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Humor in *Lolita* and Its Film Adaptations

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<p>Detta examensarbete behandlar humoristiska element i Vladimir Nabokovs roman <i>Lolita</i> samt hur dessa element återgetts i Stanley Kubricks och Adrian Lynes filmatiseringar. Syftet med studien är att analysera funktionen hos dessa element i <i>Lolita</i> och att understryka vikten av att bevara dem i nytolkningar av romanen. Diskussionen kontextualiseras av tidigare akademisk forskning kring romanen samt av en översikt av den symboliska rollen konceptet "Lolita" fått i populärkultur. Centrala begrepp och relevanta teoretiska frågor inom humor- och adaptationsforskning behandlas även kort. Romanen och filmatiseringarna analyseras enligt närläsningsslag metod mot denna teoretiska ram.</p> <p>Studien påvisar att humorn i originalversionen är mångfasetterad och att den inte bara uppfyller en rent estetisk funktion, utan också spelar en viktig roll för tolkningen av berättarrösten. De viktigaste motiven i denna studie är desamma som berättaren använder sig av: det vill säga romantisk litteratur, dubbelgångartematik och diverse bärande idéer i psykoanalysen. Studien visar att humor, ironi och motstridigheter uppfyller en central funktion i och med att dessa element skapar en kritisk undermening som ifrågasätter berättarrösten. Dessa element har också en satirisk nivå som är riktad till läsaren och hans benägenhet att påbörja förenklade och dikotomiska tolkningsmodeller på litteratur för att förenkla eller rent av suddas bort obekvämt tvetydighet. Analysen av filmversionerna av <i>Lolita</i> demonstrerar humorns centrala roll. Kubricks film framhäver de humoristiska elementen och liknar därmed till ton och budskap originalet, medan Lynes film förbiser humorn och skapar en banal och etiskt problematisk version, trots att den är bokstavstroget i andra avseenden.</p> <p>Examensarbetet påvisar att humorn i <i>Lolita</i> har en funktion utöver formskönhet samt åskådliggör vikten av att bibehålla dessa element i nytolkningar av romanen. Humor i Nabokov's <i>Lolita</i> utgör en viktig aspekt av romanen som även bidrar till dess status som modern klassiker.</p>			
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1 INTRODUCTION

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* hardly requires any introduction: it ranks among the great novels of the 20th century and has since its release in 1955 become a staple of modern western literature. Even those with very limited knowledge of the actual novel have often heard the name “Lolita” in one context or another, often as a word to denote “a promiscuous young girl.” *Lolita* has undoubtedly left its mark on culture: despite the controversy and moral outrage surrounding it, media and popular culture are saturated with references and imagery drawn from the novel. *Lolita* has been reincarnated in various media ever since the novel was published, the most influential interpretations being the two major film adaptations that were issued in 1962 and 1997, respectively. These films have also been sources for much of the imagery associated with *Lolita*.

What seems to change, or sometimes even be lost, in *Lolita's* assimilation into popular culture is the humor of the novel. Despite the inherently dark subject matter, comedy is an integral part of *Lolita*, which permeates the work on multiple levels. In this thesis, I aim to showcase and analyze these comic elements and explore how they translate into the films by Stanley Kubrick and Adrian Lyne. In order to contextualize my discussion, I present previous academic criticism of *Lolita* as well as consider the image of the character in popular culture. I also discuss humor in a general sense, how it relates to aesthetics and ethics, and attempt to define and consider the relationship between the terms parody, satire and irony. Moreover, I define the concept of adaptation, mainly drawing on Linda Hutcheon, and discuss some related theoretical issues, most importantly some aspects particular to literature-to-film adaptations, and the much debated fidelity question.

In this thesis, I argue that the humor is one of the main defining characteristics of *Lolita*, and that it is present on multiple levels and has multiple functions within the novel. This comes across most centrally in the parody of the concepts Humbert appropriates, that is, romanticism, doubling and psychoanalysis, the ironies and contradictions of which both call Humbert's narrative into question. Additionally, I argue that the humor takes on a metalevel in “traps” inviting conventional analysis, which satirize the tendency of the reading audience to think of art in a romanticized way and the desire to impose simplistic and dichotomic interpretive patterns onto art to streamline ambiguity and avoid unpleasantness.

In order to further showcase the centrality of the comic elements in *Lolita*, I analyze how the humor of *Lolita* is adapted for the screen in Kubrick's and Lyne's cinematic interpretations of the novel. I argue that Kubrick, despite a number of structural changes, manages to convey a similar sentiment to that of the novel in emphasizing the humor, while Lyne, despite meticulous literalism, fails to include most of the humorous elements of the novel, thus creating an iteration *Lolita* that is best characterized as banal and ethically problematic.

Much can be - and indeed has been - said of *Lolita*. In this thesis I hope to shine a light on an aspect of the work which has, in my opinion, been largely neglected or outright dismissed as merely decorative: aesthetically pleasing but insubstantial. I argue that style and substance are interlinked within *Lolita* in such a way that alterations to one detracts from the other.

1.1 Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

"*Lolita* is famous, not I. I am an obscure, doubly obscure, novelist with an unpronounceable name."
Vladimir Nabokov (Gold and Nabokov)

While it is true that the creation is far more famous than the creator, it is an exaggeration to call Vladimir Nabokov obscure. In life, the Russian-American novelist was very much a kind of star in certain circles of academia, and to this day his legacy extends far beyond his literary accomplishments: some of his research of butterflies came to be quite influential in the field of entomology to name just one example. Even the biography of Nabokov is fascinating: born a Russian aristocrat, Nabokov was forced to flee the country at the threshold of adulthood and start over from scratch, spending fifteen years in Berlin and some twenty years in the United States. He was famously eccentric, and notoriously opinionated. Through his twelfth novel, the scandalous *Lolita*, he rose to prominence and was able to move back to Europe and devote himself to his writing. (Albert, Field).

Nabokov's *Lolita* is written in the form of a memoir from prison, in which the scholar of French literature and self-proclaimed "nympholept" Humbert Humbert recounts the story of how he, through a series of more or less bizarre events and connivances, came to love, possess, and eventually lose the American girl Dolores Haze. The novel is focalized entirely through Humbert and the narration is characterized by colorful introspection and intricate word play, French interjections, and elaborate literary allusions. Graham Vickers points out that *Lolita* is not a novel that lends itself to a literary précis, and that summaries of the book often make it sound "melodramatic or even absurd" (5). While *Lolita* certainly amounts to more than that, I would argue the characterization of absurd melodrama is not entirely misleading. The narrative voice, while certainly highbrow, has an extravagant and self-ironizing flourish, and the unfolding of events reads as a comedy of errors. Rather than lessening the impact of the tragic aspects of the novel, the absurdity of the surrounding events amplifies them. The characters are so thoroughly rooted in their strange context that the impact of tragedy is not lessened by its surreal qualities: it is funny to the reader because of how bizarre it all is, but the emotional involvement of the characters is understandable. In addition,

Nabokov weaves ornate parody and satire on a variety of topics into the narrative, which, while often scathing, never strays far from the playful and absurd.

1.2 *Lolita* as a Cultural Icon

Sexual fascination with the childlike is hardly a novel concept. The erotic desire for juvenile features in women has a long history that is not restricted to Nabokov's famous depiction of it. Nymphs in Greek mythology - from which the Humbertian term "nymphet" is derived - are, in addition to being minor deities associated with nature, most commonly depicted as very young, beautiful women with a casual attitude toward sex. In more recent cultural history there are several examples of a similar fixation on women who display childlike features. Vickers cites such examples as the Dickensian waif, actresses in the early days of Hollywood who were often adorned with the epithet of "little" (Little Blanche Sweet and Little Mary Pickford), playing roles that matched that characterization, and the unsettling precocity and even blatant sexualization of the child star Shirley Temple (Vickers 61-65). Indeed, as Vickers puts it "if a 'Lolita' was a defenseless child who exerted unconscious sexual pressure on a certain type of middle-aged man, then she was nothing new, just something newly christened" (55). However, Nabokov's *Lolita* has undeniably become shorthand and the poster child for these young girls and women, fictional and non-fictional.

Lolita entered the popular consciousness soon after its publication, quickly becoming a new and instantly recognizable symbol for the charged blend of "childlike innocence and adult sexuality" (Vickers 69), while simultaneously becoming increasingly distant from the source material. "Lolita" also entered the vernacular as a noun or sometimes an adjective (as did *nymphet*, though to a lesser extent), denoting youthful promiscuity and sexual availability in teenage girls. The image that cemented *Lolita*'s identity as a teenage temptress in the public eye was the stylized promotional poster for the first cinematic adaptation from 1962, which features the young actress Sue Lyon as reflected in the rear-view mirror of a car, peering over heart-shaped sunglasses, sucking a red lollipop. Incidentally, neither of these iconic props ever appear in the film, or the book for that matter. Nevertheless, this image has proven to be an enduring one. Vickers points out that the associated props have become a "loose trade-mark vaguely suggestive of very young, sexually available girls" (150). Drawing on this image and its associations, *Lolita* has been evoked in a multitude of media, cultural products, and commercial endeavors, among them "erotic lithographs and weird fashion movements, artful spin-off novels and miscellaneous movies, awkward theater dramatizations and ill-judged musical entertainments, and vile Internet subcultures and lurid newspaper clichés" (Vickers 3).

There is an inherent tragedy to this transformation from victim of abuse to cheerfully complicit - or even sexually manipulative - vixen. It is through the distorted perspective of Humbert most readers and viewers continue to regard Dolores Haze. In the novel, there is no tangible evidence that Dolores is overly flirtatious, seductive, or in any other way substantially different from other children her age. Just as Humbert robs Dolores Haze of her childhood, person, and name, turning her into a figure of fantasy and art, the public consciousness has gladly adopted, and often fueled, this image of a teenage temptress, who, after all, cried herself to sleep every night.

In this erotically charged image of *Lolita* in popular culture, the humorous aspects of the novel seem to change radically or even disappear completely. This transformation of *Lolita* is as much ironic as it is tragic. Although topics such as pedophilia and child abuse are no laughing matter, removing the humor is ultimately detrimental to the heart of the novel, as it is frequently Humbert himself who is the target of the ridicule. The humor is what reveals Humbert as the cruel and manipulative man he is, and functions as an invitation to discuss various complex topics, such as romantic ideals, imposing art on reality, and common patterns of analysis.

1.3 Previous Criticism

Lolita is a rich and complex novel that, in addition to outrage and delight, has generated an abundance of critical interest over the roughly sixty years since its publication. It has continuously proven to be a text that resists definitions and defies schematic and simplistic analysis. Contextualizing *Lolita* can therefore be a challenge. Nabokov famously resisted most kinds of categorization and interpretation of his works. He emphasized the aesthetic value of literature, which he defined as "a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm" (*Book* 315). Several of the forewords to his novels include pre-emptive warnings to psychoanalysts and other scholars with the intention of applying interpretive schemes onto his work. Nabokov has, in fact, explored the topic of perverse distortion and misunderstanding through the act of interpretation at some length in his novel *Pale Fire* (1962.) He frowned upon most instances of classification, harboring a curiously hostile attitude even to certain descriptive words, as can be seen in this quote:

I have never been interested in what is called the literature of social comment (in journalistic and commercial parlance: "great books"). I am not "sincere," I am not "provocative," I am not "satirical." I am neither a didacticist nor an allegorizer. Politics and economics, atomic bombs, primitive and abstract art forms, the entire Orient, symptoms of "thaw" in Soviet Russia, the Future of Mankind, and so on, leave me supremely indifferent. (Nabokov, *Bend* 2)

I would argue such statements can be taken with a pinch of salt, as aesthetics can never be completely severed from the reality it resides in, the two need not and cannot be artificially separated. While reality can certainly be characterized as a “subjective affair” (Nabokov, *Opinions* 9) that “always belongs in quotation marks” (Nabokov, *Book* 312) and it could be argued that a work of art to some extent creates its own reality, aesthetics do not exist in a vacuum. Certain value judgements will always be present in evaluating a work of art. The modernist semblance of “complete artistic independence” can also be seen as having been undermined by our understanding of the “necessarily intertextual nature of the production of meaning” (Burgin as qtd in Hutcheon, *Politics* 95). Art is and will always be closely intertwined with the representational practices and institutions of its time (Burgin as discussed in Hutcheon, *Politics* 96).

However, critics have been surprisingly inclined to heed this “authorial trespassing” by Nabokov. Many interpretive readings of *Lolita* are quite abstract and emphasize stylistic elements (Edelstein 44). *Lolita* has been read as an allegory for the relationship with old-world Europe and young America (Nabokov *Book* 314). A famous review called *Lolita* Nabokov’s love story with the romance novel, the object of which Nabokov corrected as being the English language (Edelstein 44). It has also become the go-to example of the unreliable narrator, as argued by Wayne C. Booth, who coined the term (390).

The comedy in *Lolita* has also been examined over the years, although usually scholarly attention has been restricted to comments on decorative parody. The famous Nabokov scholar Alfred Appel’s article “*Lolita*: The Springboard of Parody” from 1967, established parody as an important concept in criticism of *Lolita*. The notion of satire, on the other hand, has been subject to disdain and allegations of pedantic didacticism. This can be noted in the Appel’s characterization of satire as “the product of its makers moral sensibilities” and the declaration that stressing the satirical elements of *Lolita* is as limited a response as focusing on its sexual content (*Criticism* 36). I would argue the limitation here lies in the view of satire as a concept, which is discussed in chapter 2.1.2.

Some critics have interpreted *Lolita* as simultaneously being a love story and a parody of one (Edelstein 43) Some even place the burden of responsibility of the “relationship” on Dolores Haze. Leslie Fiedler summarizes the novel as “the seduction of a middle-aged man by a twelve-year old girl,” while Lionel Trilling admits to difficulties in “muster[ing] up the note of moral outrage” (Fiedler and Trilling as qtd in Connolly 31) when reading the novel. While seduction is a key element in *Lolita*, the most interesting seduction to occur is by far the one of the reader by the narrator: Humbert does a fine job in getting his readers invested in his story, which is told from his point of view, with such a degree of skill that some readers have actually spoken in defense of Humbert Humbert. In later years, several feminist readings that emphasize the experiences and the portrayal of the silenced

Dolores Haze have emerged. A famous example is Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which also draws parallels between the novel and the oppressive reality of living in the Islamic republic of Iran.

In imposing narrow critical frames on a novel like *Lolita*, or any work of art for that matter, we inevitably run the risk of misrepresenting and distorting. John Burt Foster points out that ideally a frame “enhance[s] and bring[s] out the significance of the picture that it surrounds,” but that the colloquial expression of “framing someone” means giving false testimony in order to wrongfully prove someone guilty of a crime (Foster 11). Nabokov certainly suffered misrepresentation of both his art and his life after the publication of *Lolita* (Toker *Introduction* 1), thus making this comparison quite literal. Moreover, Foster’s observation illustrates the fact that critical frameworks may warp the reading to the point where the text itself no longer can be said to support the conclusion. However, viewing a text through the lens of authorial intent might be an equally narrow, if not misleading, approach.

Doing a novel like *Lolita* justice is a major, if not impossible, task. This is due primarily to Nabokov’s truly inimitable style and towering intellect and secondarily to the fact that the novel itself “resists” interpretation. In this thesis, I hope to showcase a more nuanced view of the humor in *Lolita*, one which is not restricted to decorative parody.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 On Humor

Humor and comedy are, to say the least, complicated terms. What one finds funny is more or less entirely subjective, which forces the terms to span everything from the sophisticated to the unbearably banal. In this chapter, I briefly discuss the rather basic concept of “what makes us laugh” as well as address the connection between humor and aesthetics and how this comes across in comedy in literature and film. I also discuss and define the often haphazardly used terms *satire*, *parody*, and *irony* and explore the connections between them. Finally, I discuss the ethics of comedy and how it relates to a subject like *Lolita*.

2.1.1 What is Humor

A common lay notion about humor is that someone, or something, needs to be hurt in order to elicit amusement. Peter McGraw refines this idea somewhat, and suggests humor derives from some form of violation that is perceived as sufficiently benign, and viewed from an adequate psychological distance (3). As it pertains to literature, this violation can be observed in wordplay and puns, which “violate one linguistic or logic norm while adhering to another” and more elaborately in satire, which (in the crudest of definitions) “presents something that is wrong as if it is not” (Veatch as qtd in McGraw 6). In cinema, linguistic humor is certainly possible, but film as a medium has a multitude of other means to communicate humor, for example, through visual or aural discrepancies.

To some extent, John Morreall echoes this view in claiming that the basic pattern of amusement and humor consists of experiencing a cognitive shift that is received “playfully,” (that is, disengaged from practical or conceptual concerns) and is responded to with enjoyment (xii). This also extends to more complex instances of humor, such as the ones based on language. For example, words can elicit “an unexpected sequence of ideas and we enjoy the mental jolt” (Morreall 32). This mental jolt is enjoyed for its own sake, as opposed to being enjoyed for practical reasons.

Morreall also sees a strong link between humor and aesthetics, as the aesthetic experience is generally defined as “appreciation in which we perceive or contemplate something for the satisfaction of the experience itself,” which is characteristic of our enjoyment of humor as well (70). He also points out the emphasis on surprise and imagination that can be found in both, as both humor and aesthetic experience allows us to rethink our perspectives, see unexpected connections, and think creatively (71). This, in turn, makes both a kind of play. He goes on to note that “in play, ordinary conventions about what may be said and done are suspended, and so we give humorists,

novelists, and dramatists considerable freedom from linguistic rules about sincerity and truth, rules of etiquette, and societal mores,” which often raises questions about morality in art (71).

Morreall notes that enjoying cognitive shifts in an aesthetic sense is not restricted to humor. He lists the aesthetic categories of the tragic, grotesque, macabre, horrible, bizarre, and fantastic (73), elements of which are often found in the horror genre. For the first four categories, Morreall makes a sharp distinction between the kind of cognitive shift we experience when encountering these aesthetic categories, and the ones which provoke amusement and laughter. He suggests these categories elicit fear and disgust, but that the cognitive shift is enjoyed nonetheless (73). I would argue the distinction is not necessarily as clear-cut as Morreall suggests. Depending on the framing, the horrific and grotesque can also be perceived as amusing. Such seemingly contradictory emotional responses can also co-exist.

The subject matter of *Lolita* many would consider horrible, and the novel certainly contains elements of the grotesque, but the framing of these instances makes *Lolita* comic.

This thesis will focus on humor as a subversive force: a surprising breach of norms and conventions. However, humor is by its nature a subject which is difficult to delimit and one which has multiple definitions. The humor covered in this thesis is not the only kind, nor is this thesis a comprehensive statement on what we understand by humor.

2.1.2 Satire, Parody, and Irony

When delving more deeply into a particular instance of art with comic elements, more specific humor-related terminology needs to be considered. Terms like *irony*, *satire* and *parody* are often used more or less interchangeably. While they are closely intertwined, the relationship between these terms needs to be made clear and more specific definitions established in order for them to be useful in a discussion such as this.

The first recorded instance of the use of the word “parody” in English is from the 1500s, in Ben Jonson’s comedy *Every Man in His Humour* (Mack 49). The concept, however, is far older. While the basic idea of making fun of or commenting on something through humorous imitation has been retained, the more specific connotations have changed over the centuries. I base my definition on a contemporary discussion of the concept. Simon Dentith provides a relatively broad definition of parody as “any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice” (9), which extends the definition of parody beyond intertextual allusion to other works of art. Linda Hutcheon complicates the issue by indicating a strong link between parody and postmodernity, and claims that as a form of representation, parody is “doubly coded,” simultaneously legitimizing and subverting its target (*Politics* 97). Interestingly, Hutcheon

sees in parody value-problematizing, de-naturalizing acknowledgement of the history and the politics of representation (*Politics* 90). This sets her definition apart from the common idea of “value-free, decorative quotation” that has traditionally been associated with postmodern parody, and brings it closer to the definition of satire (Hutcheon, *Politics* 90).

Nabokov himself admits to making use of parody in his works, but appears to associate satire with some form of didacticism, aphoristically summarizing his views in saying “Satire is a lesson, parody is a game” (Appel, Nabokov *Interview* 138). This view aligns with the critical consensus on satire that was established in the 1960s, according to which satire is a “a highly rhetorical and moral art” (Griffin 1), in which the author operates from a strictly unambiguous moral certainty against a definite evil. This outlook has since become outdated, but a more refined consensus has not been established. In this thesis, I make use of Griffin’s more nuanced take on satire in which he claims that satire is an open rather than closed form, the main concern of which is to “inquire, explore, or unsettle” as opposed to “declare, sum up or conclude” (95). This makes satire a complicating factor in narrative fiction, not a streamlining one (4). He argues that questioning and provocation, play and display, are defining characteristics of satire, and that only second-rate satire can be reduced to simple moralizing. Satire rarely provides clear answers or affirm moral points, but rather raises questions. Similarly, the playfulness and the ornamental and performative elements of satire are stressed, when Griffin points out that “Anybody can call names, but it requires skill to make a malefactor die sweetly” (73). Moral questions are engaged with, but playfulness and performance take center-stage (Griffin 85). This is certainly true of *Lolita*, in which the taboo subject matter is often eclipsed by the abundance of intricate wordplay and dazzling displays of literary complexity and deceit. Griffin’s less didactic definition of satire proves to be a useful one when engaging with humorous texts with a higher degree of moral complexity and ambiguity than what has traditionally been afforded to satire.

Irony is most commonly understood as a rhetorical device or literary technique, central both to parody and satire. Traditionally, irony is defined as “the expression of one's intended meaning through language which, taken literally, appears on the surface to express the opposite—usually for humorous effect” (s.v. *irony*, Oxford Reference). Hutcheon and Morreall both call this relatively clear-cut definition into question, claiming that such an unambiguous view of binary oppositions is restrictive and simplistic. Morreall sees semantic instability as opposed to fixed meanings as characteristic of the use of irony, which works as a “a rhetorical dimmer switch that allows for a continuous range of effects between ‘I almost mean what I say’ and ‘I mean the opposite of what I say’” (65-66), as opposed to a simple binary or logical contradiction.

Hutcheon, too, dismisses the traditional binary oppositions in ironic meaning. Hutcheon argues that in interpreting irony we are able to “oscillate very rapidly between the said and the

unsaid" (*Edge* 57) and that the combination of these two is what creates a third, "semantic note," of ironic meaning (59 *Edge*). This, Hutcheon argues, "would involve an oscillating yet simultaneous perception of plural and different meanings" (*Edge* 64). She also identifies irony as a central tool for drawing attention to the conventions of the representational process (Hutcheon *Politics* 91). These definitions are, of course, more unwieldy than traditional ones. As Morreall points out, there is an inherent ungovernability to irony, and uncertainty as to where it begins and ends (69). Such definitions make analysis of irony more challenging, but hopefully also more nuanced and rewarding.

There is a complex interplay between the concepts of parody, satire, and irony, the borders of which often become blurred in actual texts. In presenting these definitions, I am hoping to move past the didacticism and simplistic dichotomies of right and wrong, which have been characteristic of the discussion of these concepts for some time. Although undeniably more complicated than traditional definitions, I strongly believe these provide a more refined framework for my analysis of *Lolita*, which does not lend itself well to black-and-white dissection.

2.1.3 The Ethics of Humor

Despite affording art a "freedom from linguistic rules about sincerity and truth, rules of etiquette, and societal mores" (Morreall 71), the line has to be drawn somewhere. When discussing *Lolita*, one cannot help but address the ethical dimension of humor. The relationship between aesthetics and ethics, and more specifically, humor and ethics, is a complex one. One of the most central questions of this discussion is when it is permissible to laugh. There have been several moral objections to humor over time, and concerns have been raised about the alleged hostility, idleness, and irresponsibility of humor, among other things (Morreall 92). However, nowadays it is generally agreed upon that there is no inherent depravity in humor and that it even has the potential to foster moral and intellectual virtues (Morreall 112-115).

Today, the concerns are more particular, and many of the more recent studies on the ethics of humor have dealt with the topic of racist and sexist jokes. Berys Gaut and Aaron Smuts, for example, while addressing the ambiguity and context-bound nature of the issue, have concluded that finding such ethically questionable jokes funny is not an indicator of endorsing the views implied by such jokes (Gaut 57, Smuts 337). However, it seems humor that relates pedophilia and child abuse are not awarded the same leniency, perhaps for good reason. Gaut and Smuts both make notes like "Recall the dead-baby jokes genre: in the right context, told by a decent parent, they may be funny, but imagine exactly the same joke-types being told by a child-molester" (Gaut 58-59) and "Knowing

what is necessary to get a joke cannot mark us as immoral, unless of course we are trading in the inside jokes of a set of, say, child pornographers” (Smuts 345).

Child abuse is a cultural taboo that functions as an extreme example of depravity, one that has the potential to undermine humor on the grounds of its immorality. While *Lolita* rarely makes “pedophilia jokes” per se, much of the humor is still drawn from a situation where a grown man kidnaps and essentially keeps a child as his sex slave. However, while the humor and irony in *Lolita* have a purely aesthetic purpose, they are also the things which provide distance from Humbert and what call his narrative into question. The relentless irony and the contradictions which mar his narrative make up the principle grounds for Humbert’s condemnation, despite his best efforts to present himself in a good light. This is where the humor arguably functions as an ethical indicator, rather than belying a nonchalant or even flippant attitude toward a serious topic. Since this is the case, removing the humor arguably makes the story more ethically questionable.

2.2 On Adaptation

“For I do not exist: there exist but the thousands of mirrors that reflect me. With every acquaintance I make, the population of phantoms resembling me increases. Somewhere they live, somewhere they multiply. I alone do not exist.”

Vladimir Nabokov (from *The Eye* 102)

Lolita, as a character, has undeniably taken on a life of her own since 1955, which seems to be a mere phantom of the original Dolores Haze. This development is reflected in and, most likely, partially due to subsequent pop cultural iterations of the story. In this subchapter, I discuss theory and challenges of adaptation as an art form, mainly as it relates to film. The aspects of adaptation covered in this overview are reduction of scale, the contrast between form and content, and showing versus telling, particularly as it relates to the humor and portrayal of sexual abuse in *Lolita* and its two film adaptations. I also address the much debated fidelity question and its relevance to humor in *Lolita*.

2.2.1 What is Adaptation

Our culture is saturated with adaptations, retellings, and reinterpretations of both classic and more contemporary stories. Adaptations dominate the pop cultural scene, especially in audiovisual entertainment. But what does adaptation entail in an analytical sense? There is, certainly, an uncomplicated everyday understanding of the concept, but exploring the phenomenon further raises many difficult questions, some of which are mentioned by Jørgen Bruhn: “What is an original? Should

an adaptation be true to the original? ... What are the differences and similarities between media? What is authorship?" (Bruhn 3)

The established contemporary understanding of adaptations is that they are a form of interart, a clear and concrete manifestation of the dialogic interaction between texts and the fact that stories are born from stories, and exist in a continuum rich in borrowing, reappropriating, reinterpreting, and even stealing. While there is a tendency to view adaptations as secondary in value to the source material, there is an argument to be made that adaptations are independent aesthetic objects, and should be treated as such. However, Linda Hutcheon argues that "it is only as inherently double- or multilaminated works that they can be theorized as adaptations" (*Adaptation* 6). That is, the relationship between the source and the adaptation is central.

Hutcheon provides a dual definition of adaptation as both a product and a process of creation and reception, as an explicitly declared and substantial transposition of a particular work (or works) that involves creative reinterpretation and creation and "an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (*Adaptation* 8). In other words, as an artistic product, adaptation is a deliberate and announced transcoding of another work. Hutcheon (like many other adaptation theorists) compares the process of adaptation to translation, which, like a translation, can never be literal but must strive to convey meaning or a message in a new communicative context (*Adaptation* 16). Adaptation is primarily a process of reinterpretation appropriation and, secondarily, creation.

There is also an inherent duality to the audience's engagement with adaptations of familiar works, often the audience both relishes and, to some extent, rejects the changes made. As Hutcheon puts it, "we experience adaptations as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation" (*Adaptation* 8). The relationship between source and adaptation is also twofold in terms of intertextuality, as every widespread adaptation also adds to our understanding of the original. In a sense, novelty is what gives adaptations their value as artistic products.

2.2.2 Classic Tensions in Film Adaptation

When an adaptation makes a shift from one medium to another, there are, inevitably, changes in modality, structure, and signifiers. Different media have different sets of conventions, which handle artistic and narrative devices differently, a few examples include focalization, time, and symbolism. In the case of adapting novels for the screen, such variations often occur in the realms of scale, adjusting the plot and narration for the conventions of film (the question of form and content) and translating "telling" into "showing."

In the case of transferring a novel to the silver screen, the source material usually has to be significantly condensed, often resulting in a loss of complexity and scale. Storylines and sometimes even characters have to be cut to streamline the narrative and make it fit in a 90-180-minute runtime. The inevitability of constriction can be handled in different ways, as for instance, by focusing the narrative on a particular theme or character.

The question of form and content becomes overt when discussing adaptation. Hutcheon points out that separating the two is a somewhat heretical notion in classic aesthetic and semiotic theory (*Adaptation* 9). However, the ubiquity of adaptation proves that this kind of separation is technically possible. In practice, content usually refers to story and characters, as well as to the vaguer notion of themes, while form represents the structural and stylistic aspects of a work. Narration is an element of form that is relatively difficult to convey on film, especially if the perspective is limited. The externality of the camera inevitably creates a different mode of telling. Visually representing strict first person narration is notoriously difficult and rarely attempted (Hutcheon, *Adaptation* 54). Voice-overs are sometimes used to communicate perspective. There are, however, other tools filmmakers have at their disposal to communicate perspective. Camera angles, focal length, and music are some examples through which perspective can be suggested (Hutcheon, *Adaptation* 55). Robert Stam argues that what is more important to consider than grammatical person in narration is “Authorial control of intimacy and distance, calibration of access to the characters knowledge and consciousness” (as qtd in Hutcheon *Adaptation* 55). While the literary and cinematic mediums use different means to achieve this effect, both have their merit: in the adaptation process, this might involve drafting all-new scenes, in effect altering the content. Of course, it is impossible to achieve an exact likeness across different media, and it can often be difficult or impossible to decide the primacy of form and content.

In addition to the relationship between form and content, adaptations and adapters are often faced with the disparity between showing and telling. Hutcheon points to the difficulty in representing “Res cogitans” or, in other words, “the space of mind,” in visual form (*Adaptation* 14). How does one represent introspection, wordplay, and allusion through a visual material reality? A traditional answer to the question is that one cannot. However, despite the immediacy and externality of the camera, film has several tools at its disposal to convey emotional states, shifts in time, and even metaphor. This is usually achieved through “creating externalized analogues to subjective elements” (*Adaptation* 59), such as dreams or fantasies, which can be achieved through, for example, editing, manipulation of speed, directing the focus, and the use of aural elements.

Hutcheon makes the distinction between the indexical or iconic signs of cinema and the conventional and symbolic ones of literature (*Adaptation* 43). Literature communicates through language, which is inherently symbolic, and the connotations of which are relatively stable, while

cinema works mainly through imagery. While cinematic signs can and do have symbolic value (and some have developed universally recognizable meanings), they are more often reliant on the internal semantic weave of the film to have meaning. Examples of cinematic signage include repetition of meaningful visual or aural elements within the story, such as color, motifs, or music.

Despite these tools, humor rooted in language remains difficult to convey visually. As noted in 2.1.1, humor often involves some kind of unexpected transgression of norms and schemata. Some of this can be represented cinematically, for example through incongruity between visuals and sound. However, there is some overlap - film is, after all not a purely visual medium, but one where some similar linguistic and communicative rules apply - but the effect of reading something can be quite different from seeing and hearing the text on screen. Irony, in particular, is a demanding mode of expression in any medium, and often relies on subtle linguistic cues. The acting, setting, music, editing, and visual elements attached even to verbatim quotations from a literary work can radically alter the effect produced and interpretation of the audience. The Kuleshov effect is a prime example of this, that is when juxtaposition of shots affects the emotion attached to a particular scene, even though the facial expression of the actor used remains the same (Baranowski 624). Interestingly, a similar effect has been noted with the use of music, which also greatly affects interpretation of emotions on film (Baranowski 630). When it comes to irony or more complex humor, conveying these concepts requires the careful and precise incorporation of multiple elements: the wording, the performance, and the way the film is shot, the music and lighting all play key roles in setting the tone. Given that there are so many components, it can easily be mishandled or misinterpreted, and subtleties that were present at one point in the production are often lost along the way.

The question of complexity and nuance also relates to the next point: what can be shown on film? Translating shocking, brutal, or sexual content into film poses particular problems. Anne Gjelsvik argues there is a “tendency for ... ‘downplaying’ taboos and provocative content in mainstream cinema” (246), which strikes me as something most regular moviegoers have observed. Although most new art forms go through a period of being considered harmful, cinema was particularly vehemently censored, by courtesy of the studio-imposed Hays code, until the late 1960s. Indeed, cinema is often seen as having the potential to create a more “immediate and visceral” response, than say, novels, which do not have the power “to startle the viewer due to sensory input” (Gjelsvik 259). Gjelsvik points out that the audiovisual input of film is difficult for viewers to protect or distance themselves from, unlike the safe distance of a metaphor, which is something more commonly encountered in literature (257).

While Gjelsvik mainly discusses violence, sexual content is subject to similar “downplaying,” even when the sex depicted occurs between consenting adults. Translating the sexual content of *Lolita* to the screen is naturally problematic, not only because of the emotional impact of showing

the brutal relationship dynamic of a pedophile and a child he has kidnapped, but also due to the real-life process of shooting these kinds of scenes with real actors. A less righteous concern is, of course, the marketability of such depictions. In dealing with taboo subjects, filmmakers must generally make some concessions in what they portray on screen, for ethical and commercial reasons, which inevitably influences the final product.

Different media have different conventions of storytelling, but the possibilities of communicating particularly literary features on film is more versatile than general opinion suggests. However, it often involves changes: to effectively transpose content there will most likely be some changes in form, and the adaptation process from novel to film might involve reinterpreting and altering symbols. There might be ethical qualms as to what to show on film that affect the finished product, and humor might take on different forms and functions. Strict literalism in adaptation is rarely the answer, since certain narrative devices do not necessarily convey the same things in different media, and the artistic value of a replica is dubious at best. Nevertheless, I would argue that the question of accuracy or fidelity to the source material does have a place in academic discussion of adaptation.

2.2.3 The Fidelity Question

Although accuracy to the source material is a common yardstick of artistic evaluation among the regular moviegoer and even, to some extent, the film reviewer, academic adaptation studies have long since moved away from an excessive focus on “fidelity.” In fact, it is considered a kind of scholarly *faux pas* to examine adapted works from this perspective. As early as 2003, Thomas Leitch argued that “Fidelity to its source text—whether it is conceived as success in recreating specific textual details or the effect of the whole—is a hopelessly fallacious measure of a given adaptation’s value because it is unattainable, undesirable, and theoretically possible only in a trivial sense” (161). This is a useful condensation of the critical consensus on this issue.

However, in recent years, this rigid view has been challenged. Adam-Petros Gkikas makes the compelling argument that questions of fidelity do have a place in contemporary criticism. He points to Erica Sheen, who claims the hostile attitude toward fidelity studies stems from simplifying generalizations about the concept, which supposedly “impose potentially damaging limitations on the cultural and historical scope of adaptation studies as a discipline” (Sheen as qtd in Gkikas 49). While criticism of fidelity studies certainly raises valid points about the limits of focusing on accuracy and faithfulness, completely abandoning these aspects would cause “notions such as adaptation and media transformation to collapse into nothingness” (Gkikas 51). Gkikas rightly argues that a discussion of difference and similarity is quite different from basing artistic evaluation solely on fidelity.

One of the more ambiguous transferable elements, which is generally thought important to preserve intact in adaptation and often evoked in discussions of fidelity, is the notion of the “spirit of the text.” While it is “realistically impossible to define” as Gkikas notes, one can turn to the concept of the *implied author* for clarity in this matter (70). The implied author is a term coined by Wayne C. Booth that refers to an inferred authorial voice of a work, which is distinct from both the narrator and the real author. It is constructed from the stylistic, aesthetic, and ideological properties of the text (Schmidt) and could be characterized as the values a given narrative projects. While interpretations and focus naturally differ in adaptation, distorting the “spirit” of the text might have aesthetic and ethical consequences.

I would argue that the question of fidelity, at least in terms of “the spirit of the text” is of critical importance when adapting *Lolita*. A central aesthetic and narrative feature of *Lolita* is the dark humor, which provides crucial interpretive clues. As I argue in chapter 3, the implied author, present mainly in the humor, is severely critical of Humbert despite his compelling (and manipulative) confession. Altering or removing the humor of *Lolita* not only reflects poorly on Nabokov, it also distorts the tone, which in turn alters the meaning, and at times it even imposes odd messages and morals not present in the novel. Even though adaptations must be viewed as independent aesthetic objects, and even though they have the right to reinterpret and reshuffle elements and scenes, adapting a work always comes with its own set of responsibilities and ethics, particularly when dealing with sensitive topics.

3 HUMOR IN *LOLITA*

In this chapter, I analyze the comic elements of *Lolita*. To provide context, I first discuss the narration and the levels of humor in *Lolita*, of which the subtextual critical humor will be the main focus. Next, I discuss the parody and satire of the concepts Humbert appropriates - that is romanticism, doubling, and psychoanalysis - and how juxtaposition, hyperbole, and irony lends these comic elements a critical edge which serves to question Humbert's narrative and satirize conventional patterns of analysis.

3.1 Narration and Levels of Humor: Humbert and Subtext

Nabokov famously made the claim that his stories are "webs of style and none seems at first blush to contain much kinetic matter. For me style is matter" (*Letters* 115-116). In *Lolita*, style is certainly a defining feature. The plot on its own might even be characterized as somewhat unremarkable, save the controversial subject matter. It is, to a large extent, style that elevates the text beyond simply being a story about pedophilia. A central component of the style is the use of humor, without which *Lolita* would be a strikingly different novel.

Humor in *Lolita* has multiple functions, which range from the purely decorative to the profound. I would suggest the humor occurs on two main levels. The first concerns Humbert's narration his appeals to our wit and sympathy by the means of evocative and flowery language, of which humor is a central part. The second, more critical level is that of the subtext, or the implied author, which provides crucial interpretational clues and ultimately condemns Humbert's actions and exposes his flimsy justifications. This critical level is the main focus of this thesis, and it is mainly present in the parodies and their satirical implications, which are manifest in the ironies and contradictions of Humbert's narrative. However, these functions of humor in *Lolita* are not entirely separable. There is a kind of tension between the two which contributes to the ambivalent feelings many readers experience, and the novel eluding conclusive analysis. In this subchapter, I therefore devote some attention to the narration, that is how Humbert uses humor aesthetically and persuasively, and discuss how this relates to the more critical use of humor in the subtext of the novel.

As a first person narrator recounting events after the fact, Humbert is afforded the opportunity to twist and reshape the events in his favor, even fabricate. Thus, it is understandable that Humbert is the go-to example when first introducing students to the concept of narrative unreliability. The use of humor for aesthetic effect is a central feature of Humbert's narrative and this aesthetic revelry is central to the character and how audiences relate to him. Verbal play is even

explicitly referenced by Humbert: "Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!" (20). Throughout his "confession," Humbert uses humor ornamentally and persuasively, appealing to readers with wit and worldliness and seeking sympathy with self-deprecating humor.

Humbert's verbal play is often multilingual, cultured and generally highbrow, all of which contributes to the image of him as worldly and intelligent. The abundance of allusions to Proust, Poe, and other giants of literature add to his scholarly and artistic authority. However, at other times his jokes border on the corny, such as Humbert mentioning his "dolorous hazy darling" (34), and several iterations of the pun "There was no Lo to behold" (106, 147). His appeals to intellectual authority, combined with perhaps the sense of being "in on" a joke, elevates the reader to the same erudite level as him - in short, he makes the reader feel smart. By the same coin, his decidedly lowbrow jokes serve to show the reader that he too takes pleasure in less lofty displays of wit, which arguably makes him seem more relatable.

Humbert's narrative also attempts to elicit amusement in a more explicitly persuasive way. While Humbert's clever, and often cruel, jests target the people around him, it is also occasionally self-deprecating, directed inward. In between assuring us of his exceptional beauty and intelligence, he refers to himself as an ape, a spider, a monster, and a number of other derogatory terms. Other examples of situations where Humbert is thoroughly humiliated is in the story about his first marriage, and in the final confrontation with Quilty. Making himself the butt of the joke is effective in eliciting sympathy, and lends some credibility to the rest of his story. After all, why should Humbert include such embarrassing sidetracks unless he was being painstakingly truthful throughout? The fact that he occasionally casts himself in a pathetic light and displays self-awareness about the irony and absurdity of the situation he is in is also an appealing trait, which serves to seemingly lessen the impact of his manipulation and abuse as he portrays himself as a powerless victim of his circumstances.

Julia Trubikhina points out that a large part of the reader's "reluctant fascination" with Humbert's mind derives from his feverish, literary-minded imagination, that of "an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy." She goes on to note that "His prose is in perpetual state of ecstasy: for Lolita, first and last, but also for whatever he sees and feels" (161). I would argue the humor plays a part in this as well. The humor in *Lolita* is inextricable from the aesthetics of pathos and ecstasy in Humbert's prose. His use of humor alternates between high and low and is multifunctional to how the imagined reader perceives him - simultaneously as witty and worldly, while also revealing a vulnerability in his naked passion and his willingness to engage in self-deprecation. All this lends him an air of relatability and trustworthiness.

The humor is also present on a subtextual level, and the main focus of this thesis is how this critical voice of comes across in the humor of *Lolita*. The contradictions and ironies present on this

level are the clearest indicators that we should not take Humbert's admission at face value. Much of this is evident in the parody of the concepts Humbert chooses to appropriate in telling his story, and the satirical implications this carries.

However, there is an inextricability to the humor, passion, and pathos in the novel that contribute to the complex and ambiguous experience that makes a conclusive interpretation hard to pin down. Navigating the ironies and humorous asides of the narrative can be quite difficult, as there is some ambiguity to where Humbert ends and subtext begins. Thomas Karshan points to the fact that Humbert's humor shuttles "between the high and low and aiming at the self-relieving humour of pathos" but that it "overshoots the mark, so that it comes to express his own desperation and Lolita's misery" (238). It is in such cracks in Humbert's narrative that we can detect the voice of the implied author, through contradictions, hyperbole, and other irony markers that override the voice of Humbert. It is easy for readers to get drawn in by the ambiguity, which is what makes it so effective. The same way that traps and games play out among the characters in the novel, the narrative seeks to ensnare its readers. In the following section I discuss how this comes across in the parodied and satirized concepts in *Lolita*.

3.2 Romantic Ideals: Appropriation and Implications

In this section, I provide a definition for romantic literature, discuss how specific features of it are parodied in *Lolita*, and explore how this serves to undermine Humbert's narrative. Thematically, and in several smaller details, *Lolita* both draws heavily on and destabilizes the tradition of romantic literature. Romantic ideals are distorted and subjected to inquiry by the parodic treatment of romantic conventions, revealing a satirical core that targets the tendency of readers to adhere to a simple romanticized view of art and the potentially harmful implications of such an outlook. It is most evident in an abundance of intertextual allusions to the romantic poet Edgar Allan Poe, the stylized and hyperbolic language that parallels classic romantic style, and the subverted subject matter of passionate love and intense emotions. The most central target of the parody is the romantic notion of the artist, which calls into question the romantic ideals of artistry and aesthetic control, which, while effective and compelling, are also shown to include egotistical and self-aggrandizing elements.

Romance is a perplexingly comprehensive term, even when applied to literary fiction alone. Does it denote medieval heroic verse narrative, a specific kind of 19th century poetry, or modern love stories? Even the more specific term "romanticism," as it refers to the literary movement, is a concept that proves difficult to delimit and define. Some generally agreed upon features include

emphasizing the personal genius of “the poet,” and the moving away from the traditional paradigms of mimesis in favor of “creative imagination” and internal artistic impulses (Moore and Strachan 2). While modernism is the literary movement often associated with a “preoccupation with selfhood,” it is also a befitting description of romantic literature. However, in this context it centers mainly on the individual experience and emotions of the poet, often considered a “figure in receipt of an intuitive truth” with a sense of “the infinite and transcendental” (Moore and Strachan 3). Romanticism also explicitly connected passionate emotions to artistic expression. Such elements of art stemming from emotion, emphasizing selfhood, artistic truths to which only the poet is privy to can be noted in *Lolita* in several instances. Although romanticism as an artistic movement may seem old-fashioned and somewhat trite, there is an argument to be made about its continued relevance today. Claudia Moscovici argues that romantic views on love, transcendent aspiration, as well as knowledge and art continue to influence our culture and sensibilities, even shaping seemingly contradictory current trends and tendencies in our time (3).

While *Lolita* is saturated with intertextual allusions, it owes a particular debt to the romantic poet Edgar Allan Poe. Nabokov has admitted to having had an affinity for romantic poetry in his teenage years, citing Poe and Keats among his favorites (*Opinions* 40) However, he has also revealed that as he grew older, several of his “top favorites” have “lost the glamor and thrill” they held for him - among them Poe (*Opinions* 40).

As has been pointed out by several critics, the most obvious example of the influence of Poe can be seen in the retelling of the story of Humbert’s lost childhood love, Annabel Leigh. This section, spanning a few pages of the novel, is essentially an elaborate paraphrasing of Poe’s famous poem “Annabel Lee.” Poe’s titular heroine’s last name is only slightly altered (the homophonic Lee/Leigh), which is also the case with several lines in the poem. Examples include “It was many and many a year ago/ In a kingdom by the sea” (Poe, “Annabel” 42), which becomes “In a principedom by the sea. Oh when? About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer” (Nabokov, *Lolita* 5). It can also be seen in the description of the love between narrator and heroine in that “With a love that the wingèd seraphs of Heaven/ Coveted her and me” (Poe 42) becomes “exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied” (Nabokov 5). This apparent jealousy of the angels is what ends up killing Poe’s Annabel - “That the wind came out of the cloud by night/Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee” (42) - while Humbert’s Annabel “died of typhus in Corfu” (8) shortly after they met.

However, there are some key differences. While Poe’s poem lacks an explicitly sexual dimension, Humbert’s and Leigh’s romance, while also containing a deep spiritual connection, is mainly concerned with more or less clumsy attempts to consummate their relationship, which is described in equally florid language, an infamous example being “I have her to hold in her awkward

fist the scepter of my passion" (9). In Nabokov's reworded version of the romantic poem, the text is preoccupied with sex, something which is entirely absent from the original, which, despite its melodrama, is quite coy and innocent. Humbert is also not satisfied with the union of souls Poe's narrator finds solace in after the death of his beloved ("And neither the angels in Heaven above /Nor the demons down under the sea/Can ever dissever my soul from the soul/Of the beautiful Annabel Lee") but makes clumsy and unsatisfying attempts to recreate the experience by going to young prostitutes and marrying a woman with child-like manners, until finally resurrecting his Riviera-love when meeting Dolores Haze. This fixation with the carnal and the clumsy contrasts with the soaring, romantic language and makes the whole affair seem rather ridiculous as well as makes Humbert's insistence on the ethereal nature of his love dubious.

Poe is also evoked explicitly on several occasions, including references to his relationship with Virginia Clemm, who was only thirteen years old when they married. Similarly, Nabokov writes: "Lolita, you are my girl, as Vee was Poe's" (71) and "Virginia was not quite fourteen when Harry Edgar possessed her" (28). Humbert also refers to himself as Mr. Edgar H. Humbert three times (50, 79, 124), and to Lolita as Lenore (136), another one of Poe's heroines. Nabokov even initially considered naming his novel "Kingdom by the Sea" (Abazaj 219). Nabokov's choice to make a famous romantic poem the focal point of the novel, including some of its major thematic elements, and including several references to Poe, make the connection to romantic poetry explicit and important to consider beyond the most obvious example.

The romantic notion of the poet as a harbinger of truth and beauty is also questioned and subverted in *Lolita*. In Humbert's description of "nymphets" and those who pursue them, it quickly becomes evident he sees his pedophilic inclinations as a kind of artistic insight: seeing what is unseen by others. The alleged emotional and artistic aspects of his affliction are emphasized, as can be seen in this quote in which Humbert describes the select few who can recognize a nymphet, "the little deadly demon among the wholesome children" and "You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine" (11). He associates himself with poets and visionaries, who he claims suffered the same affliction, such as the aforementioned Poe, Dante, and Petrarch, and effectively dismisses the taboo of sexual relationships with underage girls as an arbitrary social norm of the time: "... girls mature about the end of their twelfth year ... have but followed nature. I am nature's faithful hound" (90). Humbert very much portrays himself a "figure in receipt of an intuitive truth" (Moore and Strachan 3).

However, Humbert's affliction with "nymphets" also gets very technical at times, providing a stark and comical contrast to the high art parallel. Humbert, for instance, makes notes of such matters as "The bud-stage of breast development appears early (10.7 years)" (12) and exact

measurements of thigh circumference (71). The description initial sexual encounter is surprisingly brief and lacking in explicit detail, with Humbert claiming "I am not concerned with so-called 'sex' at all" (89), again returning to a more abstract and grandiose greater endeavor: "to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets" (89). However, as noted, Humbert has continuously proved to be very much concerned with sex. The jarring contrast and deflection on his part shows the hollowness of his justification and argument, which calls his narrative of artistic insight into question.

We are surprisingly inclined to afford artists a "special moral status" in the sense that certain concessions have to be made in order to produce art, if art is to evolve and push the envelope (Berleant 197). Artists in the process of making art are therefore in a sense, considered exempt from regular moral concerns. While it is certainly true that art should have the privilege to choose its subjects freely and explore taboo subjects, it cannot be used to, as Ellen Pifer put it, subject others to the "despotic rule of aesthetic creation" (58). Humbert, in effect, reduces Lolita to an aesthetic object that he is in full control over, as Dale E. Peterson aptly describes it: a waking daydream made from "inaccurate translations from poetry to life" (96). Humbert even gives her a new name, "Lolita," to replace "Dolores," her birth name that evokes sorrow and darkness. There are also several other instances in the novel where the theme of aesthetic control is explored. This is highlighted by the motif of drama and acting. Quilty is a playwright, Dolores has a knack for acting and participates in a school play. Even the very concept of acting has some associations with deception, which is abundant in the novel. Brian Boyd points out the tendency of Humbert to plan out scenes in which people play his assigned roles to help him pursue his fantasies selfish goals. However, his schemes are constantly thwarted by the autonomy of his presumed "actors." Examples include Charlotte planning to send her daughter to a boarding school and Dolores entering a relationship with Quilty and plotting to run away. This forfeiting of control is met with murderous rage by Humbert, who deliberated murdering Charlotte and killed Quilty. Even the very act of writing his confession can be seen as a final attempt for aesthetic control of the story. (Boyd 250-252).

The romantic focus on the self is also subject to parody in *Lolita*. Although Humbert supposedly loves Lolita, he is ludicrously preoccupied with himself, repeatedly referring to his own "striking if somewhat brutal good looks" (16) and being "despite *mes malheurs*, an exceptionally handsome male" (16). He also admits to knowing next to nothing about the child he claims to love. This can be noted in the following quote: "I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate — dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me" (189). This further emphasizes the way Humbert has invented Lolita for himself, and for his readers.

There are other passages in which Humbert's extreme egoism is ridiculed. Although Humbert's style and "documentation" of events can frequently be described as meticulous, Humbert even priding himself on his attention to detail, his indifference to anything but his own preoccupations is evident in several instances. Examples include his rather complete disregard of the fact that Lolita had a brother who died as a small child (only dismissively mentioned, 45 and 53) and in a less central moment, when Humbert's barber "babbled of a baseball-playing son of his," but Humbert fails to realize until very late that "the mustached young ball player had been dead for the last thirty years" (140). He describes his memory as "photographic" (26) and "sensational but incomplete and unorthodox" (143). Ironically, Humbert, though supposedly diligently and accurately recounting a factual series of events (a "confession" as it is referred to multiple times), he never manages to move beyond his own narcissism, thus revealing a portrait of a cruel, deluded, and selfish man.

Lolita echoes romantic literature on a thematic level as well, just as passion, desire, ecstasy, and longing are ubiquitous in romantic literature. The narration conveys traditional romantic emotions and whimsy, but *Lolita* drastically subverts romantic convention by means of the taboo subject with the unlikely and macabre pairing of Humbert and Lolita. This creates a discordant, humorous effect. The florid and sensual language in description of appearance also echoes traditional romantic literature ("frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair" (25). However, this is often taken a step too far, with descriptions ranging from the amusingly mawkish characterization of scratches on Lo's limbs as "tiny dotted lines of coagulated rubies" (74) to the morbidly specific statement "My only grudge against nature was that I could not turn my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys" (108) This imagery, while decidedly sensual throughout, simultaneously clashes with convention to the point of ridicule. It is also quite telling, as Leona Toker aptly points out, that in his desire to possess Lolita "beyond the surface" Humbert does not mean reaching her "heart" or "soul" (213 *Reader*). Humbert remains incapable of relating to her as anything but an aesthetic object.

Parody of romantic literature in *Lolita* takes several thematic and stylistic cues from its source material, but exaggerates and subverts given constellations in the genre. This ironic recasting of common and familiar tropes and rhetorical devices calls into question the ideological legitimation of the implications and assumptions inherent in Humbert's language and views and showcases their rather ridiculous nature. Nabokov's characterization of the value of art in aesthetic bliss as "curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy" establishes a clear contrast to Humbert's attempt to immortalize and shelter Lolita in "the refuge of art" (206). Still, Nabokov utilises the tools of the genre to reveal flawed tropes and to make a point about how they are used in other, triter works, but he also

demonstrates their effectiveness. Many, if not most, readers still relish the ornate romantic lyricism and are moved by the plight of the characters, not least that of Humbert. Through the taboo subject, Nabokov shows and exploits the enthralling potency of romantic discourse while simultaneously ridiculing the implications of it, and provides an effective, satirical perspective to explore our own relationship with beauty, art, and artists, which is still very much colored by romantic ideals and conventions. As Appel notes, Nabokov “demonstrate[s] that the certainty of our moral feelings is far more tenuous than we ever care to admit” (*Springboard* 224). This shows that the sensual pleasures of Nabokov’s prose are inseparable from the irony and humor that permeate the novel.

3.3 The False Double and Interpretive Conventions

In this section, I provide a definition for the concept of the double in the context of this study, discuss the pivotal instances of parodic doubling in *Lolita*, mainly the implications of the character names and the false double relationship between Humbert and Quilty, and how this serves to undermine Humbert’s version of the events. I also discuss the satirical undertones of the use of the trope and how that relates to interpretational convention.

Doubling is another trope indebted to romanticism and more specifically, the branch of gothic literature. The extent of this in *Lolita* requires its own subchapter. Here, too, Nabokov draws on Edgar Allan Poe, who frequently used this motif. Several instances of doubling and mirroring can be found in *Lolita*, such as the Annabel/Lolita pairing and Humbert’s two failed marriages, but, most notably in Humbert’s pseudo-double Clare Quilty. Most of the doubling present in the novel proves to be misleading. In *Lolita*, the parodic handling of the mirror pairings serves to deconstruct and satirize conventions of interpretation and the literary significance of the trope.

Doubling and doppelgängers are normally thought of as literary motifs. It is, however, a more far reaching concept that has fascinated people for millennia, its implications ranging from positive to negative: the double stands for likeness, opposites, belonging, death and immortality depending on time and cultural context. For the modern western reader, the double is traditionally familiar as “a device to articulate self-division” (Živković 122) with predominantly negative associations. This western understanding of the concept as a literary device has its roots in romanticism and its emphasis on psychology and notions of the unconscious, and “what the enlightenment left unexplained” (Botting 15). In gothic literature, doubling was one of the most prominent ways of displaying character psychology (DeMars 8), often being “an uncanny figure of horror,” and “the representation of an internal and irreparable division in the individual psyche” (DeMars 60). As a rule, doppelgängers represent a clash in the mind or life of the protagonist that is difficult to reconcile. Usually there is some form of rivalry between the two, building up to a climactic

confrontation. This meeting frequently results in a more or less violent struggle for domination in which one, or both, end up dead (Faurholt). Nabokov has explored this theme with a parodic edge before, often with false doppelgängers. Examples of this include his novels *Despair* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and the more obscure short story “Scenes from the Life of a Double Monster.”

The first and most glaring instance of doubling can be noted in the name Humbert Humbert, the pseudonym which the narrator chose for himself, because it “expresses the nastiness best” (205). This name, in addition to being a literal doubling, echoes *umbra* - Latin for shadow. Shadows have common symbolic associations with the double, frequently representing opposites, or an internal struggle between light and dark. It is also a well-established word for pursuer, one that Humbert makes use of when referring to Quilty. However, this strongly suggests Humbert should be viewed as much as a shadow as Quilty.

The name also echoes the alliterative double name William Wilson in Poe’s short story of the same name. *Lolita* also shares other similarities with “William Wilson,” thus making the connection more tangible and providing a frame for the doppelgänger parody. Poe’s tale tells the story of a young man, with a questionable code of ethics, whose efforts are continuously thwarted by another man who shares his name and appearance. Both Nabokov’s and Poe’s main characters narrate their own stories of “unspeakable misery, and unpardonable crime” (Poe, “Wilson” 110) in grandiloquent language, under pseudonyms and close to their deaths. Both are exceedingly egocentric and have a tendency to dodge responsibility for their actions, Wilson claims to be a “slave of circumstances beyond human control” (“Wilson” 111). Poe’s double tale is unusual in the sense that it is the protagonist who represents the depraved, evil side of the self, while the double is framed as the conscience of the narrator.

Humbert contrives a pseudo-double and shadow in Clare Quilty, fellow writer and pedophile. Quilty is a moderately successful playwright, who frequents Ramsdale, where the Haze family lives, to visit his uncle. Starting from Humbert’s and Lolita’s first meeting, Quilty is a ubiquitous, though mysterious, figure in the novel. There are numerous clues and allusions to Quilty scattered through the narrative, increasing in frequency as the events unfold, gradually revealing his presence and similarities to Humbert. He is first obliquely evoked in passages such as the “crooner or actor chap on whom Lo has a crush” (28) who Humbert is said to resemble and later in Mona’s letter to Dolores: “*Chimène, comme le lac est beau car il faut qu’il t’y mène Lucky beau! Qu’il t’y —* What a tongue-twister!” (147). Quilty quickly realizes what is going on between Humbert and his protégée, promptly begins a subtle pursuit of them and finally takes Lolita with him from a hospital, leaving Humbert to travel the country in search for her for several years, following clues left by Quilty. The implication is that Lolita and Quilty were romantically, and conspiratorially, involved very early on. While Humbert

does not figure out who the pursuer is until the very end, it must be kept in mind that the narration takes place after the fact.

Humbert presents himself as superior to Quilty, as the “good” half of the doppelgänger pairing, if you will. They share several characteristics, both are sexually attracted to children: “Cue liked little girls, had been almost jailed once” (183). They both display great erudition, Humbert noting the following about the clues left by Quilty: “His allusions were definitely highbrow. He was well-read. He knew French. he was versed in logodaedaly and logomancy” (165). However, Humbert describes Quilty as fairly ugly: “Gray-faced, baggy-eyed, fluffily disheveled in a scanty balding way” (196) (in stark contrast with descriptions of himself) as well as lecherous and lustful. To Humbert, Quilty is nothing but a pornographer, which Humbert presents as diametrically opposed to his endeavor to immortalize Lolita in art. In their final confrontation, Humbert has the audacity to cast himself in the role of the concerned and vengeful father, and Quilty as the kidnapper and exploiter. This seems to adhere to the traditional tenets related to doubling as listed above. The ironic detachment from traditional doppelgänger tales is gradually revealed as the narrative transpires.

To some extent, Humbert recognizes and admits to the similarities between himself and Quilty, though still placing himself above Quilty: “his genre, his type of humor — at its best at least — the tone of his brain, had affinities with my own” (165). Humbert’s occasional use of derogatory self-referential language further blurs the distinction between the supposed “good” and “bad.” Alfred Appel points out that in traditional doubling narratives, the doppelgänger is frequently described as an ape, citing examples such as Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde, in which Hyde plays “ape-like tricks” and kills with an “ape-like fury” (*Springboard* 230). Appel goes on to note that Humbert’s narration contains several instances of Humbert describing himself in such terms, “my aging ape eyes” (25), “my ape paw” (171) and “ape-ear” (31). (It is fair to note that Lolita, too, gets her share of simian denominators in Humbert’s narrative, as she is frequently described as “monkeyish.”) This transference of traditionally dichotomic features between the doubles becomes another undermining factor of the double narrative in *Lolita*.

After the abduction of Lolita, Humbert swears to track Quilty down and kill him, reminding himself in his grief and rage that he is “free to trace the fugitive, free to destroy my brother” (164). One of the more overtly humorous scenes in the novel is Humbert’s and Quilty’s final confrontation. In traditional doubling narratives, the final clash usually represents high stake drama. In *Lolita*, this the passage reads as slapstick, punctuated by elements of the morbid and grotesque. The high drama and satisfying conclusion Humbert, and perhaps the reader, is expecting from this encounter, is foiled by Quilty’s drunken stupor and unwillingness to cooperate in the third act redemption Humbert has constructed for the two of them to act out, thus rendering the situation undeniably comic. When Quilty first notices Humbert in the house, he “dismissed me [Humbert] as some familiar

and innocuous hallucination" (196). When the two start speaking to each other, Quilty is preoccupied by long-distance phone calls and has trouble even remembering Lolita:

"Quilty," I said, "do you recall a little girl called Dolores Haze, Dolly Haze? Dolly called Dolores, Colo.?" "Sure, she may have made those calls, sure. Any place. Paradise, Wash., Hell Canyon. Who cares?" "I do, Quilty. You see, I am her father." "Nonsense," he said. "You are not. You are some foreign literary agent. A Frenchman once translated my *Proud Flesh* as *La Fierté de la Chair*. Absurd. (197)

Humbert is not satisfied by simply ending Quilty's life for the personal misery Quilty has caused him, but wants to make it an example of poetic justice. He makes Quilty read his own death sentence in the form of a melodramatic poem. Here, too, Quilty's commentary highlights the absurdity of the emotional drama Humbert is trying his best to inject the situation with. However, Quilty refuses to engage with such drama: "Oh, grand stuff!" "...Because you took advantage of a sin/when I was helpless moulting moist and tender" and "Getting smutty, eh?" a little downy girl still wearing poppies/ still eating popcorn in the colored gloam/ where tawny Indians took paid croppers/because you stole her from her wax-browed and dignified protector... " and "Because you took advantage of my inner essential innocence because you cheated me —" (200).

Even as the situation escalates, Quilty refuses to partake in the scene of vindication Humbert has set up for himself, commenting: "This pistol-packing face is becoming a frightful nuisance" (201). Quilty then attempts to bargain with Humbert, offering him, among other things, his house and "a rather exciting little freak, a young lady with three breasts" (201). Even when shot, Quilty's exclamations of pain are delivered "with a phony British accent - all the while dreadfully twitching, shivering, smirking, but withal talking in a curiously detached and even amiable manner" (202). Humbert acts the part of a traditional climax in double narratives, which is wholly dismissed by Quilty. This effectively trivializes Humbert's efforts and reduces the scene to a farce.

The doubling aspect is also explicitly addressed in the description of Humbert's and Quilty's struggle, effectively blurring the line between the two, emphasizing that they are in many ways indistinguishable from one another: "We fell to wrestling again. He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us" (199). Quilty's rejection of the situation, the humorous contradictions in tone and the gradual increase in the obscuring of boundaries between supposed opposites also leads the reader to question the implications of the double narrative.

Humbert portrays himself as an artist in possession of sublime knowledge on a noble quest, even describing himself as "helpless" and "innocent" in the poem (200), while Quilty, to Humbert,

represents depravity, lust, and exploitation. No matter how much Humbert tries to illustrate the divide and emphasize the differences between the two, they remain, essentially, exactly the same in a most pedestrian and appalling way. Both share the pedophilic inclinations, have a manipulative streak, and do not shy away from exploiting the people around them. In fact, it is arguably, Humbert who has the more detrimental effect on Lolita's life, which is addressed in the novel: "I would sooner go back to Cue [Quilty]. I mean —' She groped for words. I supplied them mentally ('He broke my heart. You merely broke my life')" (186). The basic tenet of doubling that Humbert appropriates, that is, representing a conflict or irreconcilable difference, is to a large extent, undermined in *Lolita*. There are no major differences between Humbert and Quilty, no grandiose clash between light and dark.

This is typical of Nabokov's use of doubles and mirroring. Gordon Slethaug argues that the double, though traditionally associated with existential horror, can serve a serious purpose in comic settings as well. The Nabokovian double critiques and makes fun of "the metaphysics of analogy, metaphor and mysticism" and our tendency and desire to draw far-reaching conclusions and deep meanings from banal literary artefacts (Slethaug 128). In *Lolita*, the doubling reads as an elaborate bluff. The structure and motifs of the narrative coax and invite the reader to interpret the mirroring in a traditional dichotomous way, such as moral versus immoral. However, the more is revealed, the less we find there is to uncover, the more meaningless and blurred the abundant mirrorings become. Such traps laid by Nabokov show the playfulness and game-like nature of his satire. Like Humbert, who for years tries and fails to untangle the cryptic pattern of Quilty's obscure aliases, we as readers try to decode a metaphor that ultimately points to nothing except our own predictable and simplistic patterns of reasoning.

3.4 The Use and Abuse of Psychoanalysis

In this subchapter, I provide a short description of Freudian psychoanalysis and its influence in the United States in the 1950s, and discuss the humorous, derisive take on psychoanalysis in Nabokov's *Lolita*. It is mainly present in the framing device, the role of the Annabel Lee passage as a justifying circumstance, the pseudoscientific progressive education of Lolita's school and in more general jabs at the practice. It is also a curious example of Humbert subtly poking holes in his own narrative, in that he is actively deriding while simultaneously drawing on Freudian tradition for justification. It also takes on a satirical level in mocking the reductionist view of Freudian thought in how it is applied to literature.

Psychoanalysis is a set of theories and practices in psychology that stress the importance of the unconscious mind, symbolism in dreams, early childhood experiences, and sexual development, as outlined in the 1890s by the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud. It was at the height of its popularity and prestige in postwar 1950s America (Kamienski 2). The influence of the discipline reached far beyond that of individual minds, and the authority psychoanalysts held played a part in shaping “debates about which social identities and behaviors, cultural values, and political ideals were appropriate and legitimate for Americans during the era” (Kamienski 1). Daniel Kamienski claims that the behavior and ideals endorsed by psychoanalysts somewhat contradictorily “promoted conformity and thwarted individuality” (1).

While much has changed, and many of Freud’s theories have been further developed or discarded, the legacy of psychoanalysis is an enduring one. Joseph Reppen argues that Freud has had a lingering effect on our collective understanding of psychology, and that some traditional Freudian concepts continue to exist in our everyday speech and thinking (215). Although much of Freudian theory is considered outdated and non-scientific in academic psychology, psychoanalysis has also enjoyed considerable success as an interpretive framework for art, especially for literature and cinema. A study from 2008 shows 86,4% of courses dealing with psychoanalysis in 150 highly ranked US colleges are found outside the psychology departments (Redmond and Shulman 398). Although Freudian psychoanalysis eventually faced considerable backlash, the intellectual climate of the 1950s (when *Lolita* was published) no doubt shaped Nabokov’s attitude toward the practice and was explored in his writing.

Vladimir Nabokov is known to have been quite disdainful toward psychoanalysis and Freud, for whom he invented several rather malicious nicknames, such as “the Viennese witch-doctor” (*Invitation* viiii) and the “Austrian crank with a shabby umbrella” (*Opinions* 99). He famously characterized the practice and ideas as “medieval,” “grotesque,” and “one of the vilest deceits practiced by people on themselves and others” (*Opinions* 20). As it pertains to analyzing literature Nabokov was equally critical. This contempt also comes across in several of his novels, both as cursory quips and more elaborate parody and satire, *Lolita* being no exception. Critique and ridicule of psychoanalytic concepts permeate the entirety of *Lolita* and is usually more scathing and critical than other instances of parody and satire found in the novel.

The first instance of parodic treatment of the psychoanalytic tradition in *Lolita* is in the foreword of the novel. The foreword functions as a framing device, in which John Ray Jr. (PhD), editor of psychology books, who has been tasked with editing Humbert’s manuscript, provides his own comments and insights. In his foreword, in a rather banal, tabloidesque fashion, he details the fates of some of the “real people” involved (whom the readers do not yet know) and, somewhat ironically

mentions the changes in names that have been made so as to protect the identities of these real people.

John Ray Jr. also comments on the manuscript itself. His response to it is somewhat contradictory. Although he is obviously disgusted by Humbert's crimes - "he is horrible, he is abject, he is a shining example of moral leprosy" (4) - he also expresses admiration for Humbert's style and the manuscript as a work of art: "But how magically his singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author!" (4). This seems to mirror the reactions of most readers. However, Ray refuses to let this ambiguity alone. He seems compelled to force onto it a framework by which it can be made sense of, that of psychoanalysis. Ray even claims that had Humbert gone to a "competent psycho-pathologist," the disaster could have been averted (4). He concludes his foreword with the claim that "As a case history, 'Lolita' will become, no doubt, a classic in psychiatric circles" (4) and, in truly moralistic fashion, outlines a general lesson to be learned from Humbert's confession:

As a work of art, it transcends its expiatory aspects; and still more important to us than scientific significance and literary worth, is the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader; for in this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson; the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac — these are not only vivid characters in a unique story: they warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils. "Lolita" should make all of us — parents, social workers, educators — apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world. (4)

In this statement, Ray reduces the characters to archetypes (wayward child, egotistic mother, etc.) and uses value-laden, dramatic words such as "evil," and ends on a flaccid platitude. It appears that Ray's insistence on imposing a moral significance on the text arises from attempting to find a justification for his own enjoyment of the manuscript.

The few names in this short passage are also significant. Ray cites Dr. Blanche Schwarzmann (literally "White Blackman") on the topic of men with a similar affliction as that of Humbert. This could readily be interpreted as a simplistic "black-and-white" approach to the text, which simultaneously discourages readers from taking a similar view. John Ray Jr.'s name also yields the initials J.R. Jr., echoing not only Humbert's double name, but also "Junior Junior," thus evoking a sense of inexperience and amateurishness. This is also a strong suggestion to readers not to take his commentary seriously.

The foreword proves to be a satirical account of the omnipresent fear of moral grey areas and of having blind faith in psychology, that is, of pathologizing behavior and reducing ambiguous

stories to more easily digestible morality tales. The foreword also provides important clues as to how the novel should be interpreted. In fact, Nabokov has said that *Lolita* "has no moral in tow" (*Book*, 314), and given that he was vocally disdainful of psychoanalysis, this seems to support such an interpretation - not that it is necessary: similar clues can be found in the narrative.

Moreover, Humbert's personal history obviously includes an abundance of ingredients for Freudian analysis, most prominently the archetypal sexual trauma of losing Annabel. The emphasis on childhood experiences and sexuality in the psychoanalytic tradition is well-known. Jenefer P. Shute points out that the "*coitus rudely interruptus*" scene even includes the so called castrating father-figure in the form of a "bearded bather" who emerges from the sea "with exclamations of ribald encouragement" (Shute 644-645). Humbert himself evokes Freud's ideas and imagery in his confessional narrative in several instances, both in a derisive tone and as compelling psychological justification for his crimes. The Annabel Leigh passage provides Humbert with a poetic and psychologically justifiable reason for his pedophilic tendencies: "the poison was in the wound, and the wound remained ever open," (11) which was spawned by his childhood experience and the sexually unfulfilled, brief relationship with a "nymphet" of his own age. Humbert even makes the dubious claim that "In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child" (5).

Alfred Appel points out that the persuasiveness of Humbert's specific trauma is severely undercut by their being based on another man's verse, which suggests Humbert's affliction does not reflect a unique "inner reality" at all (*Annotated* 333-334). It could even be argued that Annabel never existed, and that it might just be an elaborate bluff contrived by Humbert to garner sympathy and provide a rationalization for his preferences. This supposed trauma is further explored and exploited, even subtly ridiculed, by Humbert, who claims to "reincarnate" the spell of Annabel in Lolita, whom he first sees sunbathing in her backyard "in a kind of fictitious, dishonest, but eminently satisfactory seaside arrangement" (110). He also imagines that the psychologist assigned to his case is "no doubt anxious to have me take Lolita to the seaside and have me find there, at last, the 'gratification' of a lifetime urge, and release from the 'subconscious' obsession of an incomplete childhood romance with the initial little Miss Lee" (109). Humbert finds a beach and does his best to recreate his initial attempted copulation (at this point a "purely theoretical thrill"), and ironically, "the fog was like a wet blanket, and the sand was gritty and clammy, and Lo was all gooseflesh and grit, and for the first time in my life I had as little desire for her as for a manatee" (110). Appel compellingly argues that such descriptions mock the "the scientific certitude of psychiatrists who have turned intensely private myths and symbols - in short, fictions - into hard fact" (*Annotated* 333).

In the novel, we also find out that Humbert has spent extended periods of time in mental institutions, where he discovers the joy of fooling the psychiatrists who are treating him: "never

letting them see that you know all the tricks of the trade; inventing for them elaborate dreams, pure classics in style (which make them, the dream-extortionists, dream and wake up shrieking); teasing them with fake 'primal scenes'; and never allowing them the slightest glimpse of one's real sexual predicament" (22). Humbert also claims to have taken down a powerful newcomer who was "known for his knack of making patients believe they had witnessed their own conception" (22). He is delighted to discover to have been labelled "potentially homosexual" and "totally impotent" and attributes this "excellent sport" of deception to his condition improving (22).

These passages draw on the more questionable theories of Freud and the psychoanalytic emphasis on psychosexual development as well as sexual trauma to explain adult behavior. Humbert, in effect, turns the dynamic of psychoanalytic treatment around, casting himself in the role of manipulator, thus making an elaborate mockery of the practice. In sum, the incapacity of the several institutions and analysts to get to the heart of Humbert's affliction is effectively ridiculed in these passages.

Humbert also convinces Dolores to keep their shared secret through veiled threats and manipulation, such as her material dependence on him and fear of child services. The following short passage throws light on psychoanalysis in a more indirect way, through a parody of popularized Freudian developmental psychology that might be found in a book about parenting. Humbert's version ironically details and justifies the parody of incest they exhibit:

I am your daddum, Lo. Look, I've a learned book here about young girls. 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 desired elusive male ('elusive' is good, by Polonius!). 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. (98)

The passage clearly exaggerates the Freudian emphasis on the sexual aspects of psychological development and parental relationships. This ironic juxtaposition serves to show that Freudian concepts easily lend themselves to Humbert's abhorrent worldview without much distortion.

A similar kind of hyperbolic popularized Freudianism, and to some extent, social psychology, can be found in passages about the school Dolores briefly attends in Beardsley. The school prides itself on its experimental, modern and progressive program: "We are not so much concerned, Mr. Humbird, with having our students become bookworms or be able to reel off all the capitals of Europe which nobody knows anyway, What we are concerned with is the adjustment of the child

to group life” and “We are still groping perhaps, but we grope intelligently, like a gynecologist feeling a tumor” (116). The passage continues in a similar vein for several pages. The imagery and sentiment are decidedly banal, and effectively ridicule Freudian notions of sexuality and interpersonal relationships and take them to their popularized, absurd extremes.

The second passage at the school is an elaborate parody of the ineptitude of psychoanalytic thought to uncover and address real issues. Humbert attends a parent-teacher meeting, with the comically named Miss Pratt, the context of which is concern for Dolores’s grades and her disruptive behavior in class. In this extended passage, which largely consists of a monologue delivered by Miss Pratt, the analysis provided is strongly colored by psychoanalytic thought, and, ironically, entirely incorrect. She makes the claim that Dolores “is a lovely child, but the onset of sexual maturing seems to give her trouble” and analyzes her as still shuttling “between the anal and genital zones of development” (127). In a parody of the psychoanalytic tendency to ascribe significance to certain types of habitual behavior (such as thumb-sucking), there is a lengthy rundown of inconsequential conduct that is attributed to Dolores’ “troubles,” such as: “handles books gracefully,” “Sighs a good deal in class. Chews gum vehemently. Does not bite her nails though if she did, this would conform better to her general pattern — scientifically speaking, of course” (128). The psychological significance of gum and nail chewing, is, of course, dubious at best and the blind faith in this “science” lends the scene its comedic value. The crux of the matter comes in the form of another lengthy statement from Miss Pratt:

Well, we all wonder if anybody in the family has instructed Dolly in the process of mammalian reproduction. The general impression is that fifteen-year-old Dolly remains morbidly uninterested in sexual matters, or to be exact, represses her curiosity in order to save her ignorance and self-dignity. All right — fourteen. You see, Mr. Haze, Beardsley School does not believe in bees and blossoms, and storks and love birds, but it does believe very strongly in preparing its students for mutually satisfactory mating and successful child rearing. (128)

The irony is, of course, that “Dolly” is not being denied sex education and innocent recreational activities with the members of the opposite sex by an “old-fashioned European parent,” but is excessively familiar with sexual matters at the hands of an abusive, controlling step-father. The chapter ends with Dolores, for the price of “sixty-five cents plus the permission to participate in the school play” (130) pleasuring Humbert under the desk in her classroom, further highlighting the collective blindness of the school. However, even with Humbert’s explicit admission of lying to psychiatrists for fun and overt disdain for everything psychology-related, the legitimacy of the

Annabel Lee passage relies on the very same premises, and often gets a free pass as a justifiable explanation for Humbert's crimes.

There are also several other examples of more or less explicit derisive caricature of Freudian concepts, such as "...and then pulled the pistol's foreskin back, and then enjoyed the orgasm of the crushed trigger: I was always a good little follower of the Viennese medicine man" (182), which obviously draws on and comically exaggerates the Freudian notion of phallic symbols, and contains an explicit reference to Sigmund Freud. The derogatory use of "medicine man" also carries obvious connotations of misguided beliefs. Another similar quip is the one about Quilty's writing: "He did not use a fountain pen which in fact, as any psychoanalyst will tell you, meant that the patient was a repressed undinist" (165). These amusingly absurd descriptions, somewhat provocatively, equate psychoanalysis with an unhealthy preoccupation with genitals and sexual tastes.

As compared to the other objects of parody and satire, Nabokov's ridicule of psychoanalysis appears more hostile and vicious. While the social satire of the trust in dubious science of Freudian psychiatry is evident, the satire also has a playful literary metalevel, a layer of interpretive traps that reads as a critique of reductive interpretation. According to Shute, Nabokov's antipathy toward Freudianism represents the struggle of the fictional text against "an encroaching hermeneutics" (641). This struggle is most obvious in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, which explicitly engages with the topic of obtrusive and deluded interpretation, but arguably it is very much present in *Lolita* as well. The comical elements in *Lolita* take the form of "pre-emptive strikes" and elaborate measures against reductive interpretation, specifically Freudian frameworks of analysis. The narrative invites to Freudian interpretation of Humbert's troubles, but the suggestive elements are consistently "wired to explode at the first approach of the Viennese forces" (Shute 644), if engaged with. Nabokov scrambles the clues in creating a compelling narrative with key elements drawing on Freudian thought, but at the same time, the sharp critique and undermining of those very concepts is surprisingly explicit and often comes from Humbert himself. In effect, Humbert compromises the validity of his own narrative. Readers are coaxed into trusting Humbert's word on the significance of his childhood trauma despite the constant mockery of the theory it relies on. Lest we fall for it, the joke is easily on us as much as it is on Humbert.

3.5 Concluding Remarks

Humor in *Lolita* is complex, layered, and multifunctional. Humbert uses humor for aesthetic purposes to persuade and manipulate his readers. However, humor is also what undercuts Humbert, that which reveals the cracks in his narrative that provide readers with interpretive clues to question

his story. How this comes across can be divided according to the concepts Humbert appropriates in telling his story, which are subject to parody and satire by Nabokov.

All such concepts in *Lolita* are tied together: romantic ideals about art, the simplistic but evocative trope of doubling, and psychoanalysis relish symbolic conflicts and dichotomies. Humbert uses these tropes effectively and compellingly, but the humorous ironies, hyperboles and contradictions reveal the shaky ground they stand on, and thus call his narrative into question. Humbert draws on the romantic tradition to paint a portrait of himself as an artist with unique insight, but his claims of transcendental love and artistic appreciation are undermined by his preoccupation with physiology and sex (despite his claims to the contrary), extreme selfishness, and attempts to exert aesthetic control over other human beings. Similarly, the trope of doubling is invoked by Humbert to portray a clash between light and dark, a dichotomy which crumbles upon closer inspection and which Quilty refuses to engage with. Psychoanalytic concepts are invoked in Humbert's childhood trauma, but he is also particularly blunt about his disdain for the practice, sarcastically condemning the field in its entirety, thus effectively poking holes in the justification of his actions.

The humor in *Lolita* mocks Humbert, certainly, but it can also potentially be seen as mocking the reading audience. This is where the core of the satire lies, in the mockery of our inclination for thinking of art in a romanticized way: our penchant for simplistic and conventional reasoning and desire to impose narrow interpretational patterns onto art in order to streamline ambiguous or uncomfortable aspects of a given work. In a way, *Lolita* seeks to trick its readers, as the conventional readings which it invites do not hold up to scrutiny.

The subversive quality of the humor elevates the story beyond merely being a moral or immoral story about child abuse. In this sense, style truly is substance in *Lolita*. Hence, it is arguably quite crucial for any adaptation to keep the humor of the original intact in some form or other. While shifting the focus of the narrative is possible to further explore other aspects of Nabokov's work, removing the humor or altering the tone may change the substance of the story.

In the next section, I explore how the humor of *Lolita* carries over into the two film adaptations that have been created.

4 FILM ADAPTATIONS

At the time of writing, there have been two cinematic adaptations of *Lolita*, Stanley Kubrick's (1962) and Adrian Lyne's (1997). Both films faced similar production difficulties and constraints because of the taboo subject, but ultimately turned out to present very different interpretations of the source material. In fact, Nabokov is considered notoriously difficult to adapt. There is a particular "literariness" to his works that does not painlessly lend itself to film or other media, and *Lolita* is one of the few of his several novels that have ever been adapted for the screen. Part of the reason for this is Nabokov's distinctive narrative style, which "indicates adverbially" (as described by Trubikhina 154), that is, comments on the unfolding events. In other words, much of the comic value in his texts arises from this style of narration. In the following passages, I discuss how the two filmmakers have chosen to approach *Lolita*, with a focus on how the humor has been translated into film.

4.1 Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita* (1962)

4.1.1 Introduction

Director Stanley Kubrick was the first to bring *Lolita* to the silver screen in 1962, in an adaptation which ended up having a significant influence on the public image of Nabokov's nymphet. Kubrick was, of course, still an up-and-coming filmmaker at the time and had not reached the status of legend he would later receive. He was not, however, unacclaimed, nor uncontroversial for that matter - particularly his film *Paths of Glory* had been a hotly debated work. Thus, taking on a project like *Lolita* was by no means a low-risk career move. "How did they ever make a movie of *Lolita*?" was the tagline of the first film adaptation of Nabokov's novel. This infamous advertisement for the movie presents the very existence of the film as a challenge to societal mores, as opposed to revealing plot or character details. Despite the tongue-in-cheek manner in which it was asked, it was certainly a valid question, as cinematic expression was still restrained by the Hays code and organizations like the Catholic Legion of Decency.

Nabokov was involved with the production and was offered the chance to write the screenplay. He first refused, but after experiencing "a small nocturnal illumination, of diabolical origin" (as qtd in Boyd 400), he produced a gargantuan, 400-page script with several additions to the story of the original novel. Naturally, this had to be significantly condensed and most of Nabokov's original script was altered or discarded by Kubrick (Duncan 45). Nevertheless, the screenwriting was credited to Nabokov in the final product. Nabokov's comments on the film were slightly contradictory over the years, which has led to cherry-picking of Nabokov's statements, both to support his alleged defense and condemnation of the film. Nabokov has stated he considered Kubrick

an artist (*Opinions*, 6) and was, all things considered, surprisingly charitable about the finished product.

Kubrick's film was released in 1962 and starred veteran actors James Mason as Humbert, Peter Sellers as Quilty and Shelley Winters as Charlotte Haze, and newcomer Sue Lyon as Lolita. Kubrick's *Lolita* is usually classified as a black comedy, which, for the most part, is an eminently satisfactory characterization. The tone borders on the farcical, the characters have some cartoonish features, and the acting is often theatrical and exuberant. The film received mixed reviews upon release, but has been re-appraised by critics in recent years. Although it received some praise at the time, many reviewers at the time dismissed the film as bizarre and not true to the novel because of the lack of erotic content. Alleged lack of fidelity and the outlandish humor have been the main criticisms of Kubrick's film version of *Lolita*. Boyd summarizes the general critical response as an answer to the question of "How did they ever make a movie of *Lolita*?" simply as "They didn't" (Boyd 466).

By analyzing the use of humor, I argue Kubrick's version simultaneously creates its own web of aesthetic humorous referentiality and hits the critical interpretive cues that the humor of the book provides, and thus, despite superficial changes, achieves a fidelity of spirit that ultimately does justice to the novel and to Nabokov. In order to analyze how the humor of the novel is conveyed as it is transferred to the silver screen, I will, for the sake of clarity, first go over the main changes made by Kubrick in his cinematic interpretation of *Lolita*.

Kubrick condensed the plot significantly. Humbert's childhood and backstory are not addressed, except for a voice-over mention of his position as a professor of French literature and Humbert informing Charlotte he is "happily divorced." Kubrick also leaves out large portions of Humbert's and Dolores's two road trips around the United States. Dolores's age is not specified in the film, but she is played by fourteen year old Sue Lyon, which is usually taken to be the diegetic age of the character. Another significant change is the use of the name Lolita. In the novel, it was Humbert's private nickname for Dolores (whom others usually called Dolly, Lo or Lola). In Kubrick's film, Lolita is the name everyone uses. The erotic dimension of the relationship, which could be argued manifests in the name, could not be explicitly shown on the film, and Kubrick later claimed he might not have made the film at all had he known how strict censorship would be (Boyd 466). Instead, the role of Clare Quilty is significantly amplified. He is consistently present throughout the narrative, usually in disguise.

The main structural change Kubrick made was altering the chronology of the story by opening *in medias res*, or, rather, at the very end when Humbert shoots Quilty. The motivation for this choice was one of narrative dynamics, as Kubrick felt that interest in the story dropped after Humbert and Lolita begin their "relationship," and that introducing the mystery of Quilty's crime at

the start was a way of keeping interest alive throughout the film, a change Kubrick claims Nabokov condoned (Phillips 88). While the changes were many and major in translating *Lolita* from book to film, the nymphet's first foray into the world of cinema still maintained a good deal of the tone and humor present in the source material, a topic I explore in greater depth in the next segment.

4.1.2 Humor and Narrative Control

As has been noted, Nabokov's fiction is characterized by highly stylized introspection, literary allusions, intricate wordplay, and framing that is complicated to replicate on screen. What is more, in the novel, the narration is highly subjective and famously unreliable. Part of the adaptational process is translating this to the new medium and altering it to suit the conventions of film. Form is particularly closely intertwined with content in *Lolita*. The theme of narrative control in Kubrick's *Lolita* is present on multiple levels, diegetically, extra-diegetically and to some extent, even on the meta-level of creating the film. In this subchapter, I discuss the ambiguous narrational devices Kubrick applies, how the humorous tone and the theme of control are established in the first scene, and how Kubrick circumvents censorship by invoking the erotic through the extensive use of innuendo.

In Kubrick's film, Humbert is externalized, a character among the others, and thus loses some control of the narrative. In other words, who exerts narrative control remains ambiguous. There are some indicators that Humbert has a hand in the telling of the story, such as the use of voice-over. Some of the voice-overs are at least partially lifted from the novel, but most of it is expositional. Trubikhina describes Humbert's narration as "self-delusive, straining to maintain normality and control" (181), which, of course, is precisely what Humbert in the novel attempts by writing his confession, thus attempting to exert full control of the narrative by crafting it according to his view after the fact.

Despite his best efforts, Humbert is never allowed the control he so desires. Charlotte takes charge when it comes to household matters, which Humbert rather limply protests against, but ultimately to no avail. Lolita is portrayed as quick-witted and cynical, and she regularly brushes off Humbert's attempts at wooing her with poetry and gifts. In a way, this affects her perceived victimhood: she is never powerless or without agency in the film, despite the fraught situation she finds herself in: being at the mercy of a sexual abuser. Some would argue that the downplaying of her victim status is a detriment to the film. However, I believe it suits the farcical tone of the film, as realism is not its most important concern. As viewers, we do also catch glimpses of her suffering, even if it is not emphasized.

Furthermore, Humbert has his facade undermined by Kubrick's camerawork that acts as a kind of extra-diegetic controlling presence. Much of the visual information conveyed to the audience

remains inaccessible to Humbert, such as the identity of Quilty. A particularly illustrative example of this is the camera zooming in on Quilty in a Drome ad in Lolita's room right after Humbert reads Charlotte's confession of love. Humbert's control of the situation is effectively undermined by the pan to the picture of Quilty. This also applies to the multiple appearances of Quilty, always undercutting or subverting Humbert's efforts to exude normality and control. This makes Humbert the subject of the audience's sympathy, but also its ridicule. Trubikhina puts the point well, when she claims "This is when he both is and is not in control: irony about oneself and one's own misery is self-knowledge, but it is futile, as it offers no control over fate" (181-182). This secondary narrative presence highlights the ambiguity and unreliability, and evokes the implied author of the novel, which is, likewise, "spectral, precise, merciless, and relentlessly ironic" (Trubikhina 183).

The dark, humoristic tone and the theme of wrestling for control is evident from the first scene in which Humbert shoots the drunk and disoriented Quilty at his mansion. The scene opens with Humbert navigating the space littered with glasses and miscellaneous items, indicating that a night of debauchery took place before Humbert stumbled in. Humbert strums a harp, and nervously calls for Quilty, who emerges, hungover (or possibly still drunk) and perplexed, from under a sheet draped on an armchair, which has been in frame the entire time. In response to Humbert's question, "Are you Quilty?" he drapes the sheet around him like a toga, and quips, "No I'm Spartacus, you come to free the slaves or somethin'?" in a reference to Kubrick's previous film. Quilty engages in nonchalant banter, while Humbert is visibly rigid and staring intensely at Quilty, a comic contrast to the flailing and detached playwright. Humbert puts on his gloves and invites Quilty to "have a little chat before we start." Quilty comments on the gloves, ignores the suggestion, and starts a game of ping pong with Humbert, who stands motionless as Quilty serves Humbert the seemingly infinite supply of ping pong balls he keeps on his person, over a table littered with wine bottles and glasses.

Humbert's seriousness and Quilty's indifference and flippant attitude is effectively illustrated by the contrasting habitus of the two characters. This is also highlighted by the dialogue: Humbert's speech is curt and strained, while Quilty prattles on about the score of the game: "Gee, I'm really winning here, I'm really winning. I hope I don't get overcome with power" and "That's about six one, maybe? No! let's say six-two: I'll give you another point." Even as Humbert interrupts him to ask, "You really don't remember me, do you?" and, voice breaking, asks if Quilty recalls a girl named Dolores Haze, he goes on about "the different ways the champs use their bats." In a close to verbatim quote from the book, Quilty dismissively comments that she might have made some phone calls. Humbert then pulls the gun on Quilty who reprimands him for being a "sore loser." While the ping pong scene as such does not exist in the novel, it conveys a similar sentiment. Humbert not answering Quilty's serves is amusing enough in itself, but it also gives a physical dimension to Quilty's

disengagement from the scene Humbert has set up, and visualizes Humbert's inability to assume and maintain control. Just as in the novel, Quilty refuses to engage with Humbert's redemption.

Finally, Humbert starts firing at Quilty who rushes upstairs, and attempts to bargain with Humbert, offering him the house and a chance to attend executions. He crawls behind a portrait of a young woman and Humbert kills him with six shots through the painting. In this way, Kubrick creates a metaphorical image of what Humbert actually destroyed, the life of the young woman he attempted to reduce to an artistic object, an image frozen in time.

Thus, the first scene, while slightly different from the novel both in placement and the unfolding events, shows Humbert's misguided insistence on orchestrating a redemptive scene for himself, and Quilty's refusal to participate, which retains the original irony of the scene. It also establishes the farcical tone of the film, which functions as an interpretive cue for the audience. The humorous elements dominate, but the shooting of the portrait also hints at the pathos of the story, particularly Lolita's suffering.

The menace of censorship also affects the narrative which lends an ironic meta-level to the theme of aesthetic and narrative control. The film was undeniably restricted in terms of depicting the erotic nature of Humbert's obsession, which is Kubrick's only reported regret about the finished product. The most explicit visual representation of Humbert's lust is him looking at a picture of Lolita while kissing Charlotte in bed, a scene which caused much controversy. However, this lack is substituted by an undercurrent of farcical erotic innuendo that runs steadily through the film and affects the interaction between all characters.

Charlotte is brash and unabashedly flirting with Humbert from the very first scene, claiming for example that "I believe that it's only in the romance languages ...that one is able to really relate in a mature fashion." Their interaction is brimming with innuendo throughout, such as Humbert claiming the decisive factor in moving in was Charlotte's "cherry pies," after seeing Lolita in the backyard, and his explicit intention to take Charlotte's "queen" when they are playing chess. Another example is Charlotte claiming she "goes as limp as a noodle" when touched by Humbert, to which he responds "yes I know the feeling." It is insinuated that Charlotte's neighbors and friends, the Farlows, engage in partner swapping. The summer camp Lolita goes to is called "Camp Climax." Charlotte telling Quilty that Lolita is going to have a "have a cavity filled by your Uncle Ivor," the Ramsdale dentist, also carries some clear sexual connotations. She also presumably recounts the events of an afternoon they spent together (which Quilty had promptly forgotten about) in whispers, to which he responds "Did I? Did i do that?"

Turning sex into innuendo, making it all whispers and giggles, echoes the theme of sex as play that is very much present in the novel. Lolita thinks of sex as a "game" she played with Charlie at camp, that has very specific rules, and Miss Pratt congratulates Humbert on his "civilized

terminology” when he asks whether the children are expected to engage in “sex play” (129). Even Humbert is relatively oblique about actual sexual activities, the most graphic description being of clandestinely bringing himself to an orgasm with a supposedly oblivious Dolores sprawled over his lap. Leona Toker points out that this evasiveness makes the reader “responsible for constructing or distorting the erotic scenes” (“Reader” 212), which might even be characterized as a kind of complicity on the part of readers. Quilty’s appeal to Humbert’s voyeurism in offering him the chance to watch executions in the first scene might even be read as a quip against the audience’s own somewhat twisted desire to watch this story unfold. It recalls the readers who Nabokov analyzed as feeling “misled” by the novel, who “expected the rising succession of erotic scenes; when these stopped, the readers stopped, too, and felt bored and let down” (*Book* 313). Thus, Kubrick’s visual metaphors and fades to black as indicators of sexual activity taking place are both relatively true to the novel, a kind of jab at the audience’s scopophilic inclinations, and an effective circumvention of censorship.

In creating the framework necessary for transferring *Lolita* from one medium to another, Kubrick made several adjustments. The film is fast-paced and packs much information into short, almost entirely visual sequences. It effectively establishes its tone and themes, with narrative control and humor as its most central aspects. While impossible to transpose in its original form, Humbert’s narration is arguably what “makes” the novel - to use an illustrative colloquialism - and the humor is what offsets and, more importantly, calls into question, his narrative. The fact that the film explores these aspects shows a deep understanding of the central components of the novel, and in doing so stays faithful to Nabokov’s work in a way that goes far beyond its superficial elements. It is by analyzing this established framework that we can pin down how more specific instances of parody and satire are translated into Kubrick’s film.

4.1.3 Allusion and Parody

Much of the humor in *Lolita* is allusive, the main frameworks of which are outlined in chapter 3. In this subchapter, I explore how the parodied and satirized concepts of romanticism, the doppelgänger trope, and psychoanalysis are treated in Kubrick’s film as well as analyze Kubrick’s choice to alter the many literary allusions of the novel to suit his own medium of film.

Nabokov’s novel, as noted, draws on and parodies the romantic tradition and lays out an intricate satirical consideration of romantic notions of artistry with Edgar Allan Poe as a major focal point. The film, understandably, does not reiterate the entire web of romantic allusion present in the novel. Julia Trubikhina points to the difficulty in translating literary allusions on screen, and reminds us that Humbert’s “subtle literary webs and delicate echoes, aesthetics’ substitution for the ethical—a part and parcel of Romanticism—are Humbert’s main, in fact, only, justification for what he had

done" (161). Thus, much of the theme dealing with romantic literary conventions and its implications is lost in the film. However, some of the elements are retained. The role of Poe as an important figurative framework is addressed, as the Kubrick film makes an explicit reference to the romantic poet. While still in Ramsdale, Humbert reads fragments of Poe's "Ulalume" out loud to a somewhat skeptical Lolita. Humbert calls Poe his "favorite poet" and describes him somewhat obliquely as "the divine Edgar." While reading, Humbert provides a short analysis of some of the elocutionary devices of the poem. Lolita is dismissive of the poem, calling some of it "pretty clever," but "kind of corny to tell you the truth."

"Annabel Lee," of course, constitutes the emotional center of Humbert's justification of his actions in the novel. "Ulalume," while also dealing with the death of a young woman, is a bleaker rendition of a similar theme. Instead of the focus on the purity of young love and its rather morbid notion of transcending death, "Ulalume" presents a more somber and dark portrait of a grieving man in conversation with his soul, and his unintentional, anguished return to the grave of a loved one. The fact that "Ulalume" is chosen rather than "Annabel Lee" in the film shows us not a man haunted by unjust circumstance, eternally clinging to what he lost, but a deluded soul, who ignores his internal warnings and returns to the grave of a loved one, convinced he is tempted by a demonic presence. Since Humbert is by necessity externalized in the film, and the audience knows less about him, this association provides additional critical perspective on Humbert's character.

Lolita's frank rejection and intrusive comments about "Ulalume" also mirror the scene in which Quilty mockingly reads Humbert's poem, his "death sentence." These scenes suggest a subtle critique of Humbert's romantic ideals. Humbert's sweeping romantic sentiments are dismissed as "corny" and "smutty," to use the words of Lolita and Quilty. Leaving out Humbert's justification in the form of a lost childhood love could also be interpreted as a dismissal of the value it has as a justification. The relevance of Humbert's childhood experiences to his adult crimes is, after all, highly questionable despite its narrative significance.

Humbert's selfishness and egocentrism is also shown in a comical light. Humbert is wholly unaffected by the death of Charlotte, exemplified in the scene where he sits in the tub Charlotte filled for herself just before getting hit by a car. He balances a glass of scotch on his chest, while apparently fantasizing about Lolita (the music associated with her plays in his head). The neighbors John and Jean arrive and attempt to console him and suspect he might be contemplating suicide because of the handgun in the bathroom, the irony of which is readily apparent. Likewise, despite Humbert's insistence on his love for Lolita he remains similarly selfish in relation to her. Humbert is completely ignorant of Lolita's needs, and the only thing he can think of offering her is buying her things, taking her on trips, and not demanding she do chores, all the while depriving her of any semblance of normal life for a teenage girl. He is, for example, profoundly jealous, insisting that Lolita

not mix with the “nasty-minded boys” her own age, which she promptly shoots down by pointing out the irony of his claim.

The romantic and the erotic are often intrinsically tied together, and erotic desire is certainly a central component of Nabokov’s novel. In Kubrick’s film, the absurdity of Humbert’s sexual tastes is emphasized and expanded to include the rest of the cast as well, thus creating a kind of hypersexual universe. This seems to be a functional substitute in terms of translating the humor of the novel. In the novel, Humbert’s erotic fascination with Dolores constantly skirts the line between grandiose artistic appreciation and ridiculous absurdity. In the film, this absurdity is extended and woven into the narrative to create the humorous tone that is ever present in the novel. To some extent, the absence of Humbert’s introspection obscures the romantic allusions to art. However, the elements of Poe, Humbert’s selfishness, and the erotic underpinnings are present in the film. This creates recognizable allusions for viewers who are familiar with the novel, and while such references perhaps carry less weight in terms of implication, they nevertheless contribute to the ethos of the film as a whole.

The second pervasive theme in the novel is that of doubling. As established, mirror pairings are abundant in Nabokov’s *Lolita*. The doubling in the novel is most explicit and significant in the relationship between Humbert and Quilty. Despite Humbert’s insistence on presenting them as diametric opposites, as representatives of high and low, cultured and vulgar, loving and exploitative, the division rings false and ultimately shows the banality of such literary dichotomies and the simplistic interpretation they invite.

In Kubrick’s film, in addition to the Humbert-Quilty spiel, the motif of doubling carries over visually and juxtapositionally. As a visual medium, film allows for mirrorings in imagery and scenes. For example, Quilty is constantly accompanied by his silent companion, Vivian Darkbloom. The repetition of corresponding scenes have a similar effect. Examples of this include a scene of Lolita dancing which is followed by a similar scene with Charlotte, the poem scene with “Ulalume” and the one where Quilty reads Humbert’s poem. The first and last shots are both of Humbert stumbling in to Quilty’s mansion, which lends a circularity to the narrative.

Quilty’s existence for most of the novel is merely textual. He comes to life mainly through linguistic play and vague references, and constantly eludes Humbert and the readers. Kubrick, on the other hand, chose to make Quilty’s presence in the narrative exaggeratedly intrusive. He appears in close to half the scenes, in various disguises, speaking in phony accents and playing mind games with Humbert. Kubrick’s Humbert and Quilty are linked to one another by their pedophilic inclinations and obsession with Lolita in particular. In placing Quilty in the foreground, the doppelgänger relationship between the two is highlighted. Kubrick chooses to emphasize that the story is not really about a real little girl, but of the clash between these two men and their personal obsessions and vendettas about

an image they created. It is worth noting that Nabokov's novel both begins and ends with the word "Lolita," while Kubrick's film, similarly circular, substitutes it for "Quilty," creating an alternative frame for the narrative.

Since Humbert's inner world remains inaccessible to us as viewers, the interactions between Humbert and Quilty provide some additional clues. Thomas Allen Nelson compellingly argues that we gain access to Humbert's mind and its internal ironies and contradictions through the character of Quilty. Quilty mocks Humbert's "internal disorder" through the various caricatures, such as when Quilty, impersonating a policeman at the first motel, nervously monologues at Humbert about the alleged normality of both characters and the comfort and suitability of their accommodation, suggesting the Humbert and his "little girl" should have "a bridal suite," illustrating Humbert's anxieties. The scene with Dr. Zemph takes on a similar meaning. Humbert's paranoia, veneer of normality and sophistication are "surrealistically objectified" and mocked by Quilty's antics (Nelson 80). However, this reflexivity of Quilty's often grotesque impersonations is lost on Humbert, in Nelson's words: "he does not see that his romantic infatuation with an image rather than the reality of Lolita finds its demonic incarnation in Quilty and the obscure objects of his desire" (73). This is also highlighted by the fact that the identity of Quilty's multiple incarnations is obvious to everyone but Humbert, which also echoes Nabokov's take on the *doppelgänger* as illusory and hollow.

The parody of doubling takes on a different form in Kubrick's film, but arrives at a similar endpoint. The intrusion of and focus on Quilty emphasizes the uncertainty of whose story this is, who the shadow really is, similarly obfuscating the clear dichotomy usually presented in classic doubling tales. Humbert's and Quilty's final confrontation preserves the notion of Humbert attempting to satisfyingly conclude the rivalry between the two, which Quilty will have none of. The subversive and comic elements of Nabokov's doubling carry over to Kubrick's adaptation, but with a change in form: with an intrusive as opposed to elusive Quilty. However, reading a satirical commentary on interpretative convention in the film seems more far-fetched, since Quilty is played with such ludicrous extravagance by Peter Sellers. In effect, he is rather difficult to take seriously enough in order to genuinely assign importance to the dichotomy as the Humbert of the novel suggests we should. Nonetheless, Quilty's role as an exuberant manifestation of Humbert's internal struggles reads as poignant mockery of the doubling trope which is related to the parody of psychoanalysis.

The parody and satire of psychoanalysis that runs throughout the novel is addressed and incorporated rather extensively, although, not very deeply. The web of sexual innuendo that permeates the film could be interpreted as a parody of the preoccupation with sexuality that is characteristic of caricatured psychoanalysis. The fact that Quilty's appearances function as a kind of preposterous mouthpiece for Humbert's inner world seems to be another nudge in that direction.

However, there are more explicit instances of this as well, both coming from Quilty. Quilty takes on a condensed version of Miss Pratt's monologue on Dolly's alleged "sexual repression" in the sham role of the Beardsley school psychologist, Dr. Zemph. Here, too, the claim is that Lolita is "suffering from acute repression of the libido... of the natural instincts." Elements of the dialogue are lifted straight from the novel, such as the analysis of her "chewing gum vehemently" and writing an obscene word with her lipstick on a health pamphlet. The Freudian parody is amplified by the broken English and exaggerated German accent Quilty takes on in the scene, exemplified in the ridiculous comment "she is a lovely girl you know, mit the swing und the jazz." The main difference is that Quilty's concerns are not genuine, but a deliberate attempt to trick Humbert into letting Lolita be in his play by vaguely threatening Humbert. In another attempt to distract and confuse Humbert, Quilty calls Humbert in the middle of the night to inquire about Humbert's "current sex life, if any" and whether or not he has time to "see a psychiatrist regularly." Humbert hangs up when Quilty is about to explain that "I'm afraid" is "Freudian lingo" for something or other.

These instances communicate the disdain for psychoanalysis in the novel, particularly popularized forms of it, and the inherent absurdity of some of the concepts in early psychoanalytic thought. In the film, the ridicule is more explicit, since the claims are diegetically insincere, nothing but elaborate ruses by Quilty to confuse and terrorize Humbert. However, here the film loses some complexity by omitting Humbert's shaky justification for his actions. Humbert is not shown exploiting the tenets of psychoanalysis for a compelling narrative, but only as being subjected to it. In the novel, on the other hand, an important aspect is Humbert using psychoanalytic concepts both to elicit sympathy, provide justification and simply personal entertainment. Much of the irony comes from the fact that the concepts did not have to be significantly altered to suit Humbert's purposes. Kubrick's elimination of this part diminishes Humbert's manipulative streak and the poignancy of the parody. While the mockery of psychoanalysis is rendered a bit toothless by removing Humbert's co-opting of the terms and methods to fit his own twisted ends, it remains tonally true to the book's biting mockery of what Nabokov considered the height of pseudo-scientific drivel.

Nabokov's text is densely allusive, which contributes to the humor. Kubrick understandably only retains a few of the references, but also creates his own allusive web of intertextual references similarly characterized by irony and puns. As Trubikhina notes, "the context for a text is all preceding texts, the intertextual context for a film and its actors is previous films and previous roles" (182). For example, Kubrick references his own previous film, *Spartacus*, which Victoria Duckett compellingly analyzes as ridiculing the "aesthetic grandeur, youthful virility, and moral clarity" of the film (531). For a detailed analysis of the references in the first scene of Kubrick's film, I highly recommend Duckett's article "Letting Lolita Laugh" from 2014. In the reference-heavy first scene, much of Quilty's dialogue can also be analyzed as extra-diegetic commentary directed at the viewers, such as

“Kinda tricky serve to handle, hey Captain? Kinda tricky. One of the champs taught me that,” which seemingly alludes to Nabokov’s punning and often obscure intertextuality.

While Nabokov alludes to giants of literature, Kubrick chooses to refer to film. Examples of this include a cut to a dramatic scene in *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), where the monster rips off the bandages and reveals his disfigured face. Humbert, Charlotte, and Lolita are shown watching the film right after Humbert has moved in. This could readily be interpreted as a suggestion of Humbert’s hidden monstrosity or an indicator of impending danger in letting Humbert enter the lives of Charlotte and Lolita. At the Enchanted Hunters hotel, there is a slapsticky scene in which Humbert and an elderly servant attempt to extend an uncooperative folding bed, a scene which appears to be an homage to a similar scene in Chaplin’s *One A.M.* (as pointed out by Robert Stam 159). Later in the film, Humbert and Lolita leave Beardsley under the pretense of Humbert’s “Hollywood engagement.” Hollywood is also invoked when Lolita playfully asks Humbert, who is writing an entry in his diary, if he is “afraid somebody’s going to steal your ideas and sell them to Hollywood?” which might be seen as mirroring Nabokov’s (and Kubrick’s) anxieties of creative control in the film industry.

While the web of intertextual allusion is nowhere near as rich or complex as in the novel, Kubrick uses his references similarly in terms of humorous effect, and in a way that is natural for the medium. I wholeheartedly agree with Duckett in her claim that Kubrick’s film “creates its own visual palimpsest of parody and pun that is specific to the film and that we might still today uncover and enjoy” (Duckett, 538).

4.1.4 Aural and Visual Elements of Comedy

The Kubrick film naturally contains some cinema-specific elements of comedy, such as music and visual humor, which will be addressed briefly in this subchapter. The role of music and sound effects is crucial in setting the tone of a scene or an entire film. In Kubrick’s *Lolita*, music functions as leitmotifs, as well as enhances the comedy and highlights ironies in the narrative. The most central musical elements are arguably “Love theme” and “Ya ya.” The role of music in Nabokov’s novel is not central to this discussion, but it is worth noting that Humbert loathes the kind of music Dolores prefers. He comments that “I still hear the nasal voices of those invisibles serenading her, people with names like Sammy and Jo and Eddy and Tony and Peggy and Guy and Patty and Rex, and sentimental song hits, all of them as similar to my ear as her various candies were to my palate” (97). In Kubrick’s film, Lolita is associated with a vapid, 1960s style soft-rock track, the lyrics consisting of nothing but the nonsense syllables “ya ya.” This composition appears both diegetically and extra-diegetically as an auditory cue for Lolita. The vacuous and repetitious tune seems to be a functional approximation of what most of the music Lolita enjoys, presumably, sounds like to Humbert. It plays on Lolita’s radio in the scene where Humbert first meets her, in Humbert’s head when slouching in

the bathtub drinking scotch when Charlotte has died, and over a number of scenes in which she is not present, to communicate that Humbert is thinking about her, giving an aural sign of his obsessiveness. The scene in the bathtub highlights the irony particularly effectively, surrounded as he is by mourning friends concerned Humbert is about to commit suicide.

The “Love theme” - a classical, light, romantic number by Bob Harris - plays in a few different scenes, most notably in the opening credits, when Lolita leaves for camp and at the end when she refuses Humbert’s suggestion to leave her husband to “live with me and die with me and everything with me.” The sweeping, romantic theme is used to convey both pathos and irony in the film. Its use in rather mundane scenes of separation and with this odd couple creates a discordant, humorous effect, as this type of music would typically be reserved for dramatic scenes between lovers. It also continues playing in the background when Humbert reads Charlotte’s proclamation of love for him, while laughing maniacally, creating an ironic contradiction between sound and visuals. Andrew Sarris (in a review of Lyne’s film) characterized the music in Kubrick’s film negatively as “cool and sardonic” (Sarris), a statement that might be interpreted as a compliment if encountered in isolation. Other reviewers too, were puzzled by the musical choices in the film, because of the apparent tonal discord (Bouchet 11). To me, this seems like more a deliberate attempt to underscore the irony of the narrative in a way befitting the medium of film.

Kubrick’s films are known for being visually stylized, which carries over in the depiction of humor as well. Some of the humor in *Lolita* is reminiscent of slapstick, such as the infamous “collapsible bed” scene. Other examples of visual humor includes the early scene of Humbert, Lolita and Charlotte watching *The Curse of Frankenstein*, in which both Lolita and Charlotte clutch Humbert’s hands in terror, only for Humbert to casually withdraw his hand from Charlotte’s grip to scratch his nose and place his palm over Lolita’s hand, and the cha-cha scene, in which Charlotte attempts to seduce a visibly uncomfortable Humbert with the combination of champagne and a clumsy cha-cha (which might be seen as a counterpart to Lolita’s ya ya). It is, of course, a matter of opinion whether or not one finds these gags funny, but they are tonally consistent with the rest of the film and highlight the absurdity of the story at hand.

The music in Kubrick’s film provides an additional layer of signifiers for the characters and functions as an irony marker, while visual gags accentuate the absurdity of the unfolding narrative. These elements help to establish the tone of the film and serve to highlight the playfulness which is so crucial to the novel.

4.2 Adrian Lyne's *Lolita* (1997)

4.2.1 Introduction

The second cinematic incarnation of Nabokov's *Lolita* was released in 1997, and directed by Adrian Lyne, most famous for his erotic thrillers and horror films. Lyne started his career in advertising and his films have frequently been described as stylized but, ultimately, shallow (Vickers 186). This reputation proved to be an obstacle in making *Lolita*. Although at the time of making *Lolita* Kubrick was not considered the giant of filmmaking he is today, unfavorable comparisons between Lyne and Kubrick were bound to arise.

In addition, Lyne's *Lolita* faced a multitude of other struggles. The project was in development since the early nineties, went through multiple screenwriters, and struggled to find a producer. Finding an American distributor also proved difficult. The finalized product also had to be edited down due to the Child Pornography prevention act of 1996, a US federal law, which outlawed adults impersonating children in sexual contexts (Rose). It was aimed at Internet pornography with children's faces edited onto adult bodies, but it ended up having rather unexpected effects on film. Thus, Lyne had to comb through the film with a lawyer, removing explicit scenes that were shot with a body double (Rose).

Against all odds, Lyne's *Lolita* finally premiered in 1997, at the San Sebastian Film Festival in Spain. The main cast consisted of Jeremy Irons as Humbert, Dominique Swain as Lolita, Melanie Griffiths as Charlotte and Frank Langella as Quilty. It was a textbook example of a box office disaster, making back a mere million compared its 62 million dollar budget (s.v. "*Lolita* (1998)," *Box Office Mojo*). The film received mixed reviews. Graham Vickers chalks the negative reviews up to critics "taking the doctrinaire view" (198). However, it did also receive praise, the film was called "an incredible and a powerful love story" (Junniorine) and "a tragic morality tale" (James), and few critics failed to note the alleged faithfulness of Lyne's film (Sarris, James). James Berardinelli even made the surprising claim that Lyne was more faithful to the novel than Nabokov was in his own script (Berardinelli). Nabokov himself died twenty years prior to the film's release, but it received his son's, Dimitri Nabokov's, blessing. Dimitri Nabokov also acted as a consultant on the film (Vickers 203), lending some credibility to Lyne's interpretation, even though being a blood relation to a creator does not necessarily grant one the authority to speak for the deceased. Scholarly attention, on the other hand, has been fairly limited.

Adrian Lyne was at least partially motivated by the desire to make a film that sufficiently dramatized the erotic aspect of the story and was generally "anxious to make a movie that reflected the novel" (Rose). The script was written by Stephen Schiff, who, followed the chronology of the book more closely and used more direct quotations. In Schiff's words, "Right from the beginning, it

was clear to all of us that this movie was not a 'remake' of Kubrick's film. Rather, we were out to make a new adaptation of a very great novel. Some of the filmmakers involved actually looked upon the Kubrick version as a kind of 'what not to do'" (qtd in Vickers 193). Lyne's adaptation also contains more 1940s period paraphernalia and music, which makes for an impressively detailed, albeit nostalgic and gauzy, view the time period the novel took place in. Understandably, despite his devoted aim at accuracy, Lyne had to make concessions in terms of scale. He left out all references to Humbert's first marriage, removed most minor characters and shortened many passages. Here, too, it seems Lolita's age is raised from 12 to 14. Nevertheless, in terms of plot content, Lyne's *Lolita* is probably as close to the novel as any adaptation could hope to be.

4.2.2 Narrative: Eroticism and Sentimentality

On a purely superficial level, Lyne's film carries a veneer of accuracy in that it meticulously reiterates the plot and setting of Nabokov's novel. However, when it comes to the subtler elements of the story, it rather misses the mark: the central driving forces of Lyne's interpretation of *Lolita* seem to be diligent literalism, eroticism, and an inflated sense of gravitas. In this chapter, I discuss the use of perspective and how it affects the portrayal of the characters, how the erotic component of the novel is translated into Lyne's film, and how the film sets its tone.

Lyne naturally ran into the same problem of communicating perspective as Kubrick. Lyne's Humbert is also externalized, as can be expected, but his perspective seems to color the narrative more strongly than Kubrick's Humbert does. While film is rarely focalized purely through a first person perspective, the soft-focus, dreamlike quality of many of the scenes seem to imply Humbert's distorted and biased point of view. The film contains a nightmare scene with distorted visuals that most certainly is all in Humbert's head, but most scenes are not quite as explicitly focalized through Humbert. Lyne also uses voice-over, usually passages directly lifted from the book, another indicator that Humbert has some narrative control. However, the voice-overs provide very limited insight into Humbert's mind. The passages chosen are delivered solemnly with great remorse, leaving no room for irony. Lyne keeps some of the more famous passages, such as the introductory "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins" line and the final guilt-ridden soliloquy about "the melody of children at play" (205), in which Humbert expresses his regret at having robbed Lolita of her childhood. The voice-overs showcase Humbert's poetic flair but not his wittiness nor his conniving cruelty.

The fact that most minor characters are absent from the film could be interpreted as Humbert only having eyes for Lolita, another indicator of his skewed perspective. However, in a strange contrast to the choice of at least partially portraying Humbert's perspective, most characters are curiously understated, not just by the standards of Kubrick's adaptation, but the novel itself.

Humbert is portrayed as somber and expressionless, Charlotte has a strange, demure, and childlike air over her, mainly owing to Melanie Griffith's voice. This is a particularly puzzling choice, as it muddles the contrast between the character of Charlotte and her daughter, a contrast which so effectively illustrates Humbert's particular distaste for adult women in the novel. On the other hand, Dominique Swain's Lolita is portrayed as energetic and animated, but seems to act a part much below her age, as is shown by her repeated crawling on the floor and egregiously messy eating habits. Quilty is portrayed as a morbidly serious, sinister presence throughout the film, without a semblance of humor.

While some of these measures are functional enough in communicating Humbert's distorted perspective, the complete lack of self-awareness and irony proves to be a detriment to the film. It plays his narrative completely straight, seemingly encouraging viewers to accept it at face value. Gone is the playfulness, the self-awareness, and the humor present in the novel - and these are not inconsequential. Humbert in the novel is cruel, conniving, and manipulative: there is every indication that his "redemption" is, if not entirely fabricated, at least greatly exaggerated. There is no indication that the filmmakers intend for us to interpret it as anything but the tragic love story which Lyne's Humbert is presenting it as - the tale of a tragically misunderstood man, ultimately undone by his one fatal flaw.

Many reviewers found these portrayals to be more realistic or believable. But is realism or believability truly what should be strived after in an adaptation of *Lolita*? Julia Trubikhina makes the excellent point that such an emphasis on the realism of what little girls or child abusers "should" be like "implies an assumed referent outside Nabokov's text" and that "unambiguous meaning is firmly anchored within the system of representation offered to us" (193). Ultimately, *Lolita* is not a case study in pedophilia. Nabokov's work is steeped in ambiguity, littered with contradictions and irony, and not particularly concerned with reality. Portraying a realistically guilt-ridden Humbert seems to be a countermeasure against the uncomfortable uncertainty and the ambivalence which the audience often feels toward the character.

As noted, Lyne, too, faced issues with portraying the erotic aspects of the book. It was evidently something he wanted to emphasize. The erotic aspect is depicted rather literally: in lengthy, lustful gazes, clumsy necking and the suggestion of sexual intercourse. Although Lyne had to dispense with the more explicit content because of the change in legislature, the film contains several erotic scenes. Some of them serve a purpose, such as showing Lolita exert the only kind of control she has over Humbert, using his desire for her to distract, placate, and coerce him when the opportunity arises. However, she is occasionally also shown as seemingly enjoying their sexual contact, which strikes me as a misguided attempt to inject ambiguity into the narrative where it is not called for. While Dolores in the novel may initially have thought of sex as a kind of rebellious

game, she was always reluctant in performing her “duties” (108), as Humbert so delicately puts it. Ewa Mazierska argues that Lyne ultimately sides with Humbert in portraying Lolita as manipulative and sexually aggressive, which also creates the impression that Lolita fled Humbert out of sheer sexual boredom (40). In all fairness, Lyne also allows glimpses of Lolita’s precarious position and victimhood, as she is shown crying at night and being slapped by Humbert, but the consequences of this are largely glanced over, and it is ultimately Humbert’s suffering that is given more weight.

The film is also littered with trite erotic motifs, such as wet t-shirts, the languorous eating of bananas and Lolita’s inability to consume dairy products without ending up with a milky crescent over her upper lip. With different framing or any kind of subversions these might be interpreted as parody of such tropes, but it seems to be played as a serious sensual contrast between the sexual and the childlike. Lyne certainly manages to portray the sexual aspects of the novel on screen, some of which adds to our understanding of the dynamic between the two, but a large part of it comes close to being purely gratuitous.

In addition to the theme of eroticism, the opening scene plays a central part in establishing the tone of the film. The film opens with the famous first lines of the novel, with the order slightly altered: “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. Light of my life. Fire of my loins. My sin. My soul. Lolita.” These lines are uttered by a blood splattered Humbert clutching a bobby pin as he swerves back and forth driving on the wrong side of the road after having murdered Quilty. This is arguably an effective establishing shot. A murder is implied, and the scene is set to relate to viewers what drove this wronged lover to the act. Ennio Morricone’s music playing in the background is plaintive and wistful. While it could be argued that Humbert’s opening lines of the book are quite dramatic and call for such a somber depiction, the tone is immediately destabilized in the line “You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style” (5), which draws attention to Humbert’s self-awareness and sense of irony. Lyne’s Humbert demonstrates no such self-awareness. This could, of course, have been remedied in later segments, but this lack of self-awareness remains throughout the film and is also demonstrated in the final scene.

Just as in Kubrick’s film, at the end, we return to the first scene. In Lyne’s version, Humbert is again shown listlessly driving, now swerving onto a hill and overlooking a townlet where children play, somberly expressing his repentance and guilt of having destroyed Lolita’s childhood. While it is debatable whether or not this remorse is genuine and Humbert truly loves Lolita, and if love is even possible given the circumstances, Lyne does not offer any counterpoint to Humbert’s statement, thus robbing the scene of its ambiguity. Instead, we are left with the insightful conclusion that Humbert

has learned that child abuse is wrong. This is emphasized, as Trubikhina notes, by the last frame of the film of Lolita falling asleep at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel:

The metaphorical return is to the pivotal moment in the protagonists' fates, when everything, if replayed, could have gone differently. Nevertheless, unlike the uncannily different *déjà vu* in Kubrick's *Lolita*, this return is not open-ended; life does not afford an endless bifurcation of time, and the message is that of regret, repentance, and controlled horror at the irrevocability of the past. (194)

I would argue that it is portrayed as more of an inevitable tragedy than a horrific event, but the point still stands. The ambiguity of the scene and Humbert's character is replaced by a streamlined, acceptable narrative of poetic contrition. The tone of the film is best described as mirthless, with a heavy focus on its erotic aspects. It makes for a strange blend where the film comes across as simultaneously romanticizing and moralizing. The film lacks the ambiguity and the sense of irony which are key aspects of the novel. Thus, by neglecting its humor, Lyne seems to omit much of what makes the novel a classic of modern literature.

4.2.3 Allusion and Parody

Having explored narrative control, tone, and the basic tenets that drive Lyne's film, I now analyze the transposition of the major instances of allusive parody and the satirical implications thereof, that is, romanticism, psychoanalysis, and doubling.

Lyne's *Lolita* has a decidedly romantic, even cloying, air that is present especially in the cinematography, voice-overs, and music. This kind of soaring romanticism is evident in Nabokov's *Lolita*, Humbert does, after all, consider himself a great poet with a unique appreciation for the magic of nymphets, but in the novel, this conviction is undercut and ironized by the absurdity and contradictions of his claims. In Lyne's film, the connection to art is not explicitly made, and there is practically nothing to offset the saccharine sentimentality.

There are no explicit references to Humbert's literary paragons, even if Lyne introduces the alleged source of Humbert's pedophilia, that is, his experiences with Annabel in his childhood. That particular scene is shot in a hazy dreamlike sepia with several closeups and Humbert's voiceover narrating the events and their effects: "The child I loved was gone. But I kept looking for her... long after I'd left my own childhood behind. The poison was in the wound, you see. And the wound wouldn't heal." This explanation is taken at face value and very much presented as the driving force of the narrative. Graham Vickers praises the screenwriter for understanding the importance of this

scene (192). However, simply including it is not necessarily enough to convey the implications. The surrounding cinematic devices all contribute to the image of Humbert as a romantic lover, which according to Mazierska functions as a means of exonerating him (42). This undeniably seems to be the intention, in Lyne's film Humbert's affliction is presented as a tragic, poetic inevitability, and while unfortunate, ultimately justifiable, or at the very least, understandable. Again, this is the view Humbert endorses, but the ironies and dubious quality of this alleged affliction that are present in the novel are not brought to the film.

Humbert's final assertion of his love and remorse is also taken to be completely sincere and redemptive, and in director Lyne's words, "I don't think he would go chasing after 12-year-olds anymore" (Rose). Irons, who played Humbert, also made the strange claim that Humbert was not really a pedophile "in the strictest sense," because he "knew that what he was doing was wrong" (as qtd in Alleyne). While citing the creators on this point may not provide sufficient analytical evidence, it does inform some of the choices made in the film, such as the decision to frame the story as a tragic romance. Denying and excusing Humbert's actions because he manages to elicit sympathy lends the story the air of a tragic morality tale, which it most certainly does not have the novel. It does a fine job capturing Humbert's romantic justifications but removes the ironic layers of parody and satire which elevate the narrative beyond a mere story about pedophilia.

The doppelgänger motif in *Lolita* that receives the most attention in this thesis is the Humbert/Quilty dichotomy. As noted, Nabokov uses the trope as a vessel to explore and ridicule themes such as the rigidity and predictability of interpretative conventions. Quilty is not Humbert's dark side, no matter how much he pushes that narrative, as evidenced by their banal similarity. In Lyne's film, Quilty takes on a superficially similar presence to his character in the novel, elusive and veiled in mystery. Quilty appears in a few scenes, always with his face at least partially obscured, be it by shadows, smoke, or framing. Visual and auditory cues signal his presence as sinister and ominous. There is, for instance, the metaphorical image of moths fluttering to their death in a lantern punctuating Quilty's dialogue in a scene at the Enchanted Hunters hotel. When Quilty is identified (unnamed) as the playwright of the play *Lolita* partakes in at school, Modest Mussorgsky's *Night On Bald Mountain* plays in the background. Quilty, as played by Langella, is slow and deliberate in demeanor and speech. His lines are also sparse and delivered in a low, raspy voice that might be characterized as vaguely threatening.

While this certainly is the image of Quilty Humbert wants to convey, there is practically nothing to offset it. As with the childhood trauma justifying his crimes, Humbert's evil twin narrative is taken at face value. Arguably, it is even amplified in Lyne's film. The image of a raspy-voiced manipulator cloaked in shadows is a readily recognizable manifestation of a diabolic presence, at least to western audiences. *Night on Bald Mountain* also carries connotations to demonic deities.

Quilty is essentially coded as Satan, which forces a bizarre contrast between the two, wherein Humbert by default is cast as a martyr or savior. Despite the inherent ridiculousness of this dichotomy, the struggle between the two is portrayed with the utmost gravity.

Even the murder scene at Quilty's mansion, one of the more overtly humorous ones in the novel, where Humbert's desire to conclude his narrative in a satisfying redemptive arc is completely foiled by Quilty, is played relatively seriously in the film. Before his arrival at Quilty's Pavor Manor, Humbert informs us in voice-over, "I have to say that I regret all I did before that last goodbye in Coalmont. But I regret nothing of what came after," thus emphasizing his vindication. It is worth noting the line is a film original. Humbert arrives at Quilty's mansion, and soon overpowers him. He calls out Humbert for not being an ideal stepfather, but otherwise Humbert gets to carry out his redemptive act undisturbed by Quilty. The scene is abundant in gory detail and even some gratuitous nudity. The scene does contain some of the absurdist imagery lifted from the book, such as a visual approximation of the passage "with another abrupt movement Clare the Impredictable sat down before the piano and played several atrociously vigorous, fundamentally hysterical, plangent chords, his jowls quivering, his spread hands tensely plunging, and his nostrils emitting the soundtrack snorts which had been absent from our fight" (202). However, the imagery cannot serve to amplify the humor of the scene, since it is barely there in the first place. The scene very much suggests a sincere redemption for Humbert, even omitting the particularly humiliating passage with the death sentence poem he hands to Quilty to read. The simultaneous literalism and omission of crucial elements demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the humor and the ironic layers of the novel. Trubikhina makes an excellent point about another example of "'Word-for-word' fidelity" in Lyne's film in the same scene: The depiction of the grotesque "pink bubble with juvenile connotation" of blood on dead Quilty's lips "does not achieve its goal because it cannot playfully extend itself to incorporate the next paragraph's 'every shed drop of his bubbleblood' or the two flies on what remains of Quilty, 'beside themselves with a dawning sense of unbelievable luck'" (Trubikhina 193-194). Despite the emphasis on fidelity, the central point of the scene, that is, Quilty refusing to grant Humbert a satisfying conclusion, is left out.

Quilty is shown as Humbert sees him: as a haunting, spectral presence, with the addition of bizarre Christian overtones. Quilty's subversive presence is reduced to a literal iteration of his actions, such as the kidnapping of Dolores. This means that missing from the film is the aspect of Quilty being a kind of elaborate mockery of Humbert's inclinations, which is key to calling Humbert's narrative into question. Lyne's Humbert merely overcomes his evil twin, but, in true moralist fashion, must still pay for his actions. The theme of doubling is treated with a kind of naive frankness and candor, and does not manage to reflect the novel's clever subversion of the trope.

Psychoanalysis is another crucial element in the narrative framework for *Lolita*. The two scenes that to some extent address this are the introduction to Beardsley Prep School and the parent-teacher meeting, both of these including Miss Pratt, the school headmistress. In the first scene, Pratt informs Humbert that their institution stresses the “three Ds. Dramatics, dancing and dating” and that “for the modern preadolescent, medieval dates are less vital than weekend ones.” This echoes the parody of popularized Freudianism present in the novel. However, by ending the scene with Pratt stressing that weekend dates means boys, the humor underlines the threat of competition for Humbert, rather than being explicit Freudian parody.

A similar shift in humorous focus can be noted in the parent-teacher meeting scene. The topic of the meeting is that the “onset of sexual maturing seems to be giving [Dolores] trouble,” because she is “morbidly disinterested in sexual matters.” However, Lyne does not retain Miss Pratt’s zest and confidence, but makes her, too, slightly embarrassed at discussing the matter at hand. The notes about vehement gum chewing and the like were cut out of the dialogue, which subsequently does not quite convey the vulgar trust in pseudoscientific nonsense the character was originally endowed with. The target of the humor is shifted again, from psychoanalytic theory to Humbert’s unfounded fear of having been found out, with Miss Pratt commenting that “This is a very serious matter” and “What we're trying to say to you is that someone in the family, maybe you. This is very difficult for me...” Ultimately, all she is trying to say is that “someone in the family ought to instruct that dear child in the process of human reproduction.” Despite these slight shifts in focus, the effect of the interactions is humorous, and the irony is retained.

Even though the aforementioned scenes are functional in terms of their humorous content, the extent of psychoanalytic mockery as a framework for *Lolita* is largely ignored in Lyne’s film. The Annabel Lee passage is an example of the psychoanalytic focus on childhood experiences, one which the film audience appears to be expected to accept without question. This kind of trust in Humbert’s version of the events is symptomatic of the film as a whole, and is, ironically, exactly the kind of simplistic and conventional reasoning Nabokov appears to go against. While some of the psychoanalytic parody in the novel seems to be nothing but thinly veiled bile on part of Nabokov, it also carries a satiric edge in showing how easily Humbert can appropriate the concepts of psychoanalysis to suit his narrative and a critique of imposing such limited frameworks on complex phenomena.

4.2.4 Detached Elements of Humor

Despite its predominantly melancholy air, Lyne’s film has a few examples of overt humor, such as the running joke of people getting Humbert’s name wrong. The audience is treated to

variants such as Humper, Humping and Humbug. There is also a visual jest that literally illustrates this sentence in the novel “I seemed to have shed my clothes and slipped into pajamas with the kind of fantastic instantaneousness which is implied when in a cinematographic scene the process of changing is cut” (85), where Humbert emerges from the bathroom in his pajamas immediately after having closed the door to change. The scene in which Humbert converses with Quilty for the first time at the Enchanted Hunters is also rendered almost verbatim, retaining the wordplay and puns of the passage in the novel. For example, Humbert supposedly mishears Quilty’s comment of “the weather is getting better” as “where the devil did you get her.”

However, there seems to be a certain triteness to the humor, when it is not directly lifted from the novel. There is, for example, the scene conveying mutual understanding between two men dealing with the insufferability of their wives. Here Humbert requests stronger barbiturates for his alleged insomnia: “What would you give me if you wanted to uh....to knock out... say, a cow? so, you know, the cow... would stay asleep? Even if you were tossing and turning next to it.” They share a look and the doctor offers him pills that “his wife takes.” In a narrative so creatively cruel toward Charlotte, resorting to such a commonplace joke seems strange. The whole pill scene is also made significantly less disturbing, as Humbert’s original intention was to sedate Dolores enough to abuse her unnoted, as opposed to simply “avoid his husbandly duties” in his marriage to Charlotte.

Some of Lolita’s quips and pranks might be considered humorous, such as her insinuating that her mother is fat or putting on sunglasses saying: “You look a hundred percent better when I can't see you” to Humbert when he throws out a piece of her candy. She also deliberately flushes a toilet to mess with the thermostat while Humbert is in the shower. It might be a matter of opinion whether or not these small jokes land, but they do not manage to alter the overwhelming sense of seriousness and sentimentality that permeates the film. Instead, they seem to function more as indicators of Lolita’s childishness as opposed to subverting the narrative in any meaningful way.

The music and cinematography play a large part of creating this effect. Prolific and lauded composer Ennio Morricone provided the soundtrack for Lyne’s *Lolita*, which can rightly be described as sentimental, much like the rest of the film. As is quite typical of film scores, it is used to highlight the emotion and drama on screen. The disparity between the swelling score and the understated performances from the cast gives the impression that the music is trying to imbue the scene with the pathos one would expect to come from the actors - to be blunt, it seems as if the music is doing the acting for them. The 1940s diegetic pop music in the film provides a contrast to Morricone’s sweeping, romantic score, but this contrast is not juxtaposed so as to convey irony or to produce a humorous effect.

In Lyne’s film, music is not used to subvert or to draw attention to any particular elements – here, too, the function is to enhance the emotional drama and provide authenticity in terms of the

time period it depicts. What few jokes there are fail to override the tone of cloying sentimentality, although it does not seem likely this was the intention. The effect of the comic elements is slight and superficially decorative, as opposed to having the subversive force of Nabokov's original and Kubrick's interpretation. The tone remains consistent within its own frame of reference, but the film does not attempt to utilize the devices of the medium to convey the humor and irony of Nabokov's novel.

4.3 Concluding Remarks

Despite a thirty-five year gap between films, in which censorship took a turn for the more lenient, both directors faced strikingly similar issues in getting their creations off the ground. Both naturally also had to contend with the particularly literary qualities of Nabokov, such as the problem of portraying perspective and the inevitable reduction of scale. How they chose to tackle these issues was very different, and the final products are astonishingly dissimilar, particularly in terms of how the humor of the novel was translated.

Kubrick's film, though understandably lacking in scale, and to some extent complexity when compared to the novel, retains elements of the parody present in the novel, and infuses them with a similar sense of sardonic detachment. The visual and aural realm of the film help to establish the humorous tone in providing contrast and functioning as additional irony markers. Kubrick also creates his own web of referentiality that reflects the medium of film. Humbert is rightly ridiculed, mainly by Quilty and Kubrick's camera work that undermine his control of the story, reminiscent of the subtextual presence of the implied author in the novel. However, the contrast between Humbert's malevolence and ridiculousness is not as stark some of his more depraved thoughts and actions are not shown. While some of Nabokov's more nuanced takes are absent from the film, it remains faithful in spirit to those aspects in terms of tone and humor. One could take issue with the marketing of the film, which held to be true the old maxim "sex sells": it in fact emphasizes the image of the teenage temptress, which is not present in the product itself but nevertheless ended up having a considerable influence on the public image of *Lolita*.

Lyne, on the other hand, with a long history of a "sex sells"-approach to his filmmaking, chose to focus on the erotic aspects of the book, and appeared to have been so preoccupied with replicating the sensuous images from the novel that irony markers were lost on the way. The film suffers from a kind of trite literalism, where Humbert's version of the events is taken at face value, without a semblance of irony to offset it. The few jokes there are have a superficial, decorative function, but they cannot alter the overwhelming sense of sentimentality and seriousness, which is highlighted by the use of music. The ambiguity and tonal shifts of the narrative are lost, and we are

left with a rather banal and sentimental misappropriation of the source material with a superficial similarity to the novel in that it captures the time period instead of the complexity and nuance of the novel.

While subjective interpretation is central in adaptation, and fidelity not necessarily an intrinsic value, there are some troubling implications to excluding the humor of the novel, in that it only serves to strengthen the narrative of a tragic, doomed romance with a sexually aggressive and ultimately indifferent teenager that is such a common interpretation of *Lolita*. In not portraying an undermining presence to contrast Humbert's version of the events, Lyne's film is reduced to a romanticizing, but simultaneously moralizing story about child abuse. The Kubrick film, despite its flaws, manages to convey a more interesting and accurate take by emphasizing the humor at the heart of *Lolita*, which shows that fidelity runs deeper than mere literal replication. In *Lolita* (1962), the humor takes on both aesthetic and critical features, which is characteristic of the novel as a whole. If *Lolita* is stripped of its irony and humor, we are left with only what so many uninitiated people think of the novel - simply the story about a pedophile, or worse, about a manipulative, seductive child.

As a modern classic of literature, *Lolita* will most likely be adapted again to one medium or another some time in the future. Any film adaptation of *Lolita* will run into many of the same issues Kubrick and Lyne wrestled with, such as the challenges of conveying perspective and balancing the comedy and pathos, as well as ethical qualms when dealing with such a controversial subject matter. What ends up as central will depend on many things, contemporary societal anxieties, the individual filmmaker and any number of commercial reasons. While it is only possible to speculate as to what the future holds, it seems likely that we will eventually see an adaptation which favors Dolores's perspective. In the same vein, some have also expressed a desire to see a woman at the helm of the next adaptation. We can only hope that whoever ends up taking on the project understands the significance of humor in *Lolita*

5 CONCLUSION

In *Lolita*, Nabokov engages in elaborate rhetorical, narrative and intertextual play, simultaneously subverting and celebrating the tradition he draws on, without sacrificing aesthetic revelry. The humor in *Lolita* is multilayered and multifunctional, ranging from decorative to profound and explicit to subtextual, but most importantly, it serves to call Humbert's narrative into question. The concepts that are subject to ridicule all share a common basis: romanticism, the doppelgänger trope, and the tenets of psychoanalysis are all fraught with evocative symbolism and dichotomy. Humbert uses these concepts and tropes to justify and manipulate, which shows the effectiveness and merits of these tropes, but the humorous ironies, juxtapositions, and contradictions reveal a subtextual questioning of his narrative. The supposedly romantic, transcendental insight of Humbert's affliction is undermined by his focus on physicality, his egoism, and the despotic rule he imposes over others, whom he considers mere aesthetic objects in his story. The stark contrast Humbert attempts to portray between himself and his alleged double Quilty is gradually obscured to nothingness. Finally, much of the emotional weight of Humbert's story relies on psychoanalytic concepts of childhood traumas, but this is compromised by Humbert's own insistence on ridiculing those concepts.

The humor in *Lolita* certainly mocks and questions Humbert, but it can also potentially be seen as a game played with the readers. *Lolita's* satiric core lies in the mockery of our inclination to think of art in a romanticized way: our penchant for simplistic and conventional reasoning and desire to impose narrow interpretative patterns onto art in order to streamline ambiguous or uncomfortable aspects of a given work. In a way, *Lolita* seeks to trick its readers - the conventional readings which it invites do not hold up to scrutiny.

However, exploring the mystery and joining Humbert on his enchanted hunt for Lolita and then his shadow, is terrific fun: the narrative is compelling and well-crafted, and right up until Quilty lets all the air out of it with his lackadaisical attitude toward the final confrontation, it is just as gripping as it would be if the conclusion were a traditionally satisfying one. The humor in *Lolita*, though often subversive and challenging is neither didactic nor moralizing but playful, which demonstrates that the sensual delights and aesthetic value of *Lolita* are closely intertwined, if not inseparable, from its humor.

The humor is part of what makes *Lolita* so unique and also what elevates the story beyond simply being a story about a pedophile. However, since its publication, *Lolita* has undeniably taken on a life of its own, and has, in addition to becoming a noun, been invoked in a multitude of media, often with the image of a teenage temptress emphasized. The most famous and influential

interpretations are arguably the two film adaptations by Stanley Kubrick and Adrian Lyne. Kubrick's *Lolita* (1962) reduced the scale quite significantly, reorganized plot elements and shifted the focus to Quilty, who took on an intrusive role resembling a jester. However, the film retains elements of the parody present in the novel, and develops them to suit the narrative conventions of film. Humbert is rightly ridiculed, mainly by Quilty and Kubrick's camera work that both undermine his control of the story, which is reminiscent of the critical subtextual presence in the novel. While some of Nabokov's more nuanced features are absent from Kubrick's film, it remains faithful in spirit to it in terms of tone and humor.

Lyne took on the project with the explicit intention of creating an adaptation that was more faithful to the novel. However, his interpretation of *Lolita* strays quite far from the tone of Nabokov. While it has a superficial similarity to the novel and took a meticulous approach to visualize specific details, the irony markers are lost on the way, and replaced by a cloying sentimentality that takes Humbert's narrative at face value. By neglecting to portray a subversive presence as a contrast to Humbert's story, the film is reduced to a romanticized, but simultaneously moralizing story about doomed, unconventional relationship, which creates a host of ethical problems in its implications.

These contrasts demonstrate that fidelity runs deeper than mere literalism and how little is left of *Lolita* if the humor is removed. It also raises some ethical questions. Without the humor as an undermining element of Humbert's story, *Lolita* is quite easily twisted into the image of the manipulative teenage temptress that is such a common understanding of the character. Kubrick is not entirely without blame either, since the promotional material of his film did in fact further that image. Nevertheless, Kubrick displays a much more nuanced understanding of the tone and overarching themes of the novel.

In addition to the two famous film adaptations of the novel, *Lolita* has spawned several other artistic reworkings, such as stage plays, an opera and a number of derivative literary works. As a character, *Lolita* also lives on in other contemporary cultural phenomena, such as artist personas and advertisements. Although it may be a stretch to call everything that invokes *Lolita* an adaptation, these incarnations contribute to our understanding of the tropes and traits most central to the work in the public mind. *Lolita* remains relevant to this day and new output with more and less explicit ties to Nabokov's novel is continuously being produced and discussed. The failed stage musical *Lolita My Love* from 1971 is currently being revived, and is getting its New York debut almost 50 years later (Patterson). Sarah Weinman's book about the real-life Sally Horner, a girl whose story bears a striking and terrifying resemblance to that of *Lolita*'s, was published in late 2018 (Smith). Interestingly, the novel has also recently been invoked in the purely hypothetical debate about whether or not the supposedly easily-offended, prudish generation which I, too, am part of ever would have allowed *Lolita* to be published (Waddell). Any invocation of *Lolita* is likely to run into a complex set of ethical,

narrational and commercial issues, and I sincerely doubt that my generation will manage to consign *Lolita* to oblivion simply because of the different ways these issues are dealt with in current times. On the contrary, I believe more nuanced tools to further explore *Lolita* both in art and academia are continuously being developed.

Over the years, *Lolita* has demonstrated a lasting ability to to shock, inspire, and delight. In focusing on the humor of the novel and how it was adapted for the silver screen, I hope to have shown that the humor in *Lolita* is not restricted to decorative parody, but is a defining feature of the novel. In sum, it informs the narrative by means of questioning Humbert, and even functions as an ethical pointer as opposed to being an example of nonchalance or exploitation on Nabokov's part. It also reveals a satirical core in the implicit discussion of the role and plight of the poet as a harbinger of truth and beauty, the problematizing of imposing art on reality as well as the human tendency for dichotomous, simplistic reasoning and analysis. All this is achieved neither at the expense of aesthetic luxuriation nor by reducing the narrative to simple moralizing. In no small part, humor is what makes the novel a classic work of modern literature, and as such it should not be neglected in artistic or scholarly explorations of the topic.

At the end of the novel, Humbert promises Lolita immortality in art, and whatever his motives, on that particular promise, he delivered.

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