

“Lovely, Trustful, Dreamy, Enormous”: Vladimir Nabokov’s
Representations of America in *Lolita*

An Honors Paper for the Department of English
By Tully Patrick Moyer

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Introduction

In an interview for *Playboy Magazine*, Alvin Toffler once asked Vladimir Nabokov which of his books was the most difficult to write, and Nabokov responded:

Oh, *Lolita*, naturally. I lacked the necessary information—that was the initial difficulty. I did not know any American 12-year-old girls, and I did not know America; I had to invent America and *Lolita*. It had taken me some 40 years to invent Russia and Western Europe, and now I was faced by a similar task, with a lesser amount of time at my disposal. (Toffler)

Nabokov invites us to look closely at the choices that he makes with everything from the motels that Humbert Humbert and Lolita Haze stay in during their travels to the jobs with which Humbert occupies himself when he first arrives in America. The question of exactly how Nabokov invented his version of America requires looking at Nabokov's history in the country and the ways in which he represents America in the novel. Important to Nabokov's time in America is the fact that he had no real, permanent home. Some of his time was spent in towns in which he taught at universities and colleges, but much of his time was spent on the road, travelling with Véra and Dmitri (his wife and son), jumping between motels and cabins while driving across and discovering America. This travel proved critical to the development of *Lolita*, as he began to learn about the regional differences and formed a more complete vision of the country. This vision comes through in many forms throughout the novel—places, people, stores, towns, interactions and institutions, to name a few—and in this work, I focus on Nabokov's vision of America as it is revealed through his discussion of privacy in American motels,

capitalism and American consumer culture, and the relationship between space and place in America as it relates to travel and automobiles. While these topics together fall short of a complete survey of Nabokov's vision and views of America, they each contribute something unique to the broader system of ideals that defines American life and culture.

As Nabokov's vision of America begins to take shape through Humbert's narrative, Nabokov highlights emerging paradoxes of American culture. Through his discourse on privacy, consumerism, and place in the novel, the role of the individual within the broader picture of society becomes increasingly important. Scholars in a wide array of fields have commented on the role of individualism in America. One such example is Robin M. Williams, Jr.'s *American Society*, which approaches the topic from a sociological angle, highlighting the American emphasis on "*individual personality* rather than group identity and responsibility" (442). This is not to suggest that Americans adopt a "lone wolf" mentality, but rather that they enjoy a certain amount of autonomy. Williams adds, "So long as American society safeguards the right of the individual to a wide range of moral autonomy in decision making, so long as the representative character structure of the culture retains a conscience that is more than simple group conformity—so long will freedom be a major value" (421-422). Williams recognizes the importance of individual autonomy in preserving the American value of freedom, and this relationship between individualism and freedom plays a critical role in Humbert's narrative. As Humbert soon finds as he moves to America and gets to know his new country, societal norms and institutions protect individual rights, but at the same time, lack of privacy, conformist attitudes surrounding mass culture and blending ideas of place often reject the individuality that Americans value. In *Lolita*, Nabokov highlights many of these conflicts, and more importantly,

he uses Humbert's experiences to explore the ways in which an individual of foreign origin is able to find his place in American society—both as an individual and a part of a larger group.

In formulating my argument, I use three main categories of secondary sources. First, I use literary scholarship dealing directly with *Lolita* and Nabokov throughout, and these serve to connect other theoretical works to the novel and to point to valuable questions and complexities of Nabokov's work. Second, I use biographical sources on Vladimir Nabokov, his past before coming to America, his experiences in the country and his process of writing *Lolita*. Because a large part of my argument involves drawing connections between Nabokov's experiences and Humbert's narrative, this biographical framework serves a critical role in providing details of Nabokov's past.¹ Lastly, I use sources that deal directly with the topics of interest in this project—privacy, advertising and consumerism, and place and travel—but are not immediately connected to *Lolita* or literature at all, in many cases. In the first chapter, on privacy, I rely heavily on legal sources, analyzing the ways in which court decisions and histories of privacy in America reveal details about the ways in which privacy was understood in the 1950s and today. In the second chapter, I use narratives and studies of advertising and consumer culture in America in the 1950s that approach the topic through economic and social lenses, which allows me to place *Lolita* and Nabokov's ideas within an historical context. I also utilize theoretical understandings and definitions of mass culture and the culture industry, which help to explain many of Humbert's feelings about American culture in his narrative. In the third chapter, I use studies of the relationship between space and place to explore Humbert's sentiment towards

¹ Nabokov's own effort to document his travels, along with his time spent at universities in the East, resulted in a great amount of information available about his life. The works of Brian Boyd and Robert Roper were especially helpful with this.

place and his connection to America. These secondary sources from other fields help to connect my ideas to existing scholarship on *Lolita* and Nabokov.

Beginning with their very first night together after Charlotte Haze's death, Humbert and Lolita spend most of their nights in hotels and motels. I begin this project by analyzing the role of hotels and motels in Humbert's narrative, specifically as they relate to the idea of privacy. Privacy is a difficult word to define, as it can mean various things in different contexts, and in the first chapter, I outline the ways in which privacy is viewed by Humbert and Nabokov. Importantly, this complexity is exactly what makes the topic of privacy in America so interesting to Nabokov. He does not use *Lolita* to criticize or celebrate privacy's functioning in American society, but rather to explore the ways in which private and public spheres function and overlap. Humbert has very specific goals for his privacy, as he relies on it to protect his relationship with Lolita, both in keeping their relationship away from the public eye and in his employment of privacy as a defense of his criminal actions. As Humbert's vision of privacy develops, a clearer picture emerges of the relationship between public and private spheres in America. Humbert constantly seeks private spaces in which he is able to be alone with Lolita, but these spaces are seldom as private as he imagined, as other guests and hotel employees threaten Humbert's secrecy. Even in this incomplete privacy, though, Humbert is still able to engage in sexual acts with Lolita, and in this way, he violates the sanctity of private spheres that Americans have tried so hard to protect. Through *Lolita*, Nabokov also creates a space in which readers are able to explore their own relationship with privacy in the context of a novel. Nabokov's aestheticized prose welcomes the reader into their own private space, where they are able to form their own ideas about publicity and privacy, and then proceeds to intrude upon that newly created private sphere by describing the ways in which Humbert takes advantage of private spaces in the novel.

In doing so, Nabokov develops a discourse on the relationship between public and private spheres, challenging traditional understandings of privacy and allowing the reader to consider the kinds of spaces that should or should not be protected by society and government.

This American value of privacy returns to liberal values that allow individuals to make their own choices. Humbert uses the idea of privacy to argue that he and Lolita are each able to make their own conscious decision to engage in these sexual acts, but this freedom of choice in America also extends to its capitalist economy that allows consumers to choose how to spend their money. Nabokov's representation of American consumer culture in *Lolita* is complicated by Humbert's involvement in the advertising industry. He first comes to America to work for his uncle's business, focusing on advertisements for perfumes. Through Humbert's work, and its effects on his life afterwards, Nabokov explores the relationship between consumer and persuader. While Nabokov celebrates some aspects of this consumerism, he is also critical of many of the tactics used by persuaders, like the exploitation of vulnerable targets or misleading advertisements. At the same time that Humbert engages with the role of persuader through his work, he is also critical of consumers, taking special interest in Lolita and her mother's obsessions with American mass culture. Throughout Humbert's cross-country travels, he celebrates the diversity of landscape in America and comes to appreciate the value of individualism, but he is critical of those that reject this individualism in favor of conformity. Humbert quickly adopts a classist attitude towards Lolita's preferences and sharply criticizes American mass culture and consumerism, seeing it as a low form of culture that strips America of its focus on the individual. As he becomes increasingly critical of Lolita's participation in American consumerism, Humbert also begins to commodify Lolita and become the exact kind of consumer that he sharply criticizes throughout his narrative. In the second chapter, I argue that

through advertising and Humbert's relationship with Lolita, Nabokov exposes the deceit and exploitation that stem from the self-interest of consumers and persuaders in American consumer culture in the 1950s. Parallel to this narrative is the development of a national identity in America after World War II. The clash of New Deal policies with the American rejection and fear of communism revealed uncertainties about the general American stance on capitalism, and simultaneously, Humbert is trying to find his own identity in America as a consumer and persuader, and as a European emigrant.

As Nabokov makes these general commentaries and critiques of America and American culture, he examines the country as a whole, but he also considers his own relationship with America as he begins to view it as his home. Because of his nomadic lifestyle, there was no one place in America that he was able to consider his home, but he still felt deep ties to the country, and he explores this relationship through Humbert's travels with Lolita. Nabokov, through Humbert's narrative, makes key distinctions between space and place, and this relationship becomes increasingly understood by Humbert as his narrative progresses. In an effort to keep secret his relationship with Lolita, he brings her on the road, never staying in one place for too long. I argue in the third chapter that Humbert's staying in one place results in the establishment of meaning and sense of place, and that while this is what he craves, he also recognizes the disastrous effects such an establishment would have on his relationship with Lolita, and it is this he tries to avoid by keeping her on the road. While this exposes him to new areas of the country, and eventually he comes to appreciate the beauty that he finds through his travels, this movement leads to regret. I argue that he detests the emptiness with which he views America, but that his travels by automobile allow him to experience the country for all of its distinctiveness. Importantly, Humbert recognizes his love for America, but he also notes that he only arrives at

that love after a sustained period of disdain and lack of understanding. This shift from his view of America as “no more...than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires” to his eventual understanding of “the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country” is more easily understood by considering the ways in which spaces differ from places. An emotional attachment to a place requires some understanding of the ways in which that place differs from other places, and it is this individualism of place that Humbert eventually identifies and comes to love.

Critical to the vision of America put forth in *Lolita* is its existence as a departure from life in Europe, for both Nabokov and Humbert. Each having spent their formative years in Europe, America represents a change in their life—away from something old and towards something different. They have their unique motivations for coming to America, but as they settle and come to know the country, they have similar feelings and troubles with regard to their new space. Through *Lolita*, Nabokov explores his own feelings about America by showing the country as he sees it. The vision presented is certainly not an outright embrace of America and all of its values, but nor is it an outright rejection. At times, he criticizes the country and its people through humor or ugliness, and in other moments, he showcases its beauty. In this project, I do not attempt to determine Nabokov’s true feelings; instead, I will analyze some of Nabokov’s own internal debates that he puts into text through *Lolita* and explore the contradictions and complications that he writes into Humbert’s narrative. In *Lolita*, Humbert as a European emigrant is forced to develop his identity as an American, and he—and also Nabokov—eventually sees himself as one. By exploring Humbert’s development of an American identity, Nabokov reveals his own vision of America and American people. While Humbert’s American identity and the identity of the country itself are not identical, this is exactly what Humbert enjoys—the immense value of individualism and personal autonomy. His criticisms

deal mostly with conformity and group behavior, but while he sees these as prevalent in American society, he does not suggest that they shape the nation's character. Rather, it is the ways in which American society allows individuals to break free from this conformity that shapes American identity and individuals' roles within society.

Chapter One

Not-so-separate Spheres: Privacy and Publicity in American Hotels and Motels

It is impossible to read Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* without considering the moral problem of Humbert Humbert's pedophilic relationship with Lolita, and scholarship around the novel reflects the varying arguments about how morality should be viewed in the context of the novel.² Equally as obvious in the text are the legal implications of Humbert's pedophilia and murder of Clare Quilty. Perhaps because of Humbert's obvious guilt—in fact, the entire narrative is written as a confession—the craft of his argument is often left undiscussed. Humbert is so aware (and perhaps even proud) of his guilt that he wastes no time trying to claim that he did not have sex with Lolita or kill Quilty. Instead, he makes the nuanced argument that he was seduced by Lolita, and great memories of his past allowed him to follow through on her advances. This is not to say that he does not believe his sexual relationship with Lolita was criminal, but that he hopes for sympathy and understanding as he makes his plea. He makes the argument that his killing Quilty was a crime of passion, but this necessitates a defense of his pedophilia, in some manner. For this tall order, Humbert argues that privacy protects his relationship, and it is only when this privacy is violated that it is exposed to the public. He revels in the privacy that he is able to find. He laments when others prevent him from doing so. He has clear ideas about what privacy means and how he should be able to find it. However, these ideas are constantly being disrupted and challenged. While the narrative develops distinctions between private and public

² Frederick Whiting in “‘The Strange Particularity of the Lover’s Preference’: Pedophilia, Pornography, and the Anatomy of Monstrosity in *Lolita*” and Martin Green in “The Morality of *Lolita*” are just two examples of the many scholars that approach the topic of morality in *Lolita*.

spaces in the novel, these commentaries have real world implications for the reader. In this chapter I will discuss the private space created for the reader by Nabokov and his following intrusions into that same space. At the same time that Nabokov explores the relationship between privacy and publicity through Humbert's narrative, Nabokov exposes the reader to the contemporary discourse on privacy and creates a space in which the reader is able to consider how these public and private spheres function in the world.

For Humbert, privacy is about isolation, but imagining his ideas on the topic with just this word is problematic. His vision of privacy is dynamic; the way he imagines private spaces before he engages in his relationship with Lolita is far different from the way he imagines it towards the end of his narrative, when he kills Quilty. While Humbert writes about his hopes for a private space to be alone with Lolita and believes that only complete privacy will allow him to maintain secrecy with their relationship, he is still able to find the positive effects of privacy that he needs, even in the absence of total privacy. As the narrative develops, a clearer picture emerges about the goals and effects of private spaces and how these are complicated by the various uses of privacy. In this chapter, I will analyze the complex relationship between privacy and public view that Humbert and Nabokov struggle to resolve in *Lolita*. By describing Humbert's use of private spaces for illicit means and his arguments for increased protection of those private spheres, Nabokov challenges traditional understandings of public and private spheres and explores the ways in which society should or should not protect those spaces.

In order to analyze the ways in which American ideas on privacy relate to *Lolita*, I turn to legal texts, such as court decisions and histories of privacy, as these sources allow me to explain the understandings of privacy in America that inform Nabokov and Humbert's views. Because Humbert frames his narrative as a legal defense, these legal sources provide key insights that are

not often found in literary scholarship. Literary scholarship is still critical to my work in this chapter, though, as scholars like Brandon Centerwell and Frederick Whiting have done important work to connect the reader to the text of the novel, and I use these sources to explain the ways in which the reader and the novel are situated within the broader discourse of privacy in America. I also use David Rosen and Aaron Santesso's *The Watchmen in Pieces*, which analyzes the ways in which privacy and individual autonomy function in literature. While this work does not deal directly with *Lolita*, it is still useful as I connect literary and legal scholarship.

Inside the Mind of the Reader: Morality and Anxiety

Nabokov elicits an emotional response in readers through Humbert's invasions into traditionally private spaces, and it is through this invasion that Nabokov challenges readers to consider the implications of understandings of privacy in *Lolita*. Frederick Whiting, in "The Strange Particularity of the Lover's Preference': Pedophilia, Pornography, and the Anatomy of Monstrosity in *Lolita*," notes the complications involved with trying to assess moral commentary surrounding sexuality in *Lolita*: "...the novel neither evades the ethical implications of Humbert's monstrous desire nor reiterates a shopworn outrage at his deeds but questions the period's conceptions of monstrosity and ordinary subjectivity, privacy and publicity, aesthetics and morality, upon which any ethics must ultimately depend" (Whiting 835). Although Nabokov neither sympathizes with Humbert's sexual desires nor explicitly denounces them, his representation of Humbert and Lolita's relationship still must be understood within a broader social context. Whiting argues that "both types of monster, the pedophile and the pornographer, tapped into a nexus of postwar social and political anxieties about normal, heterosexual, male

subjectivity and its place within the organization of public and private life” (834). These postwar tensions are important to understand, as they blur the line between public and private life.

“Humbert the pedophile,” Whiting argues, “threatened the home, innermost bastion of privacy and last redoubt guarding liberal democratic freedoms” (834). Humbert engages in illicit sexual acts with Lolita in private spaces, and Nabokov brings these invasions to our attention. By exposing Humbert’s threats to intimate, private spaces, Nabokov brings these actions to the public sphere, making others aware of these threats to “democratic freedoms.” The home is seen at this time as the ultimate private space, where children (which Whiting calls the “very embodiment of...privacy”) are protected from the outside world (834). Thus, as Nabokov threatens this privacy through the exploitation of a child, the private world becomes increasingly vulnerable. The will of the public to protect these spaces leads to a territorial battle for private spaces between the public and those that threaten the private—in this case, pedophiles.

Humbert recognizes the existence of separate spheres for adults and children and expresses anxieties about the increasing disconnect between these two worlds: “The whole point is that the old link between the adult world and the child world has been completely severed nowadays by new customs and new laws” (124). As Humbert attempts to claim legitimacy in his relationship with Lolita, he argues that it is only in modern times that customs and laws have come between adults and children.³ It is this disconnect that he attempts to blame for his demise:

Human beings, attend! I should have understood that Lolita had *already* proved to be something quite different from innocent Annabel, and that the nymphean evil breathing through every pore of the fey child that I had prepared for my secret delectation, would make the secrecy impossible, and the delectation lethal. I

³ Humbert adds, “Despite my having dabbled in psychiatry and social work, I really knew very little about children” (124).

should have known (by the signs made to me by something in Lolita—the real child Lolita or some haggard angel behind her back) that nothing but pain and horror would result from the expected rapture. Oh, winged gentlemen of the jury!
(125)

Humbert appeals to “human beings” and “gentlemen of the jury” in order to defend his innocence. His claim here attempts to shift the blame away from himself and onto Lolita. Humbert does half-heartedly attribute some of the blame to himself by using phrases like, “I should have understood...” or “I should have known...,” but he also argues that it is Lolita and her differences from Annabel that ultimately make the “delectation lethal.” He wants his audience to understand that it is not his complete inability to understand children that is the issue, but rather Lolita’s differences from Annabel and the changing nature of the relationship between children and adults.

Humbert includes in his appeal a recognition of the importance of innocence and his attempt, however misguided, to retain that innocence. Central to Frederick Whiting’s understanding of postwar anxieties about the home and private spaces is the retention of the innocence of children. He writes that Humbert’s “victims, children, were the very embodiment of that privacy, incarnations of innocence possessing no public existence whatsoever save their cameo appearances in the protective statutes designed to reinscribe them, ever more safely, within the domestic sphere” (834-835). Humbert considers this innocence as he writes of their first night together at The Enchanted Hunters, “I was still firmly resolved to pursue my policy of sparing her purity by operating only in the stealth of night, only upon a completely anesthetized little nude. Restraint and reverence were still my motto—even if that ‘purity’ ...had been damaged through some juvenile erotic experience” (124). Humbert argues here that he has no

obligation to retain her innocence, as it has already been corrupted by her sexual experiences at camp, but even in the absence of such an obligation he still seeks to retain her purity. He argues that he is keeping her safely within the private, domestic sphere, while at the same time arguing that she is not a normal child and has already been removed from that sphere. Importantly, however, Humbert ultimately abandons this attempt to retain Lolita's innocence when they first engage in sexual relations the next morning, unanesthetized. Humbert's intrusion into the private, domestic sphere accounts for anxieties surrounding his and Lolita's relationship, as it is seen as an attack on liberal democratic freedoms. His public appeal for his innocence then can be viewed as a defense of his place within the private sphere and his right to utilize private spaces for what he sees as legitimate uses. While others view Humbert's actions as an attack on liberal democratic freedoms, Humbert views society's intrusion into his private life as an attack on his own liberal democratic freedoms. These different understandings allow the reader to consider the extent to which certain spaces should be considered private and to what degree those spaces should be legally protected.⁴

While considering the psyche of the reader and their reaction to Humbert's narrative, it is important to also take into account Humbert's motivations. Because the narrative is entirely Humbert's and thus free from censorship or corrections, the narrator is not entirely reliable. When Humbert complains about not being afforded privacy, this feels like a good thing, as a pedophile is prevented from engaging in sexual acts with a child. On the other hand, Humbert makes persuasive arguments about privacy being an American value that should be taken

⁴ Whiting adds that during the Cold War, these "monstrous" forces that threatened the home began to shift from visible to invisible, increasing anxieties surrounding these threats (836). This shift is critical to Humbert's narrative, as he makes public his destructive actions that are made possible by the existence of private spaces. Private, domestic spaces that once provided a haven from these monsters serve in *Lolita* as spaces in which these monsters are able to hide.

seriously. This tension requires careful thought on the part of the reader about the impression that Humbert is trying to make and his motivations backing his writing. David Rosen and Aaron Santesso write in *The Watchmen in Pieces*, “Control of any situation...is inevitably complicated by the arts of impression management: a person must meet expectations but give no sign of calculation: his or her audience, in turn, must watch constantly for insincerity” (57). Humbert knows, or at least thinks that, he is under constant watch, and as a result, his activity becomes a form of performance as he seeks to deceive those by whom he is being watched.⁵ A critical factor brought forward by Rosen and Santesso is calculation. As I will discuss more in the second chapter, Humbert is constantly practicing the art of persuasion, and this makes it all too easy to take his words at face value. In response to Humbert’s calculations, the reader must “watch constantly for insincerity.” While it is obvious to anyone reading *Lolita* that Humbert’s pedophilia is morally and legally wrong and should be punished appropriately, the questions about privacy and where it should and should not be afforded are less clear. This is perhaps one of Nabokov’s greatest successes in the novel; he presents the narrative that outlines Humbert’s experiences with privacy in America and allows the reader to consider the institutions that allow for and protect these private spheres.

Nabokov argues that morality is far less important than the experience of reading and enjoying his works. Whiting quotes Nabokov, who claims to make no moral arguments in his fiction, “For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of

⁵ As Rosen and Santesso note earlier, whether or not a subject is actually being watched is irrelevant, as individuals’ behavior would be the same whether they are actually being watched or only think that they might be being watched. They point to the idea of panopticism and the famous psychological experiment where prisoners know they could be watched at any time but do not know whether or not they actually are: “Ideal perfection...would require that each person should actually be in that predicament, during every instant of time. This being impossible, the next best thing to be wished for is, that, at every instance, seeing reason to believe as much, and not being able to satisfy himself to the contrary, he should *conceive* himself to be so” (4-5).

being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (854). Whiting writes of this quote, “Implicit in these oppositions is a clean separation of public and private spheres. Unlike the public moralism of the literature of ideas, the aesthetic bliss that true art produces is measurable only in the private response of the individual reader” (854). By arguing that the experience of reading his fiction creates a private space where “curiosity, tenderness, kindness [and] ecstasy” are normal reactions, Nabokov allows for the existence of a private space than can be viewed free of moral questioning. It is this space that Humbert attempts to occupy, and his plea of innocence sets out to place his sexual endeavors with Lolita within this private sphere. Such an understanding of the experience of reading Nabokov’s fiction, however, creates a space in which morality can be explored. In the reader’s own private sphere, they can consider moral issues presented by Nabokov’s fiction. Even if Nabokov is right that he makes no moral arguments, he certainly presents a narrative in which moral issues are presented and readers can take a stance on those issues.

For Nabokov, the space created through his fiction is intended to free readers from the moral bind of the novel. However, Humbert’s narrative still creates a space in which readers are able to consider its moral implications. It is impossible to separate completely the aestheticized prose from the pedophilia. There is something so biting about the morality issue of pedophilia that aesthetics and a work’s existence as a piece of art cannot free readers from at least considering it. Nabokov, in *Lolita*, creates a private space for readers through aesthetic bliss and then immediately intrudes upon that private space with a sympathetic narrative of a pedophile. This has broader implications for the idea of privacy. Although readers are welcomed to consider the moral issues underlying the narrative, because this consideration takes place within a private space, there is no prescribed stance that readers are forced to take. There is nothing forcing a

reader to take a stance of outright rejection of Humbert's moral values or a stance of tacit acceptance. A reader may fall at either end of the spectrum, or any place in between, and is allowed to keep this stance to themselves. Consider, however, the dilemma presented by Rosen and Santesso. Even if readers' minds are not being watched, which they obviously are not, paranoia about surveillance will force readers to consider others' opinions before forming their own. Because the reader fears that they could potentially be put in a situation where even their thoughts, the most private of spaces, could be exposed or have public consequences, readers will trend towards feeling the way they are supposed to feel—that is, how society tells them they should feel. Rosen and Santesso argue that “the more closely people are watched, the more they tend to perform according to the expectations of their viewers” (57). This situation is less performative and more psychological, but these factors are still important in considering how a reader considers issues of privacy in the novel. This also points to a broader issue of privacy: if thoughts are able to be influenced by the public, are there any spaces that can be considered truly private?

Also within his narrative, Humbert continues to challenge the value of privacy. Nabokov details the destructive activity that is allowed to occur when Humbert finds private spaces and exploits them for his own gain, at the expense of Lolita and the society that is being intruded upon by Humbert's pedophilia. Nabokov uses the private space he creates to convey how easily privacy can be used to negative ends, making Nabokov's stance on privacy ambiguous. On one hand, he associates privacy with “curiosity, tenderness, kindness [and] ecstasy” (Whiting 854). He views private spaces as individual havens to experience and think about artistic values. On the other hand, he portrays it as a vulnerable space that can be intruded upon by the likes of pedophiles and murderers. Of course, if Nabokov is so deferential to aesthetic value, these moral

issues are irrelevant, as he suggests. However, to readers, they are not irrelevant and cannot be ignored. Private spaces are seen differently by various individuals, reflecting individual point of view as a critical component of privacy.

To put it simply, there is no binary categorization of public and private spaces, and this is the crux of Nabokov's exploration of privacy. Furthermore, single places fall on different points of the spectrum for different people. For example, a room at a small, rural bed and breakfast would provide a welcome refuge for a couple living in the city to escape for a weekend of solitude and anonymity. For Humbert, such a venue would strip him of the anonymity he is able to enjoy at larger establishments and allow for the opportunity for his secret to be discovered. With this in mind, this chapter is not about determining which spaces can be considered "private" and which ones can be considered "public." Instead, I explore here the ways in which society believes individuals should be allowed to experience privacy and the ways in which varying intentions affect the level of privacy afforded in different spaces for different people.

Legal Considerations of Privacy and Publicity

After arriving at an understanding of the importance of privacy to Humbert, it is then necessary to understand what shape this privacy takes. To Humbert, one of the most important elements of his privacy is his remaining unseen. Brandon S. Centerwell, in "Hiding in Plain Sight: Nabokov and Pedophilia," writes of Nabokov's claim to have known six pedophiles, "I have no doubt I have met as many pedophiles as Nabokov, but not a single one to know of" (470-471). This claim is revealing of the anxieties of the American public regarding the impossibility of knowing where pedophiles exist. Molestation is known to be a widespread

danger, but their relative invisibility is what makes them so frightening, and it is this invisibility that they rely upon for their success. Humbert is no different. Centerwell writes of the riddle of determining what *Lolita* is about, “So strewn is *Lolita* with thematic red herrings that it takes an effort to realize that the answer to the riddle is contained within the two words the author never, never uses: *pedophilia* and *molestation*. For that is what *Lolita* is really about” (471). Centerwell uses this as evidence for his argument that Nabokov himself was a closet pedophile. I do not find this argument convincing or productive, but his point that *Lolita* is about pedophilia and molestation, and that this is revealed through an absence of any direct confrontation of these terms, is useful for understanding Humbert’s motivations. His hiding from the public eye, while making use of public spaces, is central to his understanding of and quest for privacy.

Also important to Humbert’s idea of privacy is its place within the law. Because Humbert frames his narrative as a legal defense, legal jargon and ideas are prevalent throughout the novel. This is in part a result of the intended fictional audience of Humbert’s writing and John Ray’s foreword, but it is also a result of the intertwined nature of privacy, sexuality and the law. Patricia Boling, writing on privacy in the public sphere, outlines a history of privacy in the United States Supreme Court and argues that, historically, privacy has been used as “the engine for decriminalizing intimate and profoundly important decisions” (Boling 11). With regard to decisions regarding same-sex intimacy, she argues that “current discussion is pushing for public, civil recognition of same-sex intimacy using arguments about equality and community” (Boling 11). This shift did not occur until a few years into the twenty-first century, moving into the present day. The shift towards public recognition is, in large part, an effort to reinforce the normality of same-sex relations and remove the stigma of otherness that often accompanies homosexuality. This is a departure from historical efforts to defend homosexual intimacy

through arguments of privacy. The privacy argument for the legalization of homosexual intimacy does not seek to normalize homosexuality, or even defend the practice itself; it simply seeks to defend the activities occurring within private spaces. While at times he makes the argument that his pedophilic desires are normal practices that society should consider acceptable, these claims fall within the broader argument that his activities concern no one other than himself and Lolita, and that he should be allowed to engage in these activities, free from watchful eyes. Legal arguments about same-sex intimacy that Humbert uses to defend his own practices deal entirely with relationships between two consenting adults, and this is how Humbert treats his relationship with Lolita in his narrative. By framing their relationship in this manner, he attempts to mask the fact that Lolita is not old enough to consent and that their sexual relationship will remain morally and legally coercive.

Because of Humbert's reliance on the law in making his argument, it is important to understand the American legal codes and decisions that are relevant to the content and context of his narrative. Boling argues that "making the transition from private to public," or the justification of state intervention into private spheres, is more difficult in the United States than other countries because "Americans...draw on rich, protective notions of privacy to map out zones of protected activities and choices" (Boling 25). Humbert recognizes the American idea of private zones, and it is within these zones that he seeks to place himself. He fails, however, to recognize that these private spheres have their limits, and that pedophilia is certainly a zone that lies well beyond those limits. Thus, Humbert's narrative in *Lolita* can be read as an expression of an understanding of the existence of protections of privacy in America—and exist in a much higher degree than in European countries—and his effort to place himself and his actions within

those spheres to be protected. As his narrative develops, he details the ways in which he tries to find those spaces, and his frustrations when he is unable to do so.

Whiting, Centerwell and other scholars make important arguments about sexual abuse in *Lolita* and its relationship with America at the time, and as they do so, they look carefully at anxieties surrounding the blurring of lines between public and private spheres. As they think about public and private realms, however, they focus on more general applications of these terms. The private sphere is less discernable from the domestic sphere, and the public sphere relates more generally to the American public, or local societies. These are important things to consider, and their works are helpful in attempting to understand Humbert's relationship with a narrower definition of privacy, but they differ slightly from the brand of privacy I consider here. While my analysis of privacy in *Lolita* relies on some of the understandings offered by these scholars, I look closer at more traditional understandings of privacy. The kind of privacy that allows Humbert to remain unseen allows him to engage in pedophilic acts, and it is this conception of privacy that he concerns himself with more directly throughout his narrative.

Humbert's narrative focuses intently on his own psychology, as well as Lolita's, in an effort to shift focus away from the acts themselves. Humbert does not deny that he engaged in sexual relations with Lolita, nor does he deny that such acts are illegal in the United States. He understands that to do so would be unproductive. Instead, he focuses on his underlying motives in an attempt to win over the fictional jury. Similarly, the laws of the time focused on underlying motives and psychologies of pedophiles and potential pedophiles in an effort to more directly address the epidemic issue at hand.⁶ Whiting notes that the "legal codification [of pedophilia] in

⁶ Whiting describes the laws passed by legislatures in the United States during the period between 1937 and 1955: "They did not characterize sexual psychopaths according to their acts... Instead, these new statutes were designed to stand alongside earlier laws as a means of explaining—by identifying their cause—such transgressive acts" (837).

the United States awaited the intersection of...sex panics before and after World War II and the explanatory theories, which had only recently become available in American psychiatric circles, that provided the statutes' theoretical underpinning" (837). As Whiting argues, Humbert addresses many of these concerns in his narrative: "Whether viewed as a purely punitive instrument or as a means of deterrence, his trial promises to restore the alignment of public and private spheres that his crime has disrupted" (837-838). Again, however, the conceptions of public and private spheres employed by Whiting are more general than those directly discussed in Humbert's narrative. Regardless of this distinction, Whiting's insight is helpful in considering Humbert's relationship with public and private spheres. Humbert does attempt to address many of society's concerns at the time, but he does so at a more immediate level than Whiting suggests. Instead of arguing that his relationship with Lolita will not intrude upon—and in doing so, threaten—the structure of domestic relations in America, Humbert argues that his relationship with Lolita exists in its own private realm that can and should remain away from the public eye. In doing so, he attempts to outline his own motives, often times using psychological tools, that begin to address many of the concerns contemporary to the publishing of *Lolita*. Throughout his narrative, he constantly returns to the idea of privacy as an American value that has roots in the Constitution and is seen throughout twentieth-century case law.

Privacy and the Constitution

Important to an understanding of Humbert's narrative is that he frames it as a legal defense. By using language like, "ladies and gentlemen of the jury," Humbert invites the reader to consider the legal ramifications of his actions (9, 61, 69, 70, 87, 103, 123, 125, 132, 135). As

he situates the novel as his plea of innocence, he uses several different rhetorical strategies. In some instances, he argues that Lolita's complicity is a marker of his innocence.⁷ In others, he argues that the government unfairly intrudes upon his private life, and any claims of his criminality should be dismissed on those grounds. In framing his argument in this manner, and by referencing real legal statutes and topics, he makes arguments that, at times, sound logical; however, he is clearly guilty of killing Quilty—he admits to it—and there is no legal argument that could successfully prove him innocent. By making this intricate and detailed argument for his innocence, Humbert invites the reader to look closer at the relationship between public and private spaces that underlies his relationship with Lolita and ultimately leads to his murder of Clare Quilty.

Much of Humbert's argument for his innocence is rooted in his discourse on privacy. The issue of privacy is first broached in American constitutional law in *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965), where Justice William Douglas, writing for the Court, argues that "the First Amendment has a penumbra where privacy is protected from governmental intrusion" (*Griswold*). "Penumbra," defined as "the partially shaded region around the shadow of an opaque body," is a particularly interesting word when thinking about Humbert's view of privacy (Penumbra). Essentially, the Court is arguing that although privacy is not a right explicitly guaranteed by the Constitution, it is implicitly guaranteed in the Bill of Rights and first found in the First Amendment. If Humbert is to find any argument for innocence in American case law, it will certainly not be clearly stated, and he will be forced to look in the "penumbra" of other decisions. It is in the penumbra that Humbert grounds his argument, focusing on his right to

⁷ At one point, Humbert writes, "I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me" (132).

privacy as he attempts to place his actions within a private sphere to be protected by, not intruded upon by, the government and the public.

Humbert also discusses the familial relationship between himself and Lolita, and Lolita's legal status as his child. This question of legal status becomes even more significant when viewed alongside *Bohn v. County of Dakota* (1985), in which the United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit ruled: "The privacy and autonomy of familial relationships...are unarguably among the protectable interests which due process protects. We can conceive of no more important relationship, no more basic bond in American society, than the tie between parent and child" (*Bohn*). Humbert recognizes the trust implied in a relationship between a father and his daughter, and he seizes upon society's trust of this relationship as he poses as Lolita's father. This allows him to share hotel rooms and travel across the country with her without arousing suspicion. At the same time that he does this, he tries to make the legal argument for his actually being Lolita's father. He first rejects the notion of assuming legal guardianship: "Through thick and thin I will still stay your guardian, and...I hope a court may legalize that guardianship before long. Let us, however, forget...so-called legal terminology, terminology that accepts as rational the term 'lewd and lascivious cohabitation'" (149-150). Humbert yearns for legal guardianship of Lolita, but at the same time, he writes with disdain of the same legal system that would allow for it. He respects the system enough to want the titles and distinctions that it grants, but he does not like how the system defines him.⁸ He writes, "I am not a criminal sexual psychopath taking indecent liberties with a child" (150). Even as he makes the argument for his innocence, he

⁸ For example, on two separate occasions, Humbert writes about the different laws in America that vary by state and concern the legal status of teenagers (135,171). He writes admirably about these laws, rather than denouncing them: "Minnesota, to whom I take off my hat, provides that when a relative assumes permanent care and custody of any child under fourteen, the authority of a court does not come into play" (171-172).

recognizes that in the eyes of the legal system he is within, he is certainly a criminal. Yet, he still tries to make the argument.

This is allowed for by the changes in classifications of criminals that Whiting argues are taking place during this time period. These statutes specified “a condition—psychopathy—that characterized sex offenders” and “connected outward acts to an inner identity” (Whiting 837). As the laws become more connected to inner identity, Humbert is forced to make the argument that his inner identity does not match that of a “criminal sexual psychopath.” Because the law no longer focuses on outward acts, he is able to argue for his innocence, despite the fact that he has already engaged in these illicit acts. Later, as he again discusses guardianship, Humbert admits how little he knows about the law: “At this point I have a curious confession to make. You will laugh—but really and truly I somehow never managed to find out quite exactly what the legal situation was. I do not know it yet” (171). Humbert, throughout the novel, makes detailed claims of why he has legal standing to be Lolita’s guardian, but here he admits to knowing little about the law. Not understanding family law in the United States is less significant than the real legal question of his innocence that he attempts to tackle through the whole narrative, but it is still an important question that must be answered in order for this piece of his argument to fit into the whole.

This legal discussion is so important to Humbert’s narrative because of privacy’s role in American law and the United States Constitution. Frederick S. Lane eloquently addresses the importance of privacy in America in *American Privacy: The 400-Year History of Our Most Contested Right*:

At its core, the history of America *is* the history of the right to privacy. The myriad immigrants who have come to these shores, from the Pilgrims forward,

have been motivated by many factors in their decision to come to the New World, but above all by that quintessential manifestation of privacy: the freedom to make up one's own mind about fundamental human issues, including religion, marriage, politics, employment, and education. (1)

This account of privacy in America certainly overstates its role in American history. To say that “the history of America *is* the history of the right to privacy” is too firm. Regardless, the role of privacy in shaping American values cannot be ignored, and especially with regard to the development of founding legal documents and jurisprudence related to those documents, privacy is often at the center of American values. As Humbert frames his defense, he recognizes the importance of privacy in American law and sees it as a reliable idea he can use to defend his actions. While Humbert did not come to America to find a greater degree of privacy than he could be afforded in Europe, this is still something that he recognizes as an especially American idea and that privacy is rooted in American law. This is why Humbert's discussion of the law and framing of his narrative as a legal defensive is so intertwined with any discussion of privacy. When other individuals, or even the government, seek to intrude upon private spaces, the Constitution and the courts act to defend them. Humbert seeks those same protections, and he looks to the penumbras of American privacy law to find them, even though he does not do so consciously.

The American Hotel

It is during his first night with Lolita that Humbert recognizes that The Enchanted Hunters does not offer the most suitable form of housing for the privacy that he seeks. He writes

of the experience, “In later months I could laugh at my inexperience when recalling the obstinate boyish way in which I had concentrated upon that particular inn with its fancy name” (116). His eagerness to be alone with Lolita results in his being too stubborn to veer from his plan, which he has imagined for so long. He suggests here that the “fancy name” was one of its primary draws and that it was not actually the suitability of the space that led him to stay there. He actually had much better options, “for all along our route countless motor courts proclaimed their vacancy in neon lights” (116). Humbert blames his choice to forgo the “countless motor courts” on his own immaturities, as he calls himself “boyish” and “inexperienced.”

By connecting his choice of lodging to his “boyish” ways, Humbert evokes his past experiences in the Hotel Mirana. As he describes his childhood, growing up in the hotel, he writes, “I grew, a happy, healthy child in a bright world of illustrated books, clean sand, orange trees, friendly dogs, sea vistas and smiling faces” (10). Much of his enjoyment of his time in the hotel was a result of the “smiling faces” around him. He boasts that everyone from “the aproned pot-scrubber,” to the “elderly American ladies,” to the “ruined Russian princesses,” to his father’s “various lady-friends” treated him to candies and affection (10). Humbert remembers the positives of his time there, but he fails to realize that the aspects of the Hotel Mirana that he enjoyed revolve around the social nature of the space. He writes about the adoration and respect he felt for his father “whenever [he] overheard the servants discuss his various lady-friends,” but he does not realize that this is a direct reflection of the gossipy nature of these upscale hotels (11). This gossip is the exact thing that would prevent him from keeping secret his relationship with Lolita. He describes the way that “the splendid Hotel Mirana revolved” around him “as a kind of private universe, a whitewashed cosmos within the blue greater one that blazed outside” (10). This, however, is not the kind of “private universe” he later seeks with Lolita. The Hotel

Mirana functions as private universe, separate from the exterior world. Within the hotel, however, privacy is even more difficult to find, because of its social and gossipy nature. The privacy that Humbert hopes to find—solitude and separation from public view—cannot be found in a hotel like the Hotel Mirana.

When selecting lodgings for he and Lolita's first night together, he remembers these formative experiences at the hotel in which he grew up. He also remembers one of his first sexual events and "some interesting reactions on the part of [his] organism to certain photographs, pearl and umbra, with infinitely soft partings, in Pichon's sumptuous *La Beauté Humaine* that I had filched from...the hotel library" (11). It is with this description that the reader learns that the "bright world of illustrated books"—the Hotel Mirana—refers to the hotel library where he first has a sexual response to pornographic images. This connection to his own sexual experiences is likely to be contributing in a small way to his choice of The Enchanted Hunters, and his positive experiences more generally at the Hotel Mirana are blinding him from the fact the American hotel is not the venue that aligns most directly with the form of privacy that Humbert is seeking.

As soon as he arrives at The Enchanted Hunters, Humbert becomes frustrated with the business and the distractions of the hotel lobby. Douglas Tallack describes the hotel lobby as a "semi-public gateway to private places" (Tallack 6). The lobby of The Enchanted Hunters *forces* Humbert to interact with other individuals and *allows* Lolita to interact with others. Humbert writes that "a hunchbacked and hoary Negro in a uniform of sorts took our bags and wheeled them slowly into the lobby" (117). Rather than expressing the appreciation that most people would feel upon being helped with their baggage, Humbert describes with disdain the man who takes his bags and the uniform that he wears. Having someone to take his bags is a feature

distinct to hotels. In a motel, he would keep his bags in his car while checking in and then drive them to his room. A stranger handling his bags is intruding into his private life and contributes to the semi-public nature of the hotel lobby. He similarly describes with disdain the next individual he is forced to interact with—the man checking him in: “There a bald porcine old man—everybody was old in that old hotel—examined my features with a polite smile, then leisurely produced my (garbled) telegram, wrestled with some dark doubts...” (117). Humbert would also be forced to encounter a similar individual at a motel, but the experience would be far less public. He describes the way the old man examines him and clearly has “some dark doubts,” showing the way that the hotel clerk intrudes into his private life. In the more anonymous space of a motel, this check-in process would be far less intrusive.

Also at issue as Humbert checks in at The Enchanted Hunters are his anxieties about his use of an alias. As he checks in, he stumbles while giving his name: “The name is not Humberg and not Humbug, by Herbert, I mean Humbert, and any room will do, just put in a cot for my little daughter. She is ten and very tired” (118). Humbert considers giving an alias to the hotel to avoid being tracked by his real name, and he gives several attempts before finally settling on his real name. His inability to clearly give one name should arouse more suspicion than even the offering of false name, but the man checking him in does not care. He simply offers Humbert a room. Humbert’s anxieties about the decision to not use an alias are entirely a result of his own paranoia and not a function of the hotel caring what name he offers. In *United States v. Domenech* (2010), the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit ruled that “one can possess a reasonable privacy expectation—even though lacking a legally enforceable contract or property right to the room—because ‘each [guest] regards the space provided for him as his temporary place of abode’” (*U.S. v. Domenech*). In this case, the court approaches the issue of

privacy in a motel room rented with the use of an alias and rules that such a use of an alias when renting a room does not remove legal protections of privacy within the room. Just as the court does not distinguish between those who use an alias and those who do not, *The Enchanted Hunters* does not need a real name. The hotel does not care *who* is in the room, so long as it is occupied and they are receiving rent for the night, and this reinforces the anonymity associated with hotels.

In addition to not caring about who is occupying the room, hotels also have little incentive to regulate the activity that occurs within those rooms. As a result of this and the apathy towards use of aliases, criminals are able to more easily hide their illicit activity, which is exactly what Humbert is doing. Humbert's pedophilia makes it harder to sympathize with his character, more generally, but especially when it comes to matters of privacy, his illegal behavior makes it harder to imagine a scenario where his being able to find a private space could be seen as a good thing. The United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit ruled in *United States v. Domenech*: "This court explicitly rejected the principle that criminality undermines privacy expectations...A criminal may assert a violation of the Fourth Amendment just as well as a saint" (*U.S. v. Domenech*). Legally speaking, Humbert is entitled to privacy from government intrusion, regardless of the fact that the room is being used for illegal behavior, but this does not preclude the police from entering his hotel room, should they have probable cause to suspect such behavior. The man checking them in at the hotel desk, however, is not interested in the activities Humbert will engage in upstairs, and he is not looking for probable cause to allow entry to Humbert's room and an intrusion upon his privacy.

In addition to the individuals Humbert is forced to interact with, the lobby provides a space that allows Lolita to have interactions with other people, which is perhaps equally as

threatening to Humbert's secrecy as the interactions he must have with others. He writes that "Lolita sank down on her haunches to caress a pale-faced, blue-freckled, black-eared cocker spaniel swooning on the floral carpet under her hand" (117). He makes no note of a human that Lolita speaks with here, but the distractions of the lobby are shown to threaten the isolation that Humbert tries to create for Lolita. Lolita's interaction with another human is ultimately what allows her to escape from their relationship, and this threat is posed as soon as they enter *The Enchanted Hunters*.

Humbert's descriptions of his interactions with other people at *The Enchanted Hunters* reveal his paranoia associated with the busyness of hotels. When he is on the porch, with Lolita in their room, he is approached, "I was about to move away when his voice addressed me" (126). He says this in a way that shows how unwelcome this interaction is, noting that he was about to move away and did not wish to be approached. He then goes on to mishear the man as a result of paranoia, mistaking "...the weather is getting better" for "Where the devil did you get her?" and "July was hot" for "You lie—she's not" (127). Humbert is greatly concerned that not only does the man recognize the fact that he came to the hotel with a girl, but also that the man is suspicious about his intentions with the girl.⁹ The prevalence of other people at the hotel continues to concern Humbert as he goes towards their room. He writes, "As I made my way through a constellation of fixed people in one corner of the lobby..." and continues his description of the crowdedness of the hotel by noting "a twittering group" that "had gathered near the elevator" (127). Fearing another interaction like the one he just had, he opts to take the stairs, revealing his fear of any interaction with other people in the hotel.

⁹ The man is Clare Quilty, who eventually takes Lolita from Humbert and ruins their relationship, so Humbert does have reason to be paranoid, but he would not have known this at the time.

As they prepare to depart from The Enchanted Hunters, Humbert's secrecy is again threatened as a result of the intrusive features of hotels. After giving Lolita gifts in an attempt to win her affection, he gives her some change and tells her to buy herself a magazine in the lobby. As she leaves the room, he warns her, "I'll be down in a minute...And if I were you, my dear, I would not talk to strangers" (138). In a motel, there would not likely be a place to buy a magazine. There also would not be a lobby full of strangers with which she could converse. Additionally, it is only because of the curiosity of hotel staff and guests that he is forced to send her to the lobby and "devote a dangerous amount of time...to arranging the bed in such a way as to suggest the abandoned nest of a restless father and his tomboy daughter, instead of an ex-convict's saturnalia with a couple of fat old whores" (138). The curiosity of the man on the porch and the clerk who checked him in upon his arrival forces him to consider the watchful eye of the other individuals in the hotel. It is unlikely that the hotel maids coming to clean the room after their departure would be able to detect the pedophilic activities that took place in the room that morning, but his paranoia forces him to be extra careful. This then adds an additional threat, as the time he takes to arrange the room increases the amount of time Lolita is alone in the lobby, during which she would be free to talk to other guests. The need to rearrange the bed and the existence of a lobby for Lolita to buy a magazine are elements of a hotel that threaten Humbert's secrecy and would not be found in a motel.

Despite the threats to Humbert's secrecy that he complains exist at The Enchanted Hunters, his room still exists as a private space in which he is able to successfully and secretly engage in sexual acts with Lolita. Although Humbert complains that The Enchanted Hunters is noisy and intrusive, and compares this to his positive recollections of his time at the Hotel Mirana, these two hotels are not as different as he suggests. Hotels, more generally, are full of

public spaces, and, in many ways, require Humbert to interact with others in a way that he sees as threatening to his secrecy. While these opportunities exist, they do not ultimately threaten his privacy. Although they prevent him from finding complete isolation, the hotel still provides a space that begins to afford Humbert the private space that he hopes to find.

The scene at The Enchanted Hunters reveals that each individual present is interested in their own sense of privacy, but Humbert fails to recognize this. He maintains a distorted point of view and sees his quest for privacy as a fight between himself and the rest of the general public. In reality, each individual at the hotel is searching for their own private space—albeit, not to engage in sexual abuse. Humbert assumes that he is being viewed through a lens of suspicion, and this leads to his paranoia. Each individual in the hotel is already more isolated from each other than Humbert believes, and as a result, isolation is less necessary for Humbert than he assumes.

Furthermore, Humbert's detailed narrative of their time at The Enchanted Hunters proceeds by describing the entire sensory experience, contributing to the literary realism that is important in considering the moral implications of Humbert's actions. Rosen and Santesso quote Ian Watt, "In Watt's summary, literary realism begins with 'the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses' and...it produces a picture of the world by investigating 'the particulars of experience' rather than by drawing on the 'body of past assumptions and traditional beliefs'" (85).¹⁰ By transporting the reader through a detailed account of their time at the hotel, Humbert draws attention away from the lewd act, itself. This is

¹⁰ This fits into Rosen and Santesso's broader argument that the novel can "fruitfully be understood as the product of a contractual relation between an author and his or her readers." It is through this relationship that "the novel promises its readers the truth about other people" (79). In *Lolita*, however, this cannot be guaranteed as the absolute truth. Humbert's own biases and voice welcome the reader to consider the narrative presented by Humbert as one piece of the truth.

not to say that Humbert is consciously trying to distract the reader by flooding his narrative with details. Rather, this is the style of Nabokov's writing and contemporary novels more generally, and this has the incidental effect of drawing attention away from Humbert's actions.¹¹

Lolita was written on the tail end of a shift in the history of the novel in which characters were increasingly being placed within the "hurly-burly of society" (Rosen 85), and it is only by placing Humbert safely within American society that Nabokov is able to more thoroughly explore Humbert's character. In thinking about privacy in *Lolita*, it is useful to situate it in the historical context of the development of the novel more generally. Rosen and Santesso look back at older novels and note the isolation that authors commonly used as a means of exploring individual characters. Using Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* as an example, they argue that Defoe uses the island "as the setting for a thought experiment examining problems of society and the individual" and that "Crusoe's forced seclusion...forces him to become an autonomous person and allows him to develop something more individuated than his original, unformed persona" (83). While this allows individuals to be removed "from the social body and let [them] figure out, on [their] own, who [they are]," it also carries its own problem: this isolation requires that the individual become the only one with "full personhood," and "difficult questions about personhood, the nature of autonomy, and the proper limits of surveillance were no more to be resolved at the mouth of the Orinoco than they had been in Prospero's dream-kingdom" (Rosen 85). This is not to say that before a certain point, all characters were written into isolation, and at a certain point thereafter they were placed at the center of society, but rather that, before *Lolita*

¹¹ Later, Rosen and Santesso argue that the novel created the impossible task of telling "the truth about other people," adding that "the novel, in its pursuit of human interiority, had begun almost at once to violate the empirical premises of 'formal realism' and to develop robustly nonempirical methods of depicting other minds" (132). This is especially important to consider in the context of *Lolita*. Not only is the reader presented with an unreliable narrator in Humbert, but this voice is also being offered through Nabokov. Because Nabokov creates Humbert, it is not possible that Nabokov is not telling the truth about Humbert's thoughts, but it is important to consider the difficulty in offering a perspective of formal realism with the layering of voices that exists in the novel.

was written, authors were increasingly using society, and characters' roles within those societies, to explore the individual's relationship with the rest of the world. In short, "the truth about other people could only be exposed in the hurly-burly of society" (Rosen 85), and it is through this shift that the mode of literary realism so important to Humbert's narrative emerges. As Humbert tries to understand his role in American society and shape his own American identity, he must be placed in the middle of that society. What this means for *Lolita* is that the ordinary, yet important details of Humbert's story are of critical importance as readers consider his relationship with privacy.

The American Motel

In addition to the interactions with other guests and staff members that threaten his privacy, Humbert also expresses his frustrations with the various noises of the hotel. He is clearly annoyed as he writes of *The Enchanted Hunters*, "There is nothing louder than an American hotel, and, mind you, this was supposed to be a quiet, cozy, old-fashioned, homey place" (129). Humbert distinguishes the "American hotel" from its European counterpart in an attempt to separate the nostalgia he feels towards his beloved Hotel Mirana from the disturbances of *The Enchanted Hunters*. As he makes this distinction, however, he fails to note what makes this particular venue different from European hotels, and it is likely that the differences he experiences are simply a result of his own frustrations. The noise of the hotel prevents him from having a peaceful space, and he blames this on the Americanness of the hotel. Even the hotels in America that are "cozy, old-fashioned, [and] homey" are loud, disruptive spaces. Many of the sources of noise in the hotel, however, would not exist in motels. Humbert continues, "The

clatter of the elevator's gate—some twenty yards northeast of my head but as clearly perceived as if it were inside my left temple—alternated with the banging and booming of the machine's various evolutions and lasted well beyond midnight" (129-130). Surely, European hotels also have elevators. If this is the source of the disruption that Humbert finds so annoying, it is not unique to American hotels, as he suggests. It is, however, unique to hotels, as opposed to motels. The motels in which Humbert eventually finds refuge do not have elevators, as the outdoor entrances to individual rooms are mostly on the ground level, and the few that have an additional story or two are accessed by a staircase.

In addition to the absence of elevators, motels also lack internal hallways. Humbert is frustrated by the fact that throughout the night "the corridor would brim with cheerful, resonant and inept exclamations ending in a volley of good-nights" (130). It is possible that people could congregate in the parking lot outside of a motel room, but this is much less likely of an occurrence than the frequent "exclamations" Humbert hears in the hallway of *The Enchanted Hunters*. Hotels, as a result of their public spaces, such as restaurants and bars, are much more communal than motels, and groups gathering and making noise in hallways (which do not exist in motels) are common. The loud hallways of hotels are also not unique to American hotels. In fact, the social nature of the *Hotel Mirana* is one of the features he misses about his time there. Again, he is mistaken in attributing the disruptions of *The Enchanted Hunters* to its being an American hotel.

While there are some noises in the hotel that he finds annoying that would also be found in motels, these are still not uniquely American disruptions. After the voices in the hallway subside, a toilet becomes a new source of aggravation. He writes, "It was a manly, energetic, deep-throated toilet, and it was used many times. Its gurgle and gush and long afterflow shook

the wall behind me” (130). This continuous toilet flushing, along with the other guest he describes as being “extravagantly sick, almost coughing out his life with his liquor” and this guest’s toilet which “descended like a veritable Niagara, immediately beyond [their] bathroom” could also exist in any European hotel (130). There is nothing about frequent bathroom use or thin hotel walls that is inherently American, yet Humbert still places his blame on the “American hotel” (129).

In contrast to *The Enchanted Hunters*, Humbert sees motor courts along the road that offer an alternative form of lodging. As he races towards *The Enchanted Hunters*, he sees many motor courts that are “ready to accommodate salesmen, escaped convicts, impotents, family groups, as well as the most corrupt and vigorous couples” (116). The occupants that Humbert imagines occupying the roadside motor courts generally have negative connotations. If the “family groups” Humbert imagines are ones like him and Lolita, even they fit in well with the convicts and impotents. Here, though, Humbert suggests that he would have fit in better with these individuals than the clientele of *The Enchanted Hunters*. He recognizes the vileness of his own actions, but he takes no shame in his admission that he fits in with this group. Humbert excites himself with his imagination of what events might transpire within the walls of these establishments. He writes, “Ah, gentle drivers gliding through the summer’s black nights, what frolics, what twists of lust, you might see from your impeccable highways if Kumfy Kabins were suddenly drained of their pigments and became as transparent as boxes of glass!” (116). In the short span of a few sentences, Humbert describes the gross occupants as “escaped convicts” and “corrupt and vigorous couples” and then describes their activities in a beautiful way. As he writes about these activities, he is stating that he wishes he had stayed in one of these facilities. The activities he imagines as taking place within the walls of these facilities are his own

endeavors with Lolita. By connecting groups of individuals seen by society as being vile and corrupt to the aesthetically pleasing descriptions of the activities transpiring in these rooms, Humbert attempts to appeal to readers and convince them that his actions are also as beautiful as “frolics” and “twists of lust.”

Humbert fails to realize the potential of these motor courts in their initial reconnection, partly because of his unwillingness to depart from his past sexual and formative experiences of the Hotel Mirana, but it is also a result of the fact that he is initially unaware of the benefits that these uniquely American roadside motels are able to provide. As Humbert imagines with excitement the illicit activities of the “Kumfy Kabins,” he speaks with a newfound awareness of their appeal. He writes this after having spent quite some time with Lolita in many iterations of “Kumfy Kabins,” and he is aware at this point of the privacy of these spaces and the characteristics of motels that allow him to exploit Lolita. He writes that if they “were suddenly drained of their pigments and became as transparent as boxes of glass,” a passing motorist would be able to view the activities taking place within, but it is only the complete transparency of their walls that would allow this to occur (117). Otherwise, the internal activities remain private, and this is why these activities that Humbert finds so exciting are able to occur.

As Nabokov critiques American motels, Humbert aligns himself with the “salesmen, escaped convicts, impotents, family groups, as well as the most corrupt and vigorous couples,” but Nabokov views the entire group, including Humbert and his pedophilic activities, as vile individuals who find refuge in motels (116). By writing about these individuals being the ones that often occupy motels, he portrays motels as gross spaces that allow illicit activity to occur. He makes a similar criticism when Humbert later notes that “some motels had instructions pasted above the toilet (on whose tank the towels were unhygienically heaped) asking guests not to

throw into its bowl garbage, beer cans, cartons, stillborn babies” (146). The description of towels being “unhygienically heaped” on the toilet serves as a more minor form of criticism, but the list of items asked not to be thrown into the toilet is much more shocking. A sign discouraging guests from throwing garbage or beer cans into a toilet may not seem to be necessary, but Nabokov portrays motels as the kind of establishment where this kind of warning is necessary. By including stillborn babies in this list, Nabokov suggests that not only sloppy guests often occupy motels, but also criminal and negligent parents. By rapidly escalating the list of items precluded from being thrown into the toilet, Nabokov uses humor to criticize American motels. Additionally, the sign is shown to be the only thing preventing guests from vandalizing the room, or even engaging in the illegal act of leaving a stillborn baby in a toilet. Beyond simply existing as a criticism of these spaces, the inclusion of such an obviously exaggerated item on the list shows the degree to which illegal acts are (unknowingly, and perhaps apathetically) allowed to occur in hotel rooms. As these activities occur, their perpetrators are able to remain anonymous.

Anonymity and the Visual Element of Privacy

As an understanding of privacy develops throughout the narrative, the visual element becomes increasingly important, and this develops in tandem with the idea of anonymity that is so closely intertwined with privacy. Humbert and Lolita continue to travel, staying in a wide array of accommodations, ranging from upscale hotels to motels to road-side cabins. In one of these hotels, Humbert attempts to recreate his childhood memories of the Hotel Mirana by teaching Lo to play tennis. He writes, “On this or that hotel court I would drill Lo, and try to relive the days when in a hot gale, a daze of dust, and queer lassitude, I fed ball after ball to gay,

innocent, elegant Annabel (gleam of bracelet, pleated white skirt, black velvet hair band)” (162). As Humbert and Lolita begin to establish a routine in their travels, their specific choice of lodging become less and less distinguished. He abandons use of particular hotel or motel names and refers to the tennis court at “this or that hotel.” After their games, they would retire to their “small home” (164). They do not live in a permanent home during their travels, but the lodging of each night serves in the same way as a home would. As their home becomes more dynamic, Humbert’s veil of anonymity is strengthened.¹²

When Humbert and Lolita first begin their travels, Humbert is paranoid of interacting with other guests, and as they continue to travel, he remains fearful, but the constant changes of lodging allow him to remain more anonymous and, in turn, less paranoid. During one night at one of these generic hotels, he has what he describes as a “close shave”: “The waterfall nuisance pursued me of course in all our caravansaries. But I never realized how wafery their wall substance was until one evening, after I had loved too loudly, a neighbor’s masculine cough filled the pause as clearly as mine would have done” (164). The flush of the toilet he complains of earlier follows him to every lodging and is not unique to the one in which he first hears it. Before this moment, the voices he hears from outside of their room are what bother him about the lack of privacy in hotels, but here, he begins to worry about the sounds other guests are able to hear coming from his room. His fears are realized when the neighbor confronts him at breakfast: “...my neighbor of the eve, an elderly fool...somehow managed to rig up a conversation with me, in the course of which he inquired, if my missus was like his missus a rather reluctant get-upper when not on the farm” (164). The neighbor is only connected to Humbert by their shared wall, but this is enough of a reason for him to confront Humbert at

¹² The idea of Humbert and Lolita’s nomadic lifestyle contributing to their anonymity is more thoroughly developed in the third chapter of this work.

breakfast. He even knows that there is a woman in his room. Humbert is of course made nervous by the man's question, but this does not prevent him from replying that he "was thank God a widower" (164). If Humbert were as concerned about being discovered as he was when they began their travels, he would have made up a lie to deter suspicion. Instead he gives the man more reason to be curious. This shows that even under the most suspicious of circumstances, Humbert is able to remain anonymous and away from trouble in hotels, and he is beginning to recognize this fact.

Such an understanding of level of privacy afforded by hotel rooms also fails to account for the fact that Humbert is making noise that can be heard from outside of his room. His neighbor who confronts him at breakfast is not intruding in the sense that he is intentionally listening or watching within the private realm of a hotel room. It is Humbert's actions and noises that leave his own room and ultimately violate the privacy of the man next door. In 1950, the Common Pleas Court of Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania ruled on the issue of audible disturbances in *Lisowski v. Jaskiewicz*: "Although...courts will recognize privacy as a personal right and will give damages for its invasion, the right will not be extended so that it includes any annoyance a community dweller suffers" (*Lisowki*). By looking at the *Lisowki* decision alongside Humbert's attempt to find privacy in a hotel room, it becomes clear that privacy for those inside of a venue from those outside of it receives a higher degree of legal protection than those seeking privacy from outside interference. Humbert is more justified in seeking privacy from outside view than he is from expecting privacy from the sounds of others.

Although Humbert can be heard, this does not necessarily mean that his privacy is sacrificed. Robert Ellis Smith, Esq. writes in the Rhode Island Bar Journal, "Many people believe privacy is about keeping personal secrets and no more. But, it *is* more. Privacy covers a

right of autonomy, or what (in American legal arguments and Supreme Court opinions) has been called ‘personhood’” (Smith). While Humbert’s activity, after being heard by his neighbor (and even after being confronted by the same man), is no longer secret, Humbert still retains his autonomy. He is free to continue engaging in the same behavior, as he has not actually been caught. Additionally, although the man suspects sexual behavior—and he is right that there is sexual behavior occurring in the hotel room—he does not suspect illegal sexual behavior, and he does not know with whom Humbert is engaging in these acts. In this sense, although Humbert believes he has lost privacy by being heard, he still retains his “personhood,” or right of autonomy, that is covered by an American legal definition of privacy.

The arrangement of the hotel that allows him to be out of sight but within earshot of other guests stands in direct contrast to the kind of privacy he is allowed with Annabel. He writes of his time with her in Europe, “...the only privacy we were allowed was to be out of earshot but not out of sight on the populous part of the *plage*” (12). This really allows for no privacy at all. In the hotel where the man confronts him about the noise of his lovemaking with Lolita, the sound is not sufficient grounds for Humbert’s being discovered, but surely visual evidence of their activities would have been. On the beach with Annabel, they are not concerned about their sound, as their parents would have been able to see them easily, even if they were out of earshot. They are also forced to stay on the “populous part” of the beach, where other people prevented them from being able to find privacy. The beach is, similarly to a hotel, populated with other people, but at the beach, there are no walls to hide them from view. The walls allow them to engage in these illicit activities, even when they are so close to other guests, because the visual element of privacy is most critical to their being able to remain out of view from the public.

The importance of the visual element of privacy is further evidenced by the contacts he and Annabel are able to have when temporarily hidden from view. He describes the way that “her hand, half-hidden in the sand, would creep toward [him], its slender brown fingers sleepwalking nearer and nearer” (12). The sand blocks their hands, and this allows them to engage in activity of which their parents would not approve. In other instances, other individuals present allow for them to remain hidden, like the time that “a chance rampart built by younger children granted us sufficient concealment to graze each other’s salty lips” (12). In this case, it is because of the population of the beach that they are allowed to kiss. This is only possible because of from whom they are trying to avoid detection. It is not the general public they are trying to hide from, as is the case with Humbert and Lolita, but simply their parents. He writes, “There, on the soft sand, a few feet away from our elders, we would sprawl all morning, in a petrified paroxysm of desire, and take advantage of every blessed quirk in space and time to touch each other” (12). Not their parents, but other elders, are present during their time on the beach, but they do not attempt to hide their less significant contacts from these elders. It is only their parents from whom they are trying to hide. In the hotel in which Humbert and Lolita have the close call, it is “an elderly fool” that approaches Humbert at breakfast (164). Just like his experience on the beach, there is an elder only a few feet from him. The man at the hotel is removed from view, and the elders on the beach are not, but the man in the hotel presents more of a threat to Humbert because he is trying to hide his activities from view of everyone around him, rather than just their parents.

While very important to total privacy, the visual element is difficult for Humbert to find.¹³ He and Annabel, throughout their relationship, struggle to find this privacy, but they eventually believe to have found it: "...we escaped from the café to the beach, and found a desolate stretch of sand, and there, in the violet shadow of some red rocks forming a kind of cave, had a brief session of avid caresses, with somebody's lost pair of sunglasses for only witness" (13). With no one to witness their behavior, they are briefly able to do what they please and experience the complete privacy he has been searching for. Soon, however, it comes to their attention that they are not alone: "I was on my knees, and on the point of possessing my darling, when two bearded bathers, the old man of the sea and his brother, came out of the sea with exclamations of ribald encouragement" (13). Again, it is an older individual that prevents him from fully experiencing the privacy he is searching for. Even though the men do not care what Humbert is doing—and perhaps even endorse it with "exclamations of ribald encouragement"—the knowledge that someone is looking on prevents them from being able to continue. If the men did not make their presence known, Humbert and Annabel could have continued with no further consequence. It is only when they begin to shout and Humbert and Annabel become aware of their presence that they are forced to stop. This shows that the important part of the visual element of privacy is not remaining unseen, but at least not *knowing* he is being seen. This remains true as long as the acts that Humbert is trying to keep private are not illegal. As soon as his actions become illegal, as he begins to have sexual relations with Lolita, it becomes increasingly important that he remain unseen. That he remains unseen, in fact, becomes the essential element of his search for privacy.

¹³ Total privacy, if it exists at all, is certainly never enjoyed by Humbert in his narrative. As discussed earlier, even an individual's thoughts, the most sacred of private spaces, are still often susceptible to the influence of public opinion. Still, it is this high standard of privacy that he seeks, even if he falls short.

Clare Quilty's Home and Privacy

Humbert continues to discuss his vision of a private space when he goes to Clare Quilty's house with the intent of murdering him. He writes, "...for at least five minutes I went about—lucidly insane, crazily calm, an enchanted and very tight hunter—turning whatever keys in whatever locks there were and pocketing them with my free hand" (294). Humbert describes himself here as an enchanted hunter, evoking his time at *The Enchanted Hunters*, where he and Lolita first had sexual relations. At *The Enchanted Hunters*, their room key serves as representation of Humbert's control of Lolita. When Lolita tries to stay up to talk to Humbert, he replies, "Tomorrow, Lo. Go to bed, go to bed—for goodness sake, to bed." After this, he adds when writing of that night, "I pocketed the key and walked downstairs" (123). With Lolita safely in the hotel room where they will soon have sex, he has complete control over her, and the key in his pocket represents his control of the scenario. He later writes, "And she was mine, she was mine, the key was in my fist, my fist was in my pocket, she was mine" (125). The key represents his control, and he notes that the key is in his fist, which is in his pocket. Through these two layers, the key is hidden from public view, as is his control of Lolita. The key serves as a representation of his control of Lolita, but it also serves as a miniaturization of the room that he temporarily rents in which he is able to exploit Lolita. His haven of privacy and his control of Lolita are made even more private by hiding them from public view as he walks freely throughout the hotel's public spaces.

The fact that Humbert is trying to find privacy in a hotel room further complicates the situation. By nature of the way hotels work, Humbert pays a fee to rent the room, essentially

owning the property for the night. He does not, however, have complete ownership. He cannot make any changes to the room or destroy property, and he must leave the room as he found it for the next guest. In reality, his renting the room only allows him to occupy the space for the night, so it is unclear if he is entitled to the same privacy that he would receive in his own home. Case law from the 1950's tackles this question directly. In *Roach v. Harper*, the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia rules that tenants of a rented apartment do have a right to privacy from their landlords and can sue for damages when this privacy is intentionally violated (*Roach*). This is of course different from Humbert in that no one is explicitly attempting to violate his privacy in the hotel room, but it is important to consider the fact that Humbert, by renting and using a hotel room, is effectively entering space in which he is able to be freed from an outside intrusion. The room key here represents this freedom.

As he walks through *The Enchanted Hunters*, he notes its publicity: "I wandered through various public rooms, glory below, gloom above: for the look of lust always is gloomy; lust is never quite sure—even when the velvety victim is locked up in one's dungeon—that some rival devil or influential god may still not abolish one's prepared triumph" (125). Even with the control of Lolita that he feels as though he has, he recognizes that the hotel is still a very public place, and his complete ownership of Lolita is never fully guaranteed. The publicity of the hotel is further explored as he continues to wander through it: "I drifted to the Men's Room. There, a person in clerical black...checking with the assistance of Vienna, if it was still there, inquired of me how I had liked Dr. Boyd's talk" (125). Even in the bathroom, which is in most instances the most private of spaces, Humbert is unable to be alone.

As Humbert notes when he references his "velvety victim...locked up in one's dungeon," the lock on his hotel door is a key factor in securing his privacy (125). This is echoed when, in

Quilty's house, he locks all of the doors that he can before killing him. Any lockable door would be a place in which Quilty could find refuge from Humbert. He writes that after locking all the doors that he can, he pockets the keys "with his free hand" (294). By pocketing these keys, as he did the key to their room in *The Enchanted Hunters*, he attains control over Quilty in the same way that he did over Lolita.

Humbert then connects locked doors with the idea of privacy: "The house, being an old one, had more planned privacy than have modern glamour-boxes, where the bathroom, the only lockable locus, has to be used for the furtive needs of planned parenthood" (294). Having a private space, according to Humbert, necessitates there being a lockable door. In any building with other people from whom he is trying to stay out of view, a room with a penetrable entryway is insufficient. In most houses, especially modern ones, only bathrooms have lockable doors. In hotels and motels, however, every room has its own lock. As a result, they function as the ultimate private spaces. No matter what sounds can be heard going into or coming from a room, visual privacy is guaranteed by a door's lock. Here, he also shows that the primary need for privacy is having a space to engage in sexual relations. In a house where the only "lockable locus" is the bathroom, two individuals must have sex in the bathroom if they wish to maintain their privacy.

While he suggests that privacy can be found in the bathroom, he then reminds the reader that bathrooms can also disrupt privacy by making distracting noise: "Speaking of bathrooms—I was about to visit a third one when master came out of it, leaving a brief waterfall behind him" (294). He uses the same waterfall imagery that he used to describe the disruptions from the hotels and motels. He exaggerates the volume and ferociousness of a toilet's flush by comparing it to a waterfall, and in doing so, he also connects Quilty's house to *The Enchanted Hunters* and

their other lodgings during their travels. While Quilty flushes the toilet, alerting Humbert of his presence, the importance of the visual element of privacy is then reinforced. Humbert notes that “the corner of a passage did not quite conceal” him, but Quilty does not notice him (294). Even when Humbert is visible, not hidden by the walls of a hotel room or bathroom, he maintains his privacy if he remains unseen. This shows that privacy can be found, even short of complete visual coverage, if he is able to avoid detection from a watching eye.

This watching eye ultimately circles back to the idea of anonymity. So long as Humbert remains anonymous, Humbert is able to experience the elements of complete privacy that he hopes to find, even short of finding total privacy. There are certainly elements of the hotel, and even of the motels in which they stay, that begin to threaten this privacy by intruding upon his private room and relationship with Lolita; however, these spaces still allow him to remain anonymous, and this allows him to occupy a private realm and engage in illicit sexual behavior with Lolita, free from the prying public eye.

Conclusion

As Humbert’s paranoia subsides, he gains more control in his illegal actions. It is important to remember, though, that he is writing the narrative as a reflection. His understanding of private spaces is not changing significantly from the time he begins his writing to the end. Instead, his attempts to remain unseen become more important than his hopes for complete isolation. His unconscious recognition that remaining unseen will allow him to maintain his secrecy allows him to relax, and in doing so, he places himself in a position of power. This is seen to a lesser degree as he possesses the key to their room at The Enchanted Hunters. At

Quilty's house, he is able to completely lock most of the doors in the home, and this allows him to regulate access to private spaces. In doing so, he gains control as he follows through with the murder of Quilty.

Though Nabokov's use of aestheticized prose does not allow the reader to ignore completely the moral implications of Humbert's actions, it allows for more freedom and control in the way that these complexities are resolved and attempted to be understood. It is true that Nabokov creates a private space for readers to enjoy his artistic work. It is also true, however, that this private space is intruded upon by Humbert's hideous acts. Although this space is intruded upon to a certain degree, these intrusions do not prevent the reader from exploring these competing ideas of privacy. In fact, the artificial private space created by Nabokov is successful in allowing the reader to explore these ideas because the reader is able to remain unseen. The aesthetic value of the work allows the reader to temporarily adopt Humbert's point of view in order to attempt to understand his motivations and ideas on privacy. Ultimately, his acts are too morally corrupted to be completely ignored, though Humbert still uses his narrative to attempt to persuade readers of his moral cleanliness. As his narrative progresses, Humbert fills the role of persuader in different ways, attempting to persuade readers and attempting to persuade Lolita to continue with their relationship. As he does so, he simultaneously assumes the role of persuader and consumer, and it is this relationship that I will explore in the following chapter.

Chapter Two

Humbert the Persuader: Contradictory Criticisms of American Consumerism

It is difficult to separate the idea of privacy from the individualist focus of American liberalism, and throughout *Lolita*, Nabokov explores the ways in which these ideas affect American consumer culture. During the 1950s, commercial interests were accelerating at breakneck pace, and advertisers were competing for consumers' money. Vance Packard details some of the ways in which companies and advertisers sought to do so in *The Hidden Persuaders*. He includes text from a *Printer's Ink* advertisement, "In the grade schools throughout America are nearly 23,000,000 young girls and boys. These children eat food, wear out clothes, use soap. They are consumers today and will be the buyers tomorrow...Many farsighted advertisers are cashing in today...and building for tomorrow...by molding eager minds" (Packard 158). As Humbert Humbert writes his narrative, he tries to mold Lolita's mind to obtain control over her and her life choices. He assumes the role of an advertiser, trying to persuade Lolita. Interestingly—and perhaps not coincidentally—this is exactly what he does for work when he comes to America. As Humbert portrays their early relationship in this manner through his writing, he writes with a certain degree of arrogance, seeing himself as above the advertising industry and above the foolish minds of consumers. More subtly seen through the text however, is the fact that Humbert is being manipulated by the same tactics employed by the advertisement industry. This is not to say that he does not also mirror the role of the advertiser; instead, he fills both roles simultaneously, and this relationship develops throughout, as it is not until later in Humbert's narrative that he completely embraces his role as a consumer.

This relationship with the advertisement industry and American culture, and discussion of that relationship in *Lolita*, reveals the interconnectedness of American mass culture, consumerism and capitalism. The baseness with which this mass culture is often viewed removes elements of individualism that Americans often pride themselves on, and this is paired with questions of identity that arise in post-war America, as New Deal policies stand in sharp ideological contrast to the capitalism employed to push back against the global spread of communism after the war. The idea of capitalism itself is also challenged by Humbert's narrative through his participation in elite forms of capitalism—like his role as a higher-up in the advertising industry, his ability and willingness to spend money on travel, and his accumulation of wealth early on in the novel¹⁴—and concurrent criticisms of other, lower-class forms of consumerism, like small spending on what he sees as needless items and tokens of mass culture. Through these criticisms, mass culture becomes a symbol of the lower-class capitalism for which Humbert has so much disdain. Examples of culture produced by and for the masses, in Humbert's eyes, are stripped of individual qualities that he sees as necessary for the creation of art. The songs and magazines that Lolita and Charlotte Haze love are base creations of the masses, and this classist attitude drives his criticisms. As a result, these criticisms are directed less at capitalism and more at the lower status with which he perceives these interests. Capitalism simply exposes these differences and provides Humbert a point to use to attempt to mask his classist attitudes. This differentiation begins to explain the apparent disconnect between Humbert's acceptances and criticisms of different forms of capitalism and consumerism, but it also creates more uncertainty when Humbert becomes the consumer and Lolita the product. Nabokov explores these tensions in *Lolita* as Humbert attempts to find his own identity as an

¹⁴ It is this early accumulation of wealth that allows for his apparent apathy towards earning money throughout the rest of his narrative.

American after his move from Europe, participating in the American advertising industry as a persuader while falling into the same traps of that industry as a consumer.

Examples of advertisements from the 1950s and scholarly works that approach the topic from economic and social angles provide a framework through which Humbert's understandings of American consumerism can be placed in context. To place these understandings at a point in history, I also use historical sources that consider America's world view after World War II and explain the differences between American and European economies at the time. Because this chapter begins to approach Humbert's Americanization at a deeper level, I also use literary scholarship dealing with this subject to support my argument and place it within the ongoing critical conversation of Nabokov's works.

Exploitation in the Advertising Industry

Perhaps one of the most important elements of the *Printer's Ink* advertisement is the exploitative mindset adopted by advertising firms. This is of course not a hit on the advertising industry more generally, but rather a trait required of that line of work that Humbert is forced to adopt for his work in his uncle's business and that bleeds into his relationship with Lolita. The advertisement cited by Packard adopts a forward-looking tone that encourages businesses to capture the minds of children, obtaining control so that they are more easily persuaded when they gain the purchasing power—an idea that is also important in Humbert and Lolita's relationship. On the surface, Humbert maintains the purchasing power, as he is the one with the money actually making the purchases for Lolita. However, due to an array of circumstances, Humbert is essentially forced to make these decisions at Lolita's will, to a much higher degree than the

typical father-daughter relationship.¹⁵ Humbert believes, and implies in his narrative, that he maintains control of Lolita and his money, but in reality, Lolita knows that she is able to persuade Humbert to make the choices that she sees fit. Humbert then becomes the consumer, and Lolita's job is to persuade him to make the consumer choices that she wants him too—which proves to be an easy task in most cases.

The coercive nature of Humbert and Lolita's relationship runs parallel to the coercion used by American advertisers that takes a particularly obvious place in the *Printer's Ink* advertisement. The advertisement Packard includes in his text encourages businesses to not only target school children, but also to include these advertisements in school materials. These children that are forced to attend school, where they are forced to use these materials, would then be forcibly exposed to the messages of these businesses. These advertisements invade the lives of these children and leave no room for them to escape their messages. To add a layer of coercion, these children are taught in schools and encouraged to learn and grow in a safe environment where children are able to allow themselves to be vulnerable to new messages. Schools are a place where their minds are supposed to be molded. This is what makes schools the perfect place for businesses to infiltrate the minds of these young children, and this tactic of exploitation mirrors Humbert and Lolita's relationship. The relationship begins forcibly, as Humbert moves into her home, and it progresses and Humbert gains influence when Lolita is in a particularly vulnerable place. It then continues to prosper because Lolita knows nothing else and is forced to stay with him. There are of course important nuances that distinguish these two relationships, but they are both founded upon a certain level of coercion.

¹⁵ This dynamic between Humbert and Lolita with regard to decision-making power is limited here to deal only with purchasing decisions, and mostly with nonessentials items, like treats and magazines. As far as power between the two and freedom to make decisions more generally, Humbert maintains most of this power throughout the novel.

Humbert Humbert's America

It is impossible to discuss the relationship between Humbert and consumerism without also considering Humbert's transition to America, as his past in Europe as well as his changing experiences after his move to America directly influence his views of American consumerism and his expressions of those views. Humbert's childhood is filled with memories from his beloved Hotel Mirana, a palace of excess, wealth and materialistic tendencies. Importantly, this is also where he meets his first true love, Annabel Lee. This relationship, and their time together in France, become guiding forces in Humbert's life as he attempts to recreate his prior happiness. With this background, and with the goal of returning to those same feelings that he felt at the Hotel Mirana, it is curious that he later seeks to escape France for America, "the country of rosy children and great trees, where life would be such an improvement on dull dingy Paris" (*Lolita* 27). The things that draw him to America—or at least the things with which he tries to allure his wife—are a far cry from the America that he ends up experiencing and criticizing in his narrative. While many of Humbert's problems with American consumer culture are more closely related to his relationship with Lolita, his relationships with Europe and America, and his past and present, also play a critical role that cannot be ignored.

To ground the discussion of American consumer culture and advertising in *Lolita*, it is important to understand the state of the advertising industry in America at the time. The story of Dr. Arthur Sackler, a famed psychiatrist and philanthropist in New York City, and his involvement in the advertisement industry in the 1950s shows the deception and exploitation of vulnerabilities that were rampant in the industry at the time. Paying his way through medical

school in the 1940s with a job at a small New York ad agency, Sackler had a foot in both the medical and advertisement industries. An article from *The New Yorker* describes his philosophy surrounding medical advertising: “Sackler saw doctors as unimpeachable stewards of public health... Seeing that physicians were most heavily influenced by their own peers, he enlisted prominent ones to endorse his products, and cited scientific studies (which were often underwritten by the pharmaceutical companies themselves)” (Keefe). This strategy capitalizes on several widely held feelings, most notably the public trust of physicians.¹⁶ In *Lolita*, Humbert’s father-like role and age leads Lolita to trust his judgement, and her necessary reliance on him because of her young age makes her more willing to trust him. Sackler’s strategy also capitalizes on an available point of access. After making the recognition that he not only needed to capture the minds of patients, but also the doctors prescribing the drugs, he needed to find a way to convey his message specifically to doctors, and medical journals provided this point of access (Keefe). Similarly, Humbert creates, or to a certain degree stumbles upon, the opportunity to possess Lolita with her in a vulnerable position after her mother’s death. His initial move-in with the family also gives him this point of access, which is required in order for him to gain and exploit her trust. Finally, the Sackler example reflects an entanglement of interests, with the scientific studies referenced in the advertisements being “underwritten by the pharmaceutical companies themselves.” If these scientists are receiving their compensation from the companies whose drugs they are studying, there are obvious conflicts of interest that prevent the results of the study from being a reliable indicator of the drug’s success. This deceptive tactic is allowed for by the vulnerability and exploitation seen in Sackler’s advertising work.

¹⁶ Ordinary citizens do not share the level of medical knowledge held by physicians, but they rely on the services of physicians, which makes this trust easily exploited.

What makes the stories of Sackler's ad firm even more troubling is the awareness of wrongdoing paired with the pride associated with successful deception. The article about Sackler from *The New Yorker* describes an ad campaign for two tranquilizers, Librium and Valium, which was the campaign that helped Sackler amass most of his fortune.¹⁷ One of Sackler's high-up workers said of the campaign, "It kind of made junkies of people, but that drug worked" (Keefe). Edward Kennedy, in the Senate when they were holding hearings on the issue, called the ad campaign a "nightmare of dependence and addiction" (Keefe). This story reflects a broader issue of the 1950s. Consumers found themselves with more and more disposable income as America came out of the depression and the war, and companies were fighting for those dollars. With technology providing new ways for companies to advertise, these factors collided to create an environment where self-interest trumped morals, which also took a back seat to commercial interests.

American society's post-war shift to a focus on capitalism is necessary not only to understand the America in which Humbert finds himself, but also to understand the differences between the economic ideology of America as opposed to its European counterparts. Louis Hartz writes, on a theoretical level, about this shift in *The Liberal Tradition in America* as he discusses America finding its role in the world after the war, "Now this is a matter both of the success of American policy abroad and the fate of American freedom at home: the two are tied up in an intricate knot" (284-285). With this quote in mind while reading *Lolita*, the discourse on American ideology with respect to American consumers cannot be separated from the Europe that Humbert leaves behind but remembers as he writes. Important also of this quote is the two-way nature of the relationship between America abroad and at home, as they each affect each

¹⁷ The advertisements showed situations that induced anxiety at a level much lower than what would require these tranquilizers, but suggested that these drugs should be used even in these situations (Keefe).

other, in turn.¹⁸ While adopting in part some left-leaning practices often found in places like France and England, Americans continued to criticize more liberal forms of government in an attempt to distance themselves from nations that were, at the time, beginning to shift towards communist regimes. Hartz is critical of this disconnect, but his criticisms invite readers of *Lolita* to question the foundation upon which American capitalism is built and the choices this leads individuals to make.¹⁹ Hartz even goes so far as to define this “link that a liberal community forges between the world and domestic pictures” as “Americanism,” in “its absolute perspective” (285). It is this Americanism that Nabokov explores in *Lolita*, not in a way that criticizes what Hartz argues is an imbalance or misunderstanding, but in a way that analyzes the effects of a capitalist society that functions as a piece of a broader world.

American Advertising in the 1950s

One of the most public and far-reaching ways that American consumerism enters the life of citizens is through advertisements, which itself was a growing industry during the 1950s. Nabokov weaves advertisements into the novel in subtle ways throughout, but advertising also takes a more prominent role. Before moving to America, Humbert does not say exactly what his

¹⁸ Earlier, Hartz notes earlier the “alphabetical combinations” of the New Deal (he lists the “NRA, the TVA, the ERA, the WPA, [and] the SEC” as examples) and the problem these posed for Americans who criticized socialist European countries, “Now we must not assume that we are dealing here with a devious propaganda strategy on the part of New Deal propagandists, a scheme they deliberately cooked up for selling European Liberalism or European socialism to Americans without assailing their nationalist conscience: no doubt among a few ‘intellectuals’ this consideration was present” (271).

¹⁹ One example of such criticisms of Hartz’s can be found as he discusses the threat of “colossal liberal absolutism,” “And in a war of ideas this frame of mind has two automatic effects: it hampers creative action abroad by identifying the alien with the unintelligible, and it inspires hysteria at home by generating the anxiety that unintelligible things produce” (285). Again, Hartz returns to the two sides of this relationship—abroad and at home. *Lolita* focuses almost entirely on the latter. While the state of affairs in Europe is helpful to understand Humbert’s move as a departure from a separate system of ideals, the setting of the novel in America leads to domestic affairs being highlighted to a greater extent. This is not to say that *Lolita* is an example of this “hysteria,” but it is important to understand the historical context underlying the text.

uncle's business does, but after moving, he quickly begins the work: "In New York I eagerly accepted the soft job fate offered me: it consisted mainly of thinking up and editing perfume ads" (32).²⁰ Interestingly, advertisements are one of things that Humbert is most critical of throughout the novel. Michelle R. Nelson argues that as a result of advertisers' goal of determining what would sway consumers and targeting advertisements to those desires, "people were fascinated and fearful of the power of advertising as they found themselves targets of new advertising techniques in a wider variety of media" (114). Nabokov wrote *Lolita* during a time in which Americans were anxious about the intrusion of advertisements into their lives, but at the same time, the advertisement industry was booming, and its presence was increasingly noticeable. A study conducted in the early 1960s, just after the publishing of *Lolita*, found that respondents to a survey were exposed to an average of 37.9 advertisements in just half of one day, with some seeing as many as 100 advertisements in half of one day (Bauer 178).

As Humbert writes about his entrance into the world of advertising, he uses a condescending tone and attempts to distance himself from the work: "I welcomed its desultory character and pseudoliterary aspects, attending to it whenever I had nothing better to do" (32). He says that he only engaged with the work when he "had nothing better to do," as this would mean that he would not miss out on other opportunities by doing his uncle's work. He also notes that he "welcomed" the work, but in the same sentence he insults the business by calling it "desultory" and "pseudoliterary." He does not explicitly denounce the work, but his condescending tone is evident. His real distaste for the work is made even clearer as he soon moves into work that he believes suits him better. Humbert writes, "I was urged by a war-time

²⁰ Humbert writes before this, "In the summer of 1939 *mon oncle d'Amérique* died bequeathing me an annual income of a few thousand dollars on condition I came to live in the States and showed some interest in his business" (27). I will come back to this shortly and discuss it in more detail when discussing his motivations in moving from Europe to New York.

university in New York to complete my comparative history of French literature for English-speaking students. The first volume took me a couple of years during which I put in seldom less than fifteen hours of work daily” (32). This work aligns more closely with what he wants to be doing, and from the way that he describes it, he is obviously prouder of it. From the time that he puts into the history, it is also clear that he takes more pride in this type of work, especially compared to the advertisement work that he only did when he “had nothing better to do” (32). His expertise that allows him to complete the comparative history is also derived from his move from Paris to America. Having lived in Paris and studied French literature, he is knowledgeable about the subject, and being fluent in English and living in America allows him to connect with English-speaking students about the French literature. The move to America allows him to do this work and the work of his uncle, but the work of his uncle is what makes his transition to America economically feasible, as this is his source of income—and a large one, at that.

Despite the fact that the advertisement work makes his transition possible, he gives more weight to his literary work when describing the work in his narrative. He attempts to downplay the extent of his advertisement work, because he sees it as being of a lower status. He recognizes that it is necessary for him to do the work in order to move and stay in America, but he writes dismissively of the work because he does not want to associate himself with it completely. This also allows Nabokov to insert his own criticisms of advertisements. Especially compared to his literary work, Humbert adopts an insulting tone with regard to his commercial work, which allows Nabokov to elevate the status of literary work while disparaging the work of advertisers. Once Humbert has been in America for longer, he becomes increasingly critical of American advertising and consumer culture, but right from the outset, he is weary of associating himself with it completely. Still, he engages with the industry and is willing to participate for his own

personal gain. While he participates, though, he is unaware of—or at least unwilling to admit—that he is in fact participating in the same kind of consumerism that Nabokov and even he criticizes simultaneously.

This complicated relationship between Humbert and his work in advertising is mirrored by the uncertainty about advertising held by *Reader's Digest* in the fifties. Nelson writes of Vance Packard's journalism, "Although not his first or last book, *The Hidden Persuaders* was the most successful. The material for the book on the psychological techniques of advertising was actually commissioned by *Reader's Digest* in 1954" (114).²¹ *Reader's Digest* funded the research that denounced the kind of psychological exploitation commonly used in advertising at the time. When they realized that they stood to benefit from including advertisements in their magazine, they did so and declined to publish the article that they funded, recognizing the hypocrisy of including such an article in a magazine that also included advertisements. Humbert has a similarly complex relationship with advertising. He denounces its efforts and its exploitation, but he also stands to benefit from engaging with the industry; in fact, his significant income comes from the industry. This willingness to benefit financially from an industry whose principles he does not agree with is similar to the magazines that run these advertisements. Of course, funding the research for the article is different from agreeing wholeheartedly with the results of that research; however, *Reader's Digest* certainly knew the topic of Packard's research when he received funding. In Humbert's narrative, just after describing his work in the advertisement industry, he writes that he participated in a research trip into the Arctic. When describing their living conditions, he notes, "We lived in prefabricated timber cabins amid a Pre-

²¹ Packard adds, "It is interesting to note that after the article was written, *Reader's Digest* began accepting ads—and the article never actually ran (Horowitz 1994). Packard noted the connection between his critique on the advertising industry and the financial contribution of advertisements to the magazine" (114).

Cambrian world of granite. We had heaps of supplies—the *Reader's Digest*, an ice cream mixer, chemical toilets, paper caps for Christmas” (33). For one, this shows the reach of *Reader's Digest* at the time. On a trip to the Arctic, where they will live in prefabricated cabins and bring a limited array of supplies, *Reader's Digest* is notably included. Additionally, it shows the inescapable nature of advertisements at the time, and just how intertwined they were with Humbert's life and his work. At this time in America, advertisements were also becoming increasingly intertwined with other industries, often times in destructive ways. Dr. Sackler's simultaneous involvement with the medical and advertisement industries provides one example of this: “While running his advertising company, Arthur Sackler became a publisher, starting a biweekly newspaper, the *Medical Tribune*, which eventually reached six hundred thousand physicians. He scoffed at suggestions that there was a conflict of interest between his roles...” (Keefe). The world of advertising was becoming an intrusive threat, not only on its own, but also into other industries. Advertising became a tool through which influence and power could be gained, and Nabokov's inclusion of *Reader's Digest* here allows readers to consider this intrusion.

Moral Questions in Advertising

At the center of the question of morals in advertising is the issue of how consumers are seen by advertisers. Packard writes, in *The Hidden Persuaders*, “Some of these persuaders, in their energetic endeavors to sway our actions, seem to fall unwittingly into the attitude that man exists to be manipulated” (Packard 255). While Humbert's view of his relationship with Lolita aligns in many of the ways discussed previously, it is much easier to see that Lolita does not

exist to be manipulated than it is to see that consumers do not exist to be manipulated.

Advertisers and companies are able to hide behind the veil of capitalism, claiming that freedom of choice and free markets allow consumers to make their own choices. Indeed, they are able to choose how to spend their money, but advertisers seek to intervene in these free markets through their tactics of deception and manipulation. The fact that consumers are making the ultimate choice allows them to absolve themselves of responsibility of their shady manipulation. Humbert makes a similar argument as he attempts to absolve himself of responsibility for his actions with Lolita. He constantly returns to the fact that Lolita is making her own choices, and in making this argument, he ignores the fact that his own manipulation and deception allows him to be successful and influence her choices.

When these persuaders do recognize the implications of their actions, they also tend to find ways to justify it. Packard writes, “While some of the persuaders brood occasionally about the implications of their endeavors, others feel that what is progress for them is progress for the nation” (Packard 255). These advertisers recognize the gains of their own product, but they mistake this personal success for the success of America more generally. Often times, their products and methods of persuasion are having harsh negative effects on the country. Packard writes of one ad executive’s recognition of these negative effects. Discussing the rise of dissatisfaction of American consumers, Packard writes, “He talked specifically of the triumph of the cosmetics industry in reaching the billion-dollar class by the sale of hope and by making women more anxious and critical about their appearance. Triumphant he concluded: ‘And everybody is happy’” (Packard 255). There is nothing inherently wrong with cosmetics or the way that they make women feel, but the methods of persuasion that attempt to tell women how they *should* feel are too often successful. The cosmetics companies then hide behind capitalism

and point to the choices that women are making, without regard for the manipulation employed by their advertisements. This is one of the key dangers of capitalism exposed in *Lolita* through its discussion of advertising. Capitalism allows for the free markets that make consumers ripe for exploitation, then gives the “hidden persuaders” a veil behind which they are able to hide.

This capitalist system also allows for institutions to gain influence and utilize it to perpetuate their ideas and maintain control, and Humbert takes advantage of this very system. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue in “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as mass deception” that as mass culture becomes increasingly prevalent and standardized through technological advances that allow for mass production and transmission, executive authorities inevitably agree “not to produce or sanction anything that in any way differs from their own rules, their own ideas about consumers, or above all themselves” (33).²² In this sense, power is maintained by the persuaders, as their continued success allows for their continued deception. Humbert, in the same way, stumbles upon commercial success through his uncle’s business, and that initial success carries him through his relationship with Lolita, allowing him to continue operating as a persuader. However, just as “varying budgets in the culture industry do not bear the slightest relation to factual values, to the meaning of the products themselves,” Humbert’s artificial establishment of merit through his rapid accumulation of wealth has no effect on Humbert’s actual ability to persuade, but only his perceived power and ability to persuade (Adorno 34).²³ In many cases, even this artificially instilled capacity to persuade is enough to sway consumers, as is often the case in Humbert and Lolita’s relationship, but this relationship,

²² While the idea of culture may seem separate from a more general discussion of capitalism, the two are inextricably related. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan write in a brief survey of Marxism, “Culture is capitalism’s way of getting people to construe domination as freedom. And, according to Marxism, it’s quite (un)canny in its ability to do so” (232).

²³ Adorno and Horkheimer make this argument in service of their more specific claim that in the entertainment industry, “the universal criterion of merit is the amount of ‘conspicuous production’ of blatant cash investment” (34).

and the consumer's complicity in the relationship, also requires at least the feeling that the consumer has some agency. Adorno and Horkheimer later argue that there is a "necessity inherent in the system not to leave the customer alone...that he should be shown all his needs as capable of fulfilment, but that those needs should be so predetermined that he feels himself to be the eternal consumer, the object of the culture industry" (39). Lolita often exhibits hints of agency, as she is able to persuade Humbert to buy her a cold drink or souvenir, but these fleeting moments exist only to allow Lolita to think that she maintains some level of control. Later in Humbert's narrative as Lolita gains more actual control, this dynamic begins to shift, but this struggle between consumer and producer to exhibit agency defines Humbert and Lolita's relationship with consumerism. It is important to note that Adorno and Horkheimer's arguments deal more so with the entertainment and culture industry as a whole, and they are more interested in the capacity of these industries to sway and control ideologies, rather than singular decisions. While this distinction is necessary for considering their work in the context of advertising in *Lolita*, this also means that the broader systems of ideology in America could perhaps be influenced to an even greater extent by those that control the media, and in this case, the advertisers and persuaders of the time are experiencing increasing amounts of influence.

As Nabokov explores his own views of American consumer culture through his discussion of consumerism in *Lolita*, the lines drawn between Humbert's actions as a lover, an advertiser and a consumer allow Nabokov to recognize some of the problems associated with free markets and mass culture. There are certainly many similarities between commercial industries, advertising and Humbert as a lover, and these are important for connecting and recognizing the significant and problematic features of each. What is perhaps more important, however, are the differences. Most notably, the glorification of capitalism—and prevalent

criticisms of communism and socialism—makes it difficult to notice and externalize the obvious problems that arise in a capitalist society. On the other hand, the obviously problematic facets of Humbert and Lolita’s relationship make it easier to criticize the subtler problems within it. By noting the similarities between consumer culture and Humbert and Lolita’s relationship, Nabokov’s criticisms of American consumer culture are clarified, as American consumerism is directly connected to an obviously troubling relationship. Lolita’s vulnerabilities allow for Humbert’s manipulation to become more persuasive to Lolita and increasingly difficult for her to avoid. Humbert revels in his successes and attempts to deflect blame by pointing to Lolita’s complicity and agency, but her ability to make her own choices is clouded by coercion and vulnerability.

Distinctions Between American and European Consumerism

Through such an analysis of Nabokov’s discussion of American consumerism, it is important also to recognize the distinctions between European and American consumerism. Humbert’s anxieties about consumer culture can also be read as his anxieties about his Americanization. There are undoubtedly elements of consumerism seen during Humbert’s time in Europe, but much of Nabokov’s discussion of consumerism and advertising is rooted in Humbert’s move to America. This move is sparked and allowed for by the advertisement industry, as his uncle’s business gives him the financial stability such a move requires, and his first few years in America revolve around this business. This rapid introduction to American consumerism through his uncle’s advertising business is not sustained throughout the narrative, but his experiences continue to affect his future life in America and his relationship with Lolita.

Nabokov's connection of Humbert's time in advertising to his relationship with Lolita is made clearer by the interactions between Lolita, Charlotte and Humbert, of which consumerism finds itself at the center. By drawing these connections, Nabokov invites readers to recognize the similarities and differences between American consumerism and Humbert and Lolita's relationship. The anxieties at the center of each of these are exposed by Humbert's transition to America, and by the development of their relationship. Nabokov is not entirely critical of American consumerism or capitalism, and he in fact celebrates many aspects of American consumer culture in *Lolita* and other works, but he does have anxieties about many of its effects, and these are the aspects that are revealed by looking at representations of consumerism in *Lolita* alongside Humbert's character and his interactions with Lolita.

While Humbert is generally critical of consumerism, it is not an entirely American idea in the novel. Humbert describes his father's work, "He owned a luxurious hotel on the Riviera. His father and two grandfathers had sold wine, jewels and silk, respectively" (9). Owning a luxury hotel does not perfectly align with the sort of consumerism of which Humbert is critical. Humbert even participates in this brand of consumerism as he selects hotels for himself and Lolita. Though, one of Humbert's firmest criticisms of consumerism in America lies in the excess that plagues American capitalism. Humbert does not realize it, and is not critical of it in the same way, but the luxury of the Hotel Mirana is a direct manifestation of this excess.²⁴ Humbert's grandfather and great-grandfathers participate in a more explicit brand of capitalism

²⁴ The Hotel Mirana, in Humbert's eyes, differs from the American hotels that he criticizes in several important ways, and perhaps the most important of these is its individualism. His unique memories from his childhood at the hotel shape his remembrance of the hotel as a whole, and this prevents him from seeing any other hotel in the same way. While many of the aspects of American hotels that Humbert criticizes would also be found at the Hotel Mirana, his childhood memories are more important and block his memories of privacy, or lack thereof, at the hotel. Additionally, he writes of the American hotels as a part of his relationship with Lolita, and this lens determines which facets of the hotels he chooses to focus on in his narrative. Because he was not with Lolita while living at the Hotel Mirana, these factors of privacy and American excess are far less important.

as merchants. Importantly, these men also sell luxury goods. Humbert is critical of excess, but not of the excess encouraged by the entrepreneurial activities of his ancestors. This also points to Humbert's acceptance of upper-class forms of capitalism and consumerism. The kind of excess associated with extravagance and grandeur is far more palatable to Humbert than the excessive purchasing of souvenirs at roadside stops.

Humbert's relationship with capitalism and his family is complicated by the conditional inheritance he receives from his uncle: "In the summer of 1939 *mon oncle d'Amérique* died bequeathing me an annual income of a few thousand dollars on condition I came to live in the States and showed some interest in his business" (27). A record from the National Archives lists the average annual income of 1940 as \$1368. Humbert receives from his uncle a *monthly* income of nearly three times this, making him extremely wealthy. He only receives this money if he expresses interest in his uncle's business, but he is happy to do so, writing, "The prospect was most welcome to me. I felt my life needed a shake-up" (27). He does not say exactly what kind of business his uncle is involved with, but he is willing to participate in the capitalist market in exchange for a high income. Humbert's decision here is not entirely motivated by financials, however. A significant part of his decision is that it will allow him to come to America, and he states that he needs this change. Still, it is capitalist practices that allow him to come to America and build a new life. Later, as he becomes more critical of American consumerism, he does not recognize that it is the same American consumerism that allowed him to come to America in the first place. Humbert is mildly hypocritical for engaging in the same practices of which he is later critical, but what is more significant is that he criticizes American consumerism without recognizing all that he has gained from it.

Humbert also uses the move to America and participation in its consumer culture as a means of escaping his own romantic problems. He writes that “moth holes had appeared in the plush of matrimonial comfort” (27). When he first introduces to Valeria the prospect of moving to America, “she looked distressed and bewildered” (27). There is a disconnect between Humbert’s will to move to America and Valeria’s wishing to stay in Paris. He describes her pleas to stay and her arguments that life would be better if they stayed, “despite [his] patiently describing to her America, the country of rosy children and great trees, where life would be such an improvement on dull dingy Paris” (27). Humbert feels stifled in “dull dingy Paris,” but Valeria wishes to stay there with her adulterous lover. Not only does this move to America represent the disconnect between Humbert and Valeria, but it also shows the disconnect between Humbert’s view of America before moving and his later criticisms. In order to sell the prospect of moving to Valeria, he points to the country’s “rosy children and great trees.” Importantly, these stray far from the business aspects of his move. He tries to frame his motivations as being freed of capitalist ideas, but in reality, his motivations and what allows him to move are intertwined with his uncle’s business and money. Also, Humbert finds himself in a vulnerable position with his and Valeria’s domestic concerns, and this makes him more susceptible than he would otherwise be to outside influences and the allure of money in the advertising industry in America. As early as this point in the narrative, Humbert begins to fill the role of the consumer. Just as the advertisers seek to capitalize on the vulnerabilities of consumers, Humbert is being persuaded by things that would not ordinarily influence his major decision-making processes, were it not for his domestic troubles.²⁵

²⁵ While Humbert does refer to unique aspects of America in trying to convince Valeria to move to America, many of his motivations for leaving Paris are not unique to America in the same way. It is likely that he would have moved elsewhere if the opportunity with his uncle’s business had been located somewhere other than America. These motivations for leaving Paris are not important to considerations of consumer culture in America because they

Humbert's later interaction with Valeria and her lover exposes Humbert's vulnerabilities and desires for the capitalist elements of American consumer culture. He writes, "A mounting fury was suffocating me—not because I had any particular fondness for that figure of fun, *Mme Humbert*, but because matters of legal and illegal conjunction were for me alone to decide, and here she was, Valeria, the comedy wife, brazenly preparing to dispose in her own way of my comfort and fate" (28). Humbert does not care much for his wife; he openly states that he has no "particular fondness" for her and describes her as his "comedy wife." What he does care about, though, is his control over his own life decisions. Valeria's opposition to their move to America may have been more palatable for Humbert if he cared about her and her feelings, but because he does not love her, her opposition only stands to prevent Humbert from obtaining what he wants. Importantly, a large part of what Humbert wants here is money, and Valeria is standing in the way of his making a decision that affects his finances. Humbert's wanting money is not in and of itself a capitalist trait, but his will to be freed from outside restrictions and participate in America's growing market-based economy are directly intertwined with his goal of accumulating wealth. These capitalist ideas are glorified by the troubles he is experiencing with Valeria, and these troubles persuade him to make the decision to move to America and allow him to make this decision with less internal debate than he ordinarily would. The "holes" that appear in the "plush of matrimonial comfort" make him more willing to accept his uncle's offer to contribute to his business in America, and this is a large part of Humbert's hypocrisy regarding American consumerism (27). His dissatisfaction with his life in Paris is what allows him to make the jump so easily, and his participation in his uncle's business provides the financial possibility of the move. The very excess of American consumer culture that he comes to despise is what

point to aspects of American consumer culture, but rather because they are indicative of the ways in which Humbert eventually interacts with consumer culture in America.

allows him to escape his domestic problems in Paris. Just as advertisements encourage consumers to make potentially destructive decisions for the wrong reason, Humbert is pushed into the move by circumstances that are largely unrelated to this major life decision. This is not to say that Humbert is making a necessarily destructive decision, but it is certainly a major decision that is being made with questionable motivations.

Role of the Persuader in Rural America

While New York, as a hub of the advertising industry, provides a logical location for Humbert to begin his work in the industry, the elements of American consumer culture developed there follow him to more rural areas throughout his travels. Humbert soon leaves New York and begins to reject the commercial attributes of the city and his work in advertising: “Upon signing out, I cast around for some place in the New England countryside or sleepy small town (elms, white church) where I could spend a studious summer subsisting on a compact boxful of notes I had accumulated and bathing in some nearby lake” (35). He references signing out of the sanatorium, at which he was being treated for “another bout with insanity” (34). This move to a quieter space represents his moving away from the city and mental instability that he associates with it. His departure allows him to move away from the excitement of New York to a space that aligns more closely with what he imagined of America before moving. When attempting to convince Valeria to move with him to America, he describes it as “the country of rosy children and great trees” (27). The elms and white churches that he references here do not exactly mirror the “rosy children and great trees” that he described before, but they do match in

feel and with his general vision of America. He also makes a shift with regard to his work: “My work had begun to interest me again—I mean my scholarly exertions; the other thing, my active participation in my uncle’s posthumous perfumes, had by then been cut down to a minimum” (35). From his tone, it is clear that he sees his “scholarly exertions” as a much nobler pursuit. His only remaining involvement with his uncle’s perfume business is a minimum requirement to keep honest with his deal with his late uncle. His remaining faithful to the deal, however, is more of a function of his wanting to keep the income from his uncle’s inheritance, rather than a genuine interest in the work or wanting to respect his late uncle. The inclusion of this deal in the narrative also allows Nabokov to subtly remind readers of Humbert’s business in the advertisement industry, allowing the effects of the industry to be continually considered as Humbert moves forward with his narrative.

This move is also where his will to experience rural America intersects with his financial interests and his interest in nymphets. He writes, “One of his former employees, the scion of a distinguished family, suggested I spend a few months in the residence of his impoverished cousins, a Mr. McCoo, retired, and his wife, who wanted to let their upper story where a late aunt had delicately dwelt” (35). He learns of this place to stay through an employee of his uncle. He surely would have been able to find a place to stay in rural New England without this connection, but this keeps his life intertwined with the commercial interests of his uncle. This option for housing is also accompanied by the opportunity for him to be near a young girl. His uncle’s employee tells him, “...they also had two little daughters, one a baby, the other a girl of twelve, and a beautiful garden, not far from a beautiful lake, and I said it sounded perfectly perfect” (35). Here, his interests all come together. He writes, “I exchanged letters with these people, satisfying them I was housebroken, and spent a fantastic night on the train, imagining in all possible detail

the enigmatic nymphet I would coach in French and fondle in Humbertish” (35). He admits his more sinister motives as he expresses with delight the chance he will have to explore his interest in the French language, and in nymphets, while being able to live in one of the quaint American towns that he imagined before moving to America. All of these things are able to come together because of the connection he has to one of his uncle’s employees. Even as he escapes from the city, hoping to escape from the commercial aspects of it that he despises, he remains connected. It is also this connection that leads him right to Lolita. When Mr. McCoo arrives at a hotel in Ramsdale with news for Humbert that his house has burned down and that he no longer has a place for him to stay, he tells Humbert that “a friend of his wife’s, a grand person, Mrs. Haze of 342 Lawn Street, offered to accommodate [him]” (35). This is, of course, Lolita’s mother, and so it is through the original connection with his uncle that he meets the Hazes and comes to live with Lolita. Just as the advertisements directed towards school children in school books rely on this point of access to the consumer to convey their message, this moment provides Nabokov with a point of access to Lolita, the one that he is trying to persuade. The school book advertisements target students at school, where they are not forced to be as guarded. Similarly, Humbert enters Lolita’s life at her home, where she is trusting of Humbert because he has been allowed by her mother to enter their home.

After his move, the perfume business continues to haunt him. One day, while living at the Haze residence, Mrs. Haze asks Humbert to come to town with her, “In the afternoon, Haze (common-sensical shoes, tailor-made dress), said she was driving downtown to buy a present for a friend of a friend of hers, and would I please come too because I have such a wonderful taste in textures and perfumes” (50). Later in his travels with Lolita, towns are revealed to be the ultimate expression of the consumerism that Humbert dislikes so much. Haze, a woman he

strongly dislikes, bringing him to town to participate in what he sees as excessive consumerism is seen by Humbert as being invasive. What is more, Haze is buying a present for a “friend of a friend,” which serves to mock the excessiveness that gift-giving can sometimes reach. Haze plays to Humbert’s ego—whether intentionally or not—by citing his “wonderful taste,” which he only acquired through his uncle’s work. Humbert continues, “What could Humbert, being in the perfume business do? She had me cornered between the front porch and her car. ‘Hurry up,’ she said as I laboriously doubled up my large body in order to crawl in (still desperately devising a means of escape)” (50). Humbert moved to rural New England in order to escape the city and the perfume business that he felt restrained him, but it continues to follow him. Here, he is trying to find a way to escape Haze, and the perfume business, even though this was the place to which he originally escaped. In this moment, Nabokov also clarifies the link between consumerism and advertising. As they travel into town to engage in consumerist practices, the shadow of Humbert’s past in advertising for perfumes follows him. This directly connects the ideas of consumerism and advertising, showing that they cannot be separated in any meaningful way.

This trip to town also brings Humbert closer to Lolita. Originally, Haze attempts to seduce Humbert, “‘Choose your favorite seduction,’ she purred” (50). Haze’s word choice is intentional, and Humbert recognizes it as an advance, noting the way that “she purred.” This is further evidenced by her frustration when Lolita jumps into the car at the last minute. She tells Humbert to ignore Lolita as she runs towards the car telling them to wait, and when she ends up getting into the car, Haze says, “It is intolerable...that a child should be so ill-mannered. And so very persevering. When she knows she is unwanted. And needs a bath” (50). Mrs. Haze surely does not know just how much of a threat Lolita poses to any potential relationship between her and Humbert, but she does want to be alone with him in hopes of seducing him. Haze also

emphasizes the importance of smell by mentioning that Lolita needs a bath, giving even more importance to the perfume industry from which Humbert is trying so hard to distance himself. The trip to town also brings Humbert closer to Lolita: “Suddenly her hand slipped into mine and without our chaperon’s seeing, I held, and stroked, and squeezed that little hot paw, all the way to the store” (51). The trip to town that Humbert so desperately wants to escape from ends up providing the chance for Humbert to grow closer with Lolita. He writes of Mrs. Haze during the ride, “The wings of the driver’s Marlenesque nose shone, having shed or burned up their ration of powder, and she kept up an elegant monologue anent the local traffic, and smiled in profile, and pouted in profile, and beat her painted lashes in profile, while I prayed we would never get to the store, but we did” (51). Humbert jumps at the opportunity to mock Haze’s excessive use of makeup, as he pays particularly close attention to her powdered face and painted lashes, but his disdain for her makeup is also a factor of its symbolizing her older age, in comparison to Lolita. The scene begins with Humbert’s knowledge of perfume leading him into a situation with which he is unhappy, but it ultimately brings him closer to Lolita. While his ties to the industry continue to follow him, in a way that he often times does not appreciate, he also continues to benefit from the connection.

This car ride also explores the idea of the female consumer as presented in *Lolita*. During this time in America, a shift was underway in the role of female consumers. Rosemary Scott describes this shift in *The Female Consumer*:

In the past, marketers could neatly sidestep this contradiction in policy, to appeal to woman as woman, or woman as altruist, by claiming that the two markets were mutually exclusive. Woman bought as woman until she married and ‘settled down’ when she sublimated the personalized aspect in favour of buying for the

family, hearth and home...But all this has changed. Woman can now buy as woman and as any other role *at the same time*. The separateness is blurring, the markets crossing, the female consumer no longer obligingly classifies herself into two identifiable segments. (Scott 204).

Charlotte Haze herself blurs the lines between traditional roles, as she is a single mother in charge of Lolita, but she is also a landlord and manager of her home when Humbert moves in. In some ways, Humbert's arrival is somewhat of a return to traditional roles as Humbert becomes the male of the house. More so, however, Charlotte remains in charge as the strong female figure. As a consumer, she then bridges the various spheres, participating in several different markets. Of course, more Americans participating in more markets is a good thing, but this also provides more opportunities for Charlotte's choices as a consumer to be exploited. This is the version of the American consumer that Humbert describes, as he complains of her choices and willingness to engage with American mass culture. It is important to note the ways in which Humbert and Nabokov's representations of Charlotte as a consumer diverge. Humbert adopts a condescending tone, focusing on the ways in which he is superior to her as a result of her choices. Nabokov, however, uses this opportunity to criticize the way that major industries exploit individual consumers, using capitalism and consumers' freedom of choice as a way to absolve themselves of responsibility.

Consumerism in the Living Room

As Humbert's time with the Hazes continues, the reach of advertising and consumer culture becomes increasingly clear. Consumerism continues to play a complex role in Humbert

and Lolita's relationship, and its involvement becomes particularly evident during one of the most important scenes for their relationship. Humbert sets the scene in his narrative: "Main character: Humbert the Hummer. Time: Sunday morning in June. Place: sunlit living room. Props: old, candy-striped davenport, magazines, phonograph, Mexican knickknacks" (57). The "sunlit living room" fits nicely into Humbert's preconceived image of America, but Humbert constantly expresses his disdain for things like magazines and knickknacks, which come to play a large role in this scene. Humbert then notes, "The late Mr. Harold E. Haze—God bless the good man—had engendered my darling at the siesta hour in a blue-washed room, on a honeymoon trip to Vera Cruz, and mementoes, among these Dolores, were all over the place" (57). During Humbert's travels with Lolita, he makes frequent references to the fact that he dislikes knickknacks and souvenirs, and here, these items fill the room. Importantly, he frames Lolita herself as a memento of Mr. and Mrs. Haze's honeymoon. Humbert dislikes souvenir objects more generally, but he certainly does not feel the same way about Lolita. Although, framing Lolita in this manner blends the line between what Humbert sees as acceptable souvenirs and excessive ones. It makes it more difficult for Humbert to outright denounce souvenirs and knickknacks, as lines are blurred and the relationship between Lolita and objects is not as clear as he initially believes.

There are some kinds of mementos that Humbert does enjoy, and he is not completely opposed to any form of remembrance. He writes of one example of his and Lolita's travels, "...a collection of European hotel picture post cards in a museum devoted to hobbies at a Mississippi resort, where with a hot wave of pride I discovered a colored photo of my father's Mirana, its striped awnings, its flag flying above the retouched palm trees" (155). This photograph that reminds him of his childhood at the Hotel Mirana, of which he is so fond, evokes powerful

emotion. He does not see the postcard as a needless trinket. Lolita fails to see the value, ““So what?” said Lo, squinting at the bronzed owner of an expensive car who had followed us into the Hobby House” (156). Mementos and souvenirs mean different things to different people, which explains the different responses to the postcard from Humbert and Lolita. Humbert is hurt by Lolita’s apathetic response, but Humbert has the same apathy—and even dismissiveness—towards many of the trinkets that excite Lolita. Humbert often fails to recognize and sympathize with these different responses when they come across things that he sees as excessive or unnecessary. While there are some things that excite him and evoke powerful emotion, he takes a general stance of dismissiveness over these items, and this is the prevailing attitude when he notes the presence of such items in the living room.

Humbert and Lolita’s difference in age and inability to understand each other’s pasts and current desires eventually has a negative impact on their relationship, and this photograph of the Hotel Mirana provides a tangible example of this disconnect. Dana Brand, in “The Interaction of Aestheticism and American Consumer Culture in Nabokov’s *Lolita*,” argues that Humbert uses photographs as a means of control. He notes that “people have been replaced by commercial images” and “have become so thoroughly determined by these images that the images may be said to replace them” (Brand 17). Through his ability to control these images, he is able to control others around him: “By reducing the commercial world to dead images he may then revivify, Humbert gains an imaginative control over that which controls the imagination of those around him” (17). When the image of the Hotel Mirana shows up in the museum, Humbert is unable to control Lolita. The photograph excites him, as it reminds him of his treasured childhood, and with the revival of those memories, triggered by the postcard, he expects a more excited reaction from Lolita. This problematic disconnect is more easily understood with Brand’s

analysis of Humbert's "aesthetic appropriation of people, things, and events": "A photograph is a separation of surface from substance. It provides an empty form that lends itself to the imaginative 'filling' of the viewer...The intention of Humbert's aestheticism is apparently to reduce American reality to the status of a photograph" (17). Humbert thinks that Lolita's lack of interest is an immature inability to understand the importance to him of the Hotel Mirana. In reality, her lack of interest is a result of his inability to convey the substance of his memories. His childhood, and his excitement about the memory of it, is reduced to a photograph, which is not sufficient for the creation of a greater understanding of his past.

Humbert also adopts a different tone with regard to Lolita's makeup, compared to the way he discusses Charlotte's. He describes Lolita, "She wore that day a pretty print dress that I had seen on her once before, ample in the skirt, tight in the bodice, short-sleeved, pink, checkered with darker pink, and, to complete the color scheme, she had painted her lips and was holding in her hollowed hands a beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple" (57-58). Humbert describes her painted lips as completing the color scheme of the rest of her outfit. They even match the "beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple" to which he is so allured. Compare this to Humbert's description of the wings of Charlotte's nose, "having shed or burned up their ration of powder" (51). His writing about Lolita's makeup is much more favorable. He writes about Charlotte's in a negative light, as if he dislikes makeup in general and views it as excessive and unnecessary, but he is attracted to Lolita's. Again, Humbert takes no issue with excess when it pleases or favors him.

Much of Humbert's discourse on consumerism centers upon magazines, and in this scene, a magazine serves to bring the two together. He writes that Lolita, "with the monkeyish nimbleness that was so typical of that American nymphet, she snatched out of my abstract grip

the magazine I had opened (pity no film had recorded the curious pattern, the monogrammic linkage of our simultaneous or overlapping moves)” (58). Here, the magazine serves no purpose for Lolita other than to give her the opportunity to interact with Humbert. This is made clearer when Humbert continues, “Rapidly, hardly hampered by the disfigured apple she held, Lolita flipped violently through the pages in search of something she wished Humbert to see. Found it at last” (58). When she finally finds the image that she hopes to show Humbert, he is uninterested. He writes, “I faked interest by bringing my head so close that her hair touched my temple and her arm brushed my cheek as she wiped her lips with her wrist. Because of the burnished mist through which I peered at the picture, I was slow in reacting to it, and her bare knees rubbed and knocked impatiently against each other” (58). While Lolita has slightly more genuine interest in the magazine and its image, they both take advantage of the moment to come closer to each other. It is important to remember, however, that this is based on the narrative that Humbert delivers. Earlier in this chapter, Humbert writes, “I want them to examine its every detail and see for themselves how careful, how chaste, the whole wine-sweet event is if viewed with what my lawyer has called, in a private talk we have had, ‘impartial sympathy.’ So let us get started. I have a difficult job before me” (57). Humbert’s construction of this scene is carefully calculated. He pays close attention to the small details, and his goal is to convey a narrative that is “chaste” and “wine-sweet.” Because the scene is not at all chaste or wine-sweet, he attempts to make Lolita come across as more complicit and forward. In order to create “impartial sympathy” in a scenario that he knows will not be viewed impartially, he much balance the prejudice of the readers (and jury) by weaving his own bias into the text. Humbert makes it sound as though Lolita attempts to seduce him with her makeup and feigned interest in the magazine. Whereas Charlotte’s seduction was annoying to Humbert, Lolita’s is what allows

him to maintain some sense of innocence. Nabokov is also able to use this scene to subtly comment on the freedom of choice in children. Defenses of capitalism rely upon the genuine existence of this freedom, but there is seldom as much free choice as is presented. Children provide one important example of this. Humbert's own defense of his illegal activity points to Lolita's choosing to participate; however, he misses the fact that Lolita is not in a position where she is able to make this decision. She is rarely given complete information, and she is coerced into behavior that she would not participate in under normal circumstances. Similarly, advertisers targeting children pretend to maintain these young consumers' innocence, but they actually exploit their vulnerabilities for commercial gain.

While he is interested in Lolita, and pretends to be interested in the magazine, he speaks down upon the magazine in his narrative: "Dimly there came into view: a surrealist painter relaxing, supine, on a beach, and near him, likewise supine, a plaster replica of the Venus di Milo, half-buried in the sand. Picture of the Week, said the legend. I whisked the whole obscene thing away" (58). Before this, Humbert has taken know issue with this particular magazine, but now that he has nothing more to gain from it, he swipes it away. This rejection of the magazine also creates more contact with Lolita: "Next moment, in a sham effort to retrieve it, she was all over me" (58). Through all of this, the magazine is nothing more than a pawn that dictates their movements and gives them excuses to come closer to each other. This magazine, and more that are on the sofa, further allow him to achieve his illicit goals:

Her legs twitched a little as they lay across my live lap; I stroked them; there she lolled in the right-hand corner, almost asprawl, Lola the bobby-soxer, devouring her immemorial fruit, singing through its juice, losing her slipper, rubbing the heel of her slipperless foot in its sloppy anklet, against the pile of old magazines

heaped on my left on the sofa—and every movement she made, every shuffle and ripple, helped me to conceal and to improve the secret system of tactile correspondence between beast and beauty—between my gagged, bursting beast and the beauty of her dimpled body in its innocent cotton frock” (59).

Humbert is often critical of the popular culture crazes followed by teenagers, but here, he refers to Lolita as a “bobby-soxer,” or an adolescent girl that close follows popular culture trends, while describing a scene in which he is attracted to her. Lolita’s attention to these cultural trends are a constant source of frustration for Humbert, as he looks down upon them and the people that follow them.²⁷ Here though, the term reminds Humbert of her adolescence—something he is attracted to. He mentions other things, too, that he does not describe favorably, such as the old apple, that he refers to in increasingly unfavorable ways. First, he calls it a “beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple” (57-58); then it is a “disfigured apple” that gets in the way of her showing Humbert the magazine (58); it then becomes an “immemorial fruit”, that she devours nonetheless (59); finally, it is an “abolished apple,” the core of which she tosses away (59-60). This transition starts with the fruit as a part of her image to which he is attracted, and the status of the apple diminishes as he becomes more focused on Lolita. By the end, the other objects of the scene are described in equally unflattering terms, such as the “sloppy anklet” and “pile of old magazines heaped” on the sofa. This scorn for such excessive objects is complicated, though, by the way that they help him accomplish his goals. The noises from the magazines help to conceal his movements as he advances upon Lolita. He also frames these movements as “correspondence,”

²⁷ Raymond Williams writes in *Popular Culture: A Reader*, “Mass is not only a very common but a very complex word in social description. The masses, while less complex, is especially interesting because it is ambivalent: a term of contempt in much conservative thought, but a positive term in much socialist thought” (29). Humbert discusses mass culture from the point of view of the conservative school of thought, viewing Lolita’s interests, and those of the masses, as base and low.

attempting to create the façade of consensual, two-way contacts. The magazines, though he talks about them negatively, aid him and allow him to maintain some semblance of secrecy. The fact that these magazines are being used for these illicit purposes allows Nabokov to insert his own criticisms of magazines and the harmful effects they are able to have on American consumers. This negativity is doubled, as Humbert is also critical of the content of the magazines.

Similarly, the song Lolita sings throughout this scene is despised by Humbert but serves to mask his actions. He describes Lolita, midway through his act, “I watched her, rosy, gold-dusted, beyond the veil of my controlled delight, unaware of it, alien to it, and the sun was on her lips, and her lips were apparently still forming the words of the Carmen-barmen ditty that no longer reached my consciousness” (60). He dismissively refers to the song as “the Carmen-barmen ditty,” wasting no time reciting the actual lyrics of the song in this moment, even though he later remembers them in detail. Recalling the song in this way is not only dismissive, but intentionally reductionist, attempting to minimize the value of the song in comparison to the way it is viewed by Lolita.²⁸ He also focuses on Lolita’s lips that “were apparently still forming the words,” instead of focusing on the song itself. Humbert is entirely absorbed with her, while she is only paying attention to the song. This allows Humbert to continue his gross act while remaining unnoticed. He takes the opportunity to note this disconnect by describing her as being “beyond the veil of [his] controlled delight.” His ego requires him to maintain that he is in control, but he also attempts to claim his own innocence by noting the fact that she is entirely

²⁸ Arts produced for the masses are particularly susceptible to Humbert’s criticisms. Dwight Macdonald’s arguments in *Popular Culture: A Reader* explain some of the prejudices against these larger scale forms of the arts: “. . . Mass Culture is not and can never be any good. . . But in so far as people are organized (more strictly, disorganized) as masses, they lose their human identity and quality” (43). Humbert tries to find his own identity in America, and as Nabokov writes, he tries to find the identity of America; however, these popular culture trends that play to the masses are so broad that they fail to achieve any sense of individualism. Nabokov—and Humbert, as well—recognizes the greatness of America, but he is frustrated by the trends that take away from the possibility of individualism.

unaware of his motivations. After the moment, once Lolita leaves, he suddenly remembers: “At this point I may as well give the words of that song hit in full—to the best of my recollection at least—I don’t think I ever had it right” (61). He reveals to his audience here that he did in fact know the words to the song, and that his previous reference to it was an intentional maneuver to discredit the value of the song. He also obviously remembers the lyrics in detail—he continues to transcribe them in his narrative—but he tries to distance himself from the song by claiming that his memory is foggy and that he never took the time to remember them. The significance of the song to Humbert is made obvious by his frequent references to it throughout the scene and his attention to Lolita, who sings the song throughout it. The disconnect between the two that before this point already begins to manifest itself negatively within their relationship is created intentionally here by Humbert in an effort to hide his actions and remain unseen, and this masking is revealing of Humbert’s negative feelings about Lolita’s popular culture interests.

Humbert is also frustrated with Lolita’s interests in mass culture because of their lack of a human identity. As Humbert, during his time in America, attempts to establish his own identity as an American, he is frustrated by elements of American culture that lack this individualism that he seeks. Dwight Macdonald defines the masses as “a large quantity of people unable to express themselves as human beings because they are related to one another neither as individuals nor as members of communities—indeed, they are not related *to each other* at all, but only to something distant, abstract, nonhuman” (43).²⁹ This is the key to understanding Humbert’s complaints, as he sees Lolita’s interests as a way to connect to her—something he struggles to do throughout his narrative—but he quickly learns that there is nothing tangible within those

²⁹ Macdonald grounds this in a broader discussion, where he argues that mass culture will never be good because any point of view that sees this as possible assumes “that Mass Culture is...or could be...an expression of *people*, like Folk Art, whereas actually it is an expression of *masses*, a very different thing” (43).

interests of hers that is able to connect the two. Lolita's interests are "distant, abstract, [and] nonhuman," making them an impassable bridge between the two.³⁰ With cultural items like the photograph of the Hotel Mirana or the magazine in the living room, Humbert sees an opportunity, but because Lolita's interests are what he sees as shallow, he is unable to capitalize and form connections.

The Effects of Humbert's Behavior on Lolita

Humbert's inability to connect with Lolita about her popular culture obsessions is mirrored by his misunderstandings about the degree to which his actions in this scene affect Lolita.³¹ He later says of the moment, "The child knew nothing. I had done nothing to her. And nothing prevented me from repeating a performance that affected her as little as if she were a photographic image rippling upon a screen and I a humble hunchback abusing myself in the dark" (62). Dana Brand argues that comparing Lolita to a photograph in this manner is merely a way to "morally exonerate himself" and reduce Lolita "to the status of a photograph" (Brand 17). While this language has the effect of reducing her to the status of a photograph, Humbert's broader goals are more self-serving. He writes that nothing prevented him "from repeating a performance" and he notes just before: "I felt proud of myself. I had stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor" (62). Yes, Brand is right that Humbert is attempting to

³⁰ Macdonald argues that, in contrast, more localized forms of culture provides a scale "small enough so that it 'makes a difference' what the individual does, a first condition for human—as against mass-existence" (44). As Humbert travels around the country—and I will deepen my discussion of this in the third chapter—he searches for a national identity formed through a structure of individual localities. It eventually becomes clearer that while Humbert is looking for a broader picture, it is only through increasingly localized areas to individual differences appear to a great enough extent to distinguish between two individuals or groups.

³¹ The negative effects of Humbert's actions on Lolita cannot easily be overstated, and this section serves to describe only some of the ways in which this occurs, as it relates to consumer culture in America.

“morally exonerate himself,” and I would add that he is also attempting to *legally* exonerate himself. More than this, though, his language suggests that he is more interested in convincing himself of his own moral purity so that he can more easily continue with his actions.

Humbert’s discussion of this scene is also self-serving in ways that align with Dana Brand’s argument. Humbert boasts, “Thus had I delicately constructed my ignoble, ardent, sinful dream; and still Lolita was safe—and I was safe” (62). Again, Humbert points towards his own innocence as he states, “I was safe.” He also adds that he uses Lolita to construct his “ignoble, ardent, sinful dream.” Brand connects this to Humbert’s “reducing the commercial world to dead images he may then revivify” and adds that “this mode of establishing control is evident in all of Humbert’s interactions with the external world” (Brand 17). Brand overstates the degree to which Humbert is actually able to “establish control.” Because Humbert delivers the narrative, it is tainted with his own perceptions, which are most likely wrong most of the time. He is able to control the narrative but not Lolita—at least, not to the degree to which he thinks he is able. He writes, “What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own” (62). Humbert prevents Lolita from having a life of her own, but not in the way that he thinks she does. He is under the impression that he has created a duplicate version of Lolita, playing to Nabokov’s own love of doubles. Instead, he has simply prevented the existing Lolita from control her own life, or having a life of her own. The reality is much more destructive, whereas his own version of events allows him to be absolved from more responsibility. Brand notes that “a photograph is a separation of surface from substance” (Brand 17). This understates the degree to which Humbert ruins

substance; he is not controlling a false image of Lolita's life, but rather her only life, and this is much more problematic.

John Haegert, in "Artist in Exile: The Americanization of Humbert Humbert," provides a more realistic expression of the effects of Humbert's behavior when he writes about "Humbert's crazed obsession with Lolita" and "Humbert's growing awareness, throughout part two, that his idealizing efforts have been both aesthetically futile and morally transgressive, insofar as they have led him to inflict his desires on Lolita and thus deprive her of her childhood and her status as an independent being" (Haegert 778). Humbert's idealization of Lolita has prevented him from seeing her as a human being, and he (to a debatable extent) begins to realize these harmful effects. Haegert connects this to Humbert's growing awareness of his place within American society: "[the novel] is chiefly concerned to demonstrate the complexities of human behavior and experience in a particular time and space; including, it should be noted, the very American space to which Humbert Humbert feels himself condemned" (Haegert 779). As the dynamic in their relationship shifts, so do Humbert's feelings towards their relationship. This connects Humbert's growing Americanness to Humbert and Lolita's relationship, and this shift is exposed through Humbert's discussion of consumerism.

Critiques of Mass Culture

Humbert is mostly frustrated by Lolita's interest in such things because it strips her of her individuality. He writes later, about their travels, "Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl. Sweet hot jazz, square dancing, gooey fudge sundaes, musicals, movie magazines and so forth—these were the obvious items in her list of beloved things" (148). The

“obvious” nature of the list of her interests is what leads to Humbert’s criticisms. As he falls in love with her and writes about how special she is, these interests stand in the way of his narrative and lead him to dislike them more generally. He also adopts the same condescending tone as he describes the music she likes that he uses early when discussing the Carmen song, “I still hear the 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” (148). As nuanced as Humbert’s writing is throughout his narrative, his tactic for downplaying the significance of Lolita’s interests is to refer to them in generic terms. Here, for example, he lists names of what he sees as generic musicians of the time and claims that all of the songs sound the same. That he dislikes these songs because they all sound the same aligns with his real criticism of this music: Lolita likes it, and this makes her the same as all other girls. Humbert’s feelings about Lolita begin to inform his feelings about mass culture.

He is also frustrated by the way that Lolita blindly follows these trends. He notes of the attention she gives to advertisements, “She believed, with a kind of celestial trust, any advertisement or advice that appeared in *Movie Love* or *Screen Land*—Starasil Starves Pimples, or ‘You better watch out if you’re wearing your shirttails outside your jeans, gals, because Jill says you shouldn’t’” (148). Much of Humbert’s commentary here revolves around his recognition of how threatening this blind trust is to his control of Lolita.³² His control of her requires her blind trust of him—and he is of course okay with this trust—but it could be catastrophic if she trusts the wrong person. His work for his uncle also complicates this blind trust. He writes, “She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and

³² In addition to this blind trust, his frustrations also continue to revolve around Lolita’s surrender of individuality as she follows these trends, as discussed earlier in the section, “Consumerism in the Living Room.”

object of every foul poster” (148). He continues to use words like “foul” and “obscene” to describe any media that is antithetical to his mission. This also reveals just how little he cares for his uncle’s perfume business and the work he did advertising. If he did care for the work, such a child would be exciting to him, confirming that these advertisements are reaching their target markets and are able to sway their decision making. In reality, though, he only has disgust for how easily Lolita is able to be swayed. This reflects a more general distaste for American consumerism and children’s willingness to follow broader trends. This concern for Lolita’s blind trust of advertisements aligns with concerns of the time regarding the trustworthiness of advertisements. A study from the 1960s examined general public opinion on the topic: “...there is more deceit and less reason to trust people today than was true in the past. Invariably this belief is linked by many social critics to the level of truth in advertising and to the business nature of our society” (Bauer 364). Not only had commercial interest invaded the lives of consumers and their choices, but these harmful practices of advertisers had begun to lower levels of trust between individuals more generally. These effects were allowed to seep beyond commercial life because of the trust that consumers had for deceitful advertisement campaigns. Consumers like Lolita, in Humbert’s eyes, enable the exploitative advertising industry, and this is why his criticisms of her practices are so sharp.

The attention that Lolita gives to advertisements is also frustrating to Humbert because it serves as a distraction that not only consumes her time, but also could threaten their secrecy. He complains, “If a roadside sign said: VISIT OUR GIFT SHOP—we *had* to visit it, *had* to buy its Indian curios, dolls, copper jewelry, cactus candy. The words “novelties and souvenirs” simply entranced her by their trochaic lilt” (148). Because Humbert is unable to leave her alone, he is dragged into every shop that she wants to visit, and they must take time off the road to pander to

her desires. He also bought things like this to bribe her for her affection after he told her of her mother's death: "In the gay town of Lepingville I bought her four books of comics, a box of candy, a box of sanitary pads, two cokes, a manicure set, a travel clock with a luminous dial, a ring with real topaz, a tennis racket, roller skates with white high shoes, field glasses," and he continues for some time (142). Most of these items are the sort of unnecessary items that he looks down upon throughout his narrative, but he is more than willing to purchase them for Lolita if it helps their relationship. This kind of bribery is the same reason that he continues to humor Lolita when they pass these roadside gift shops.

Humbert as a Consumer, Lolita as a Product

Even after his initial bribery, Humbert still must find ways to keep her in his good graces. As he tries to find ways to buy Lolita's affection, she becomes the product and he the consumer. In other ways, however, he still plays the role of the advertiser, trying to persuade Lolita to stay with him and behave. As Nabokov explores this complicated relationship, through Humbert, he is able to provide a window into the minds of advertisers. Humbert writes that he would threaten to drive her off into the darkness if she did not calm down, but he notes, "The farther, however, we traveled away from it west, the less tangible that menace became, and I had to adopt other methods of persuasion" (149). As Lolita ages and becomes more aware of their situation, it takes more and more for Humbert to persuade her of their need for secrecy. Humbert praises himself, "From the very beginning of our concourse, I was clever enough to realize that I must secure her complete co-operation in keeping our relations secret, that it should become a second nature with her, no matter what grudge she might bear me, no matter what other pleasures she must seek"

(149). Besides the fact that he praises himself for realizing something obvious—that he must keep their relationships secret—he does make the important recognition that she will seek “other pleasures” and will not always be willing to follow Humbert’s every word. Advertisers and commercial entities rely on the willingness of consumers to engage with their business. In the same way, Humbert’s obtaining his interests relies on Lolita’s willingness to engage with him.

The purchases that Humbert makes for Lolita are directly related to his ability to retain possession of her. Dana Brand argues, “When Humbert becomes Lolita’s lover, he alienates this original power to gratify himself. Humbert can only have the illusion of possessing Lolita by spending a great deal of money to buy things for her” (Brand 19). A large part of Brand’s point here relates back to Humbert’s comparison of Lolita as a photograph. With her being connected to a photograph, he is able to maintain control, and thus, his own gratification. “When Humbert becomes Lolita’s lover,” their relationship is made real, and it can no longer be connected to photographs in magazines. It is only after they come together as lovers that Humbert must maintain possession of her by purchasing gifts. Brand argues that this possession is simply an illusion. It is true that purchasing power does not allow for the complete possession that Humbert wishes for, but this is still a realer form of possession than the kind he was able to obtain through photographs. The connection between the image and real life is distant and entirely in Humbert’s head, whereas the connection between Humbert and Lolita in their relationship, although achieved largely through consumerist practices, is more tangible than Humbert’s possession of Lolita before their relationship. As this relationship becomes realer, it is easier to see Humbert as the consumer, rather than the advertiser, but he is never entirely within either camp.

It is curious exactly which of these methods of persuasion that Humbert feels shameful about. He writes, “Among these, the reformatory threat is the one I recall with the deepest moan

of shame” (149). He continues to describe just how he threatens her: “In plainer words, if we two are found out, you will be analyzed and institutionalized, my pet, *c’est tout*. You will dwell, my Lolita will dwell (come here, my brown flower) with thirty-nine other dopes in a dirty dormitory (no, allow me, please) under the supervision of hideous matrons” (151). Humbert frames this as twisted binary. He is able to imagine and convey to Lolita a scenario so dark that her current situation, travelling with Humbert, actually appears to be more inviting. A large part of his strategy here is that he frames it as Lolita’s choice: “While I stand gripping the bars, you, happy neglected child, will be given a choice of various dwelling places, all more or less the same, the correctional school, the reformatory, the juvenile detention home, or one of those admirable girls’ protectories” (151). Each of these places, with the exception of the protectories, serves to punish children for their own wrongdoing. Even though Lolita is not at fault here, Humbert attempts to deflect blame. Here, his manipulation is so severe, that he is able to at once deflect blame and gain control over Lolita. He also frames the broader scenario as a choice, “This is the situation, this is the choice. Don’t you think that under the circumstances Dolores Haze had better stick to her old man?” (151). To Humbert, this appears to be the obvious choice, but it is only because he frames the question in a way that leaves the only other options as unappealing “dwelling places” (151). By making Lolita feel as though this is her choice, he believes to be contributing to a broader picture of his innocence. He also believes that it makes her more likely to stay with him.

Humbert adds that it works, to some degree: “By rubbing all this in, I succeeded in terrorizing Lo, who despite a certain brash alertness of manner and spurts of wit was not as intelligent a child as her I.Q. might suggest” (151). Humbert is trying to convey the fact that Lolita is complicit to a jury in order to maintain his own innocence, and in doing so, he is

attempting to manipulate his words and his audience. Here, though, he admits to the fact that he was manipulating Lolita. His ego gets in the way of his own efforts to portray his actions as normal and Lolita's as delinquent. His narrative rapidly toggles between a plea of innocence and a brag about his own genius. While he succeeds in "terrorizing Lo," his effort is not entirely effective. He adds, "But if I managed to establish that background of shared secrecy and shared guilt, I was much less successful in keeping her in good humor" (151). The most important thing to Humbert is that he maintains their secrecy, but a secondary goal, and one of high importance to him, is that he keeps Lolita in good humor. He recognizes that this method of persuasion fails to do so. This is mostly why this is the threat that he recalls "with the deepest moan of shame"—because it does not work (149). He takes no issue with buying her affection because it is useful in swaying her and keeping her in his good graces.

He attempts other things, too, that fail to work. For example, Humbert writes, "Every morning during our yearlong travels I had to devise some expectation, some special point in space and time for her to look forward to, for her to survive till bedtime. Otherwise, deprived of a shaping and sustaining purpose, the skeleton of her day sagged and collapsed" (151). Humbert speaks about her the way a parent would speak of a child instead of the way that an equal couple would speak of each other. He needs to constantly find new ways to motivate her and keep her engaged. This highlights the actual difference in their ages and the degree to which Humbert manipulates Lolita. Humbert fails to sustain the use of this tactic as a successful means of motivating Lolita because of the kind of landmarks he uses: "The object in view might be anything—a lighthouse in Virginia, a natural cave in Arkansas converted to a café, a collection of guns and violins somewhere in Oklahoma, a replica of the Grotto of Lourdes in Louisiana, shabby photographs of the bonanza mining period in the museum of a Rocky Mountain resort"

(151-152). These are all genuine tourist attractions, rather than the cheap, gimmicky roadside options that Humbert describes passing, and sometimes indulging in. This is why Lolita is not amused by them: "...but it had to be there, in front of us, like a fixed star, although as likely as not Lo would feign gagging as soon as we got to it" (152). Anything of higher merit than the cheap tourist traps that Humbert despises is seen by Lolita to be boring, and she makes childish fake gags to express this boredom. Again, Humbert admits that this is done in an attempt to manipulate her. He notes, "By putting the geography of the United States into motion, I did my best for hours on end to give her the impression of 'going places,' of rolling on to some definite destination, to some unusual delight" (152). Humbert tricks her into the having the impression of going to some definite destination, just as he does when he first picks her up from camp. Their relationship begins with Humbert telling her that they are on their way to see her mother, but he soon tells Lolita that she cannot call her mother because she is dead (141). Before this even, he is successful in distracting her by giving her the false impression of having a proper destination, and he turns back to this a strategy when they are on the road.

Humbert comes closer to using Lolita's consumer tendencies to his advantage when he tries to persuade her by connecting with her about her interests. He tells her, "In former times, when I was still your dream male [the reader will notice what pains I took to speak Lo's tongue], you swooned to records of the number one throb-and-sob idol of your coevals [Lo: 'Of my what? Speak English.'] (149). He mixes the language of her interests (that he uses when mentioning her pop idols) with other words that are too outdated for her to understand (coevals, for example), and this prevents him from being able to relate to her as he intended. This also emphasizes the shift in their relationship. Before trying to talk to her about her musical interests, he says, "Come and kiss your old man...and drop that moody nonsense" (149). He understands that he is

transitioning from her “dream man” into more of a father role, and while he embraces this role to a small degree, he recognizes that he must find new ways to maintain control of Lolita as her desires and their relationship change.

When he is unable to connect through words, or even other forms of persuasion, such as fear, he begins to appeal to her commercial interest. When they stop in a town he will buy her a lollipop (159); he indulges her appetite for “gooey fudge sundaes” and movie magazines (148); he is willing to buy for her the “novelties and souvenirs” from the gift shops by which they pass (148). Perhaps most notably, when Humbert fears she has run away, he finds her at the drugstore. Humbert writes of the moment, “‘Tried to reach you at home,’ she said brightly. ‘A great decision has been made. But first buy me a drink, dad’” (207). When Humbert is unable to find Lolita, he fears the worst, and he is so relieved to find her at the drugstore that he is willing to buy her loyalty and affection back. When this scene is viewed with Humbert as the consumer of Lolita, he is in a vulnerable position with his fearing that she has run away, so he is able to be easily persuaded. With Lolita as the consumer and Humbert trying to persuade her interests, he is willing to appeal to her commercial interests in order to get what he wants. He is easily manipulated because of how desperately he relies on her participation. She also calls him “dad” as she demands the drink. This emphasizes her dependence on Humbert and his money. Because of this dependence, she is more easily bought by tending to her commercial interests.

Humbert’s willingness to engage with Lolita’s commercial interests in order to get what he wants also points to a broader issue of the time. Packard writes in *The Hidden Persuaders*, “Beyond the question of specific practices of the persuaders and their associated scientists is the larger question of where our economy is taking us under the pressures of consumerism. That, too, is a moral question. In fact I suspect it is destined to become one of the great moral issues of

our times” (Packard 262). Throughout the novel, with Humbert’s move to America and his following bribery of Lolita as examples, consumerism drives interests and decision making. Mass culture tells consumers how they should feel and what they should buy, and those desperate to fit in are more than willing to participate.³³ These advertisers continue to deflect blame, though. Packard adds, “This is not to criticize those who make the products in question or those who promote and sell them. They and all of us who consume them are caught up in the same whirl” (Packard 264). From a reading of *Lolita*, it is fair to say that Nabokov would agree in part and dissent in part. By looking at Humbert’s participation in American consumerism, it is clear that Nabokov is critical of how easily Humbert begins to participate and how little actual persuasion it takes. Humbert is so interested in personal gain that he is willing to engage in these morally questionable behaviors in order to achieve those gains. In other ways, though, Nabokov is also critical of the advertisers and producers that create and benefit from this system. He points to the ways in which children and other vulnerable populations are exposed to the exploitation of these industries, and he avoids placing blame on those individuals. There are certainly some people that are exposed to and are harmed by this system, and they are not willingly “caught up in the whirl” in the same way as someone like Humbert.

Conclusion

Nabokov’s focus on the advertisement industry in *Lolita* gives him a common thread to which he can return. By using the industry as the force that pulls Humbert to America and the

³³ Although, as Dwight Macdonald argues, those seeking to fit in by following these popular trends are doing so with their individuality as the cost. The differences between individuals are what matters, and although Humbert is trying to find a unifying image of the country, he does hope to find one more genuine than the artificial culture created by the masses.

force that drives and sustains his relationship with Lolita, it is something that the reader is never able to fully ignore. It is then through advertising and its effects that Nabokov is able to make broader commentaries on American consumer culture. Importantly, the elements of this consumerism that Nabokov makes clearest are those of which he is critical, but this is not to say that he is generally critical of American consumerism. In subtle ways it is celebrated, as it allows Humbert to freely move about the country experiencing all that America has to offer. He revels in the museums and even some tourist traps, although along the way he is critical of the flashy lights and advertisements that plague small towns. Nabokov is especially interested in the roles of capitalism and liberalism in American consumerism. As stated previously, Nabokov is supportive of capitalist economies and has written on that support on numerous occasions. Here, however, he is more interested in expressing his concerns with the way that capitalism is sometimes used as a tool of exploitation and deceit. Turning back to advertising, Nabokov exposes the way in which advertisers are able to manipulate the vulnerabilities of American consumers in order to persuade them in the choices they make with their money. Capitalism then provides the mechanism through which these persuaders are able to deflect blame and claim that consumers are making free choices.

Humbert's existence as both a consumer and a manipulator both clarifies and complicates Nabokov's ideas of American consumerism. On one hand, his job when coming to America is to produce advertisements for a perfume company, and this ability to persuade extends into his relationship with Lolita. Nabokov uses this opportunity to connect and compare the issues of persuasion within the advertising industry with the problematic features of his and Lolita's relationship. On the other hand, Humbert's obsession with Lolita drives him to the status of consumer, with Lolita viewed as the product. Humbert begins to view Lolita on the basis of what

she is able to provide for his interests and the way that she is able to make him feel. As he shows these consumer tendencies, his early (and sometimes concurrent) criticisms of consumer culture turn to hypocrisy. The fact that Humbert participates in American consumer culture as both the persuader and the consumer, however, shows how easy it is to succumb to the manipulation and deceit that accompanies the self-interest driving each side. Through this relationship, Nabokov also highlights Humbert's classist attitude that is revealed through his discourse on American consumer culture. Humbert's privileged background and accumulation of wealth upon arriving in America afford him the freedom to spend money on travel and lodgings, as well as on Lolita, but he is still critical of spending on what he sees as lower-class pursuits. This relationship accounts for many of the seeming paradoxes in Humbert's view of American consumerism, but it also reflects a misunderstanding of the true nature of American individualism and freedom of choice. By exploring Humbert's involvement in this culture, Nabokov is able to expose the factors that drive persuaders and consumers, as well as the self-interest that leads to the negative effects of American consumer culture more generally. These windows into American consumer culture throughout Humbert's narrative are largely created by Humbert's travel throughout the country. As Nabokov explores America's national identity through travel and fiction about that travel, he searches for examples of individuality in person and place, and it is this travel—and the travel of Humbert and Lolita—that I will explore in the following chapter.

Chapter Three

Connection to Place: Seeking an American Identity

Nabokov's first version of *Lolita*, a novella titled *The Enchanter*, included the basic framework of the narrative, but it lacked a distinct setting or sense of place to ground the story. He largely dismissed this first novella—and even tried to destroy it on several occasions—but after spending time in America, Nabokov circled back, filling the voids in the narrative with sharp details from his experiences in America. While it is far from a biographical sketch of Nabokov's own travels, his time on the road in America largely informs many of the details of Humbert's narrative, and vivid descriptions of American towns and places play an immeasurable role in *Lolita*. These details come to the foreground largely through Humbert and Lolita's travels across the country, which take place in two parts. Immediately upon Charlotte Haze's death, Humbert picks up Lolita at camp, and they begin to travel. It begins as a way to keep Lolita occupied after the loss of her mother, but it is also a result of Humbert's lack of a real home. After some time, they settle down in Beardsley, but they leave again as soon as they settle. Humbert realizes that keeping his relationship secret as Lolita grows up and is surrounded by her peers is an increasingly difficult task, and the road provides them with the anonymity Humbert sees as necessary to protect his relationship with Lolita. Through their travels, Humbert attempts to understand America, but his rapid travel leaves him with only a shallow understanding of the places they visit. This lack of personal connection to place leaves him dissatisfied, and it is not until he writes of his travels and consciously considers his relationship with the country that he comes to see it as the “lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous” country that he loves.

Through Humbert and Lolita's travels, Nabokov comments on the importance of the difference between space and place as Humbert struggles to determine exactly what he hopes to find. During his time in Beardsley, they come dangerously close to establishing a home, but along with this settlement, Humbert becomes increasingly anxious about how well Lolita comes to know those around her. Beardsley begins to mean something to them, and the town becomes a more distinct place than anywhere during their travels, but this putting down of roots threatens their relationship in a significant way. Importantly, Humbert does desire a significant, meaningful home, and because of this, he is frustrated by their constant movement on the road. He is excited by the things that he is able to see and experience as they drive across the country, but this nomadic lifestyle is also void of meaning and emotional attachment. Their travels allow Nabokov to explore this relationship between a known place, full of meaning, and the space between towns that Humbert and Lolita mostly occupy, that is unable to satisfy Humbert's urge for something deeper.

Because this relationship between place and space is so important to Humbert's feelings about America and his American identity, I rely heavily on the work of Yi-Fu Tuan, who writes about the relationship between place and space and the ways in which an individual is able to form an emotional bond with a place. While Tuan does not directly connect his work to literature, his arguments about identity and connection to place inform my understandings of Humbert's anxieties about his difficulty to form this connection. Through his narrative, Humbert makes many of the same arguments as Tuan, regarding the emptiness of a place not understood by an individual or the influence of sensory experiences on individual attitudes about a place, and in this chapter, I work to connect Tuan's arguments to Humbert's anxieties. In addition, I use sources that deal directly with place in America, and with Nabokov's travels in the country, and

pulling these together allows for a complete picture to be drawn of Nabokov and Humbert's relationship with America.

Central to this relationship are Humbert's feelings about America more generally and his lack of an understanding of his place in American society. It would seem logical that his travel around the country allows him to get to know it at a level deeper than he would if staying in one place. This may be true in some senses, but despite his extensive movement, he is ultimately left with the feeling that he knows the country only at a vague, surface level. Their driving allows him to see the beauty of the country, and by the end he recognizes and conveys this beauty in his narrative, but he also expresses remorse over the fact that their hurried, ill-purposed travels reduce a great country to nothing more than an empty space with small dots for towns. He regrets the emptiness with which he constantly views the country that he eventually comes to learn is full of rich culture and meaning. This also helps to understand Nabokov's own time on the road. Although his purposes were much different, as he was focused on writing rather than engaging in a relationship with a child, his time on the road largely prevented him from establishing a home in any one place. When he did settle, it was only for brief periods of time at various universities in the Northeast. Despite this, Nabokov still had a great love for America, and certainly considered it his home. Humbert and Lolita's time on the road, and Humbert's reflections on that time, begins to explore the seeming contradiction of having no single home but still having a passionate, emotional love for America.

Connection to Place

One of Humbert's greatest frustrations with his travels across the country is his inability to form meaningful connections to any one place. Because he travels so quickly, only stopping in towns for short periods of time, he is able to see a large portion of the country, but he is unable to truly know any of those areas. Humbert writes that after his and Lolita's travels, America "was no more to [them] than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, [and] old tires" (176). It is clear he is saddened that their understanding of America is void of meaning, but his frustrations run even deeper. Yi-Fu Tuan writes on the active mode of experiencing a new place: "What we see can be presented in pictures and maps, to which all have access. Pictures and maps are public" (Tuan 152).³⁴ Reading Humbert's understanding of maps and guidebooks with Tuan's argument about the publicity of pictures and maps clarifies some of Humbert's unease with regard to his connection to individual places in America. Humbert is upset about this reductionist view of his travels because maps and guidebooks are available to anyone who is able to read them. Humbert is constantly wishing that the objects of his desire are unique; this is why he dislikes when Lolita is like the other girls, and this is why he is frustrated that his travels with Lolita end up as nothing more "than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires" (176).³⁵

Even though he is able to construct a thorough narrative, Humbert is unable to articulate what, if anything, he enjoyed of the experience. Tuan writes, "Returning from a vacation we can articulate visual experience with colored slides and incidents with words, but the exhilarating olfactory and tactile experiences remain buried in our private selves. Sensitivity cannot be shared the way thoughts can" (Tuan 152). Contrary to Tuan's argument, Humbert *is* able to articulate

³⁴ Tuan compares this to what he calls the passive mode of experience, which is comprised of things like "taste, smell and touch," and varies from individual to individual due to the influence of past experiences (152).

³⁵ This same preference for individualism over conformity is largely responsible for Humbert's criticisms of Lolita's love of mass culture icons, as discussed in the previous chapter.

many aspects of his experience on the road with Lolita. The entire second part of the novel functions as Humbert's narrative of events, and he relays what happens with intense detail that moves beyond simple sights and sounds to include private, sensitive emotions. As Humbert tries to think about the substance of their experience after the fact, however, he is unable to find the words. It is only then that the trip is reduced to maps and guidebooks. This is when Humbert begins to show empathy for the effects that their travel is having on Lolita. He writes that their experience is reduced partially to "her sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep" (176). Lolita tries to hide her terror from Humbert, as she waits to cry until she believes that he is asleep. As he shares, he is simply pretending to be asleep and notices that Lolita is crying. Humbert is troubled by these sobs, but it is unclear exactly why they trouble him. It could be because the crying annoys him by preventing him from sleeping, but if this were the case, there would be no reason for him to feign sleep. Rather, Humbert notices the effects that his abuse has been having on Lolita, and he begins to feel remorse. Importantly, though, this remorse is not significant enough to prevent him from continuing with their relationship.

Humbert's feelings about Lolita and their travel are complicated by the timeline of the narrative. Their actual travels take place in two parts, separated by their time in Beardsley, where they stay for just shy of one year. The narrative, though, is written after the fact, and Humbert knows about their entire relationship—including how it ends—when he writes the entire narrative, including the section on the beginning of their travels. Because of this, it is difficult to discern what Humbert is writing about his feelings in the moment and what he is writing about his feelings during the time in which he is writing the narrative. Part of this complication can be worked out by considering Tuan's argument about the relationship between meaning and place. Tuan writes, "Place is a center of meaning constructed by experience. Place is known not only

through the eyes and mind but also through the more passive and direct modes of experience, which resist objectification” (Tuan 152). Tuan hints at the fact that many of the important aspects of a place remain not only unarticulated, but even unnoticed at times. These unnoticed attributes of a place, though, are still important for constructing the broader image of a place. Active modes of experiences, such as sight and sound, contribute more obviously to the construction of a place, but what Tuan calls passive modes are equally important, in different ways. The sights and sounds form the frame of a place, but the passive modes fill the gaps and add character and emotion. Humbert, through all of his travels with Lolita, avoids the construction of place by remaining in constant motion. On the road, their relationship exists in many different spaces, but avoids an existence in any actual place that requires active and passive experience.

A place, and knowledge of it, requires these experiences that can only be had through an intimate connection, and it is this depth that Humbert struggles with. Tuan argues that “to know a place fully means both to understand it in an abstract way and to know it as one person knows another” (Tuan 152). Humbert, or anyone else, is able to gain an abstract knowledge of a place through maps and guidebooks. He is able to understand what exists in those spaces, the kind of people that occupy them, and even glimpses of what a place looks like, through pictures. Similarly, individual people can be known at an abstract level through pictures and books, or other indirect experiences. To know a place fully, or to know a person fully, one must find a connection deeper than sights and sounds. Even passive modes of experience, such as taste, smell and touch, are unable to suffice when they are only experienced briefly. To form a fuller connection, one must have sustained and repeated interactions, and for this to happen, Humbert must stay in one place for an extended period of time.

While Humbert never quite experiences a deep, intimate connection to place, it is not as though every place he travels is completely free of meaning. Tuan explores the different ways of considering places and notes, “At a high theoretical level, places are points in a spatial system. At the opposite extreme, they are strong visceral feelings” (Tuan 152). Humbert has many of these “strong visceral feelings” when it comes to his love for Lolita. It can be debated whether these feelings can be considered real love, or whether Humbert is in pursuit of something different, but he does have these strong feelings, and they are conveyed in his narrative. Many of the places that Humbert describes—The Enchanted Hunters, the Hotel Mirana or Lolita’s childhood home, for example—are accompanied by these feelings, but they are still much more than that and cannot be simply or completely reduced to “strong visceral feelings.” On the other end of Tuan’s spectrum are “points in a spatial system.” These points might exist as pages in a guidebook or towns on a map, and these also appear in Humbert’s narrative, oftentimes in the form of a place mentioned only briefly, occupying no more space than an item in one of Humbert’s lists. The places that occupy more space in Humbert’s narrative exist in a space somewhere between these two extremes.

One example of a place in which Humbert does spend a significant amount of time is Lolita’s childhood home, where he lives with Lolita and Charlotte Haze, but even this house fails to provide a true connection to place. Jennifer L. Jenkins argues that this home represents the “most treacherous of places, the middle-class American home” and that the grotesque interior of the Haze house is something entirely new to Humbert: “Nothing in his prior experience could prepare this pilgrim for the horrors of genteel postwar American domesticity” (218). While Humbert does not hide his disdain for the space,³⁶ he is willing to look the other way in order to

³⁶ Humbert describes the home as “a kind of horrible hybridization between the comedy of so-called ‘functional modern furniture’ and the tragedy of decrepit rockers and rickety lamp tables with dead lamps” (37-38).

get closer to Lolita. His introduction to this new space and the significant amount of time that he spends there, are insufficient to form an emotional connection because the only positive of the space is Lolita, and the actual space itself is only representative of what he dislikes of America, not of America as a whole.

The fact that many of the places seen by Humbert and Lolita are neither only points on a map nor places capable of producing strong visceral emotions aligns with the fact that, according to Tuan, most places exist in a space between those two extremes. He argues, "Places are seldom known at either extreme: the one is too remote from sensory experience to be real, and the other presupposes rootedness in a locality and an emotional commitment to it that are increasingly rare" (Tuan 152). The places that are "too remote from sensory experience to be real" only exist as points on a map, but for some people, these places are much more than that. A place, regardless of where it lies on Tuan's spectrum, is not stuck in that place on the spectrum. Its position is directly connected to an individual. A place on a map that Humbert has never visited has significance to others, for whom that place might evoke visceral emotions. Thus, it is not the place that exists on the spectrum, but rather an individual's understanding and experiences of a certain place that exists on the spectrum. As Humbert travels and uses maps and guidebooks, he encounters many places that exist only as dots on those maps, free from real meaning and emotion. Even those same places, for the same individual, are able to move along the spectrum as they become more known. What begins as a town listed in Humbert's guidebook sometimes becomes a destination at which Humbert and Lolita form an important memory, and those emotions are then permanently attached to that place. Humbert's frustrations, then, arise when the places they have traveled do not end up being connected to the emotions shared in those locations. Perhaps this is because they were never shared and only existed in Humbert's mind.

As he complains about his emotionless view of the country after their travels, he is frustrated at the lack of memories formed.³⁷ For Humbert, many of the towns that he thought were important—and many of the memories that he believed were also important to Lolita—are reduced to the end of the spectrum that remains without emotion.

The relationship between space and time also limits the ways in which Humbert is able to experience America and travel with Lolita. Tuan distinguishes between small and large places and the way that they are experienced differently based on their size: “A small place can be known through all the modes of experience; a large place, such as a city or nation, depends far more on indirect and abstract knowledge for its experiential construction” (Tuan 153). A place as large as America cannot possibly be known as intimately as some of the small towns that Humbert and Lolita occupy, and even through travels as extensive as theirs, it would not be possible for them to know every crevasse of America in the same way that it is possible to know a town. The important limitation to such a vast range of experiences is time, and this is also an important factor in the relationship between Humbert and Lolita. A variety of factors place time constraints on their relationship, such as the threat of being caught or—more certain, but longer term—Lolita’s aging and Humbert’s following loss of interest in her. Humbert is racing to get to know Lolita, just as he is racing to get to know America.³⁸ By travelling across the country from town to town at the speed at which Humbert and Lolita travel, they are able to gain a greater

³⁷ This emotionless view is evidenced by his description that America “was not more to [them] than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires” (176).

³⁸ Humbert’s effort to learn about America cannot be separated from his past in Europe. Frederick Jackson Turner, as he writes about the American frontier spirit, attempts to understand this transition: “In the settlement of America we have to observe how European life entered the continent, and how America modified and developed that life and reacted on Europe... The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization” (Turner 2). Importantly, Humbert is not traveling across the same American frontier discussed by Turner here, and he discusses the Americanization of the country, and the people moving west more generally, rather than the individual; however, the same forces are at play that take something European—in this case Humbert—and, through a system of new experiences, is transformed into something uniquely American.

understanding of America in a general sense, but they also lose the ability to experience it at a deeper level, as this would require intimate knowledge of smaller areas within the country. In order to make sense of Humbert and Lolita's travel, though, it is necessary to understand why they spend so much of their time on the road.

Static Life and Threats to Anonymity

Humbert is unsatisfied by his life on the road, travelling across America, but Lolita's growing autonomy and increasing threats to their secrecy prevent them from staying in any one place for an extended period of time. Humbert and Lolita's static life in Beardsley prevents them from maintaining their anonymity, and Humbert is threatened by the close relationships that Lolita is able to form. Her interactions with one of her classmates in particular makes him feel especially exposed. Lolita nervously asks him about his efforts to corroborate her story, to which he replies, "Perfect. Yes. And I do not doubt you two made it up. As a matter of fact, I do not doubt you have told her everything about us" (205). As Lolita matures, she is increasingly aware of her situation, and Humbert is afraid that she will realize how wrong their relationship is. Her being surrounded by other children her age in more normal domestic situations increases this threat. During the early 1950s, as Nabokov was travelling across the country, he read a newspaper article about a girl in a situation similar to Lolita: "An unemployed auto mechanic, Frank La Salle, had abducted an eleven-year-old girl named Sally Horner and kept her for two years as his sex slave, traveling from New Jersey to California by way of Texas, before being apprehended in a San Jose auto court" (Roper 157). This article would become the schema for Humbert and Lolita's travels, but perhaps the most important parallel between Sally Horner and

Lolita's stories is that their secrets were exposed after sharing their stories with classmates.³⁹

Nabokov's use of a real American story to inform his writing in *Lolita* reveals the ways in which he attempted to learn more about the country before describing it in his fiction. This is not to say that he read the La Salle story and decided that it was particularly representative of American society, but rather that the story showed Nabokov of the ways in which a relationship such as Humbert and Lolita's might function in a small American town.⁴⁰

Importantly, Lolita is only able to get closer to her peers when she and Humbert remain in one place for an extended period of time. Humbert's threat that follows his discovery of Lolita's relationship with her classmate is particularly revealing of the ways in which he attempts to maintain their secrecy: "Dolores, this must stop right away. I am ready to yank you out of Beardsley and lock you up you know where, but this must stop. I am ready to take you away the time it takes to pack a suitcase. This must stop or else anything may happen" (205). Humbert's point that "anything may happen" could be read in different ways. It could mean that their relationship would be discovered and that Lolita knows the potential disaster for herself that could result from such a discovery—her placement in a home or jail for juvenile delinquents are two things that Humbert cites as examples (*Lolita* 151). It could also mean that Humbert will respond in an unpredictable manner, by removing her from Beardsley and taking her away from town. This unpredictability is what will allow them to regain the anonymity that keeps their

³⁹ "Sally's captivity lasted for twenty-one months, included attendance at school, and concluded when she confided her secret to a classmate, who told her what was happening was wrong" (Roper 157-158).

⁴⁰ As Nabokov wrote *Lolita*, he paid close attention to sources that would teach him about American children and American girls. He consulted sources such as children's magazines, Girl Scout manuals, billboards and books about young girls and their development. He even visited a private school pretending to consider enrolling his own imagined daughter (Boyd 211). By piecing together small ideas from each of these sources, the novel began to develop into his own complete creation.

relationship secret, and it can only be attained by going back on the road, which is what Humbert eventually does.

Because Humbert must keep Lolita on the road in order to keep their relationship secret, Lolita is unable to develop meaningful relationships with her peers, and she is unable to enjoy the same freedom of choice that Humbert relies upon for his own defense. As discussed in the previous chapter, Humbert's defense of his illegal activity argues that he is able to choose who he engages in sexual activity with. He notes that this is the freedom of choice that is allowed for by American liberalism and his relationship with Lolita functions in part as a reflection of the capitalist system that allows Americans to make their own choices, freed from regulations. Lolita, however, is subject to restrictions. In order for Humbert to make his own choices and see those decisions come to fruition, he must strip Lolita of her own agency. This dynamic is made even more interesting by weighing the relative freedoms enjoyed by Humbert and taken away from Lolita. For Humbert, the freedom that he takes by engaging in a sexual relationship with Lolita stretches beyond not only societal norms, but also legal and moral boundaries. His actions are nearly universally considered lewd, corrupt and illegal, yet he still maintains that this is a choice that he and Lolita make concurrently and that his choices should be supported. Lolita, on the other hand, is deprived of her freedom to have even the most basic friendships that ordinary school children have. Lolita is no ordinary child, due to a variety of factors, and Humbert made sure of this long before he prevented Lolita from seeing this particular classmate, but in this moment, he deprives Lolita of something far more basic. Upon learning that Lolita had not attended her last two piano lessons, Humbert begins to investigate her whereabouts during these times. He soon discovers that that she had been "in a nearby public park rehearsing the magic forest scene with Mona" (203). He says of his discovery, "She remained singularly unruffled

when confronted with my discovery, and said *d'un petit air faussement contrit* that she knew she was a very wicked kid, but simply had not been able to resist the enchantment, and had used up those music hours” with their rehearsing (203). The French used by Humbert here expresses his recognition of Lolita’s feigned remorse as she tells him that she was rehearsing for the school play with Mona, rather than attending her piano lessons. Had Humbert been upset with Lolita for rehearsing for the play with Mona because she had missed the piano lessons that he paid for and expected her to attend, his anger would be fully understandable, but he is upset because Lolita was associating with one of her peers and because they were alone, and this provided an opportunity for his being exposed. Lolita simply wishes to engage with her peers and participate in ordinary functions of the girls at Beardsley, and Humbert is depriving her of even this, all so that he is able to keep their relationship a secret. There is a stark imbalance in these freedoms, to say the least, and Lolita becomes increasingly aware of this imbalance, threatening Humbert’s ability to keep their relationship secret.

Lolita’s Growing Awareness

Humbert begins to recognize that Lolita understands how problematic their relationship is, and this forces him to consider taking her back on the road, where their lack of an attachment to place allows them to enjoy a greater degree of anonymity. As Roper notes of the La Salle case, he is not caught because Horner’s classmate reveals their relationship, but rather because the classmate told Horner “that what was happening was wrong” (Roper 158). It is Horner’s awareness of the true nature of their relationship rather than an external discovery that leads to La Salle’s demise. This is not to say that an external discovery would not be problematic for

Humbert and their relationship, and Humbert is certainly concerned about this prospect. He takes several measures to prevent others from learning of his actions, and this is a large source of anxiety for Humbert. It is the shift in Lolita's understanding, however, that provides a new source of concern here. As he hangs up after his phone call with Mona to verify Lolita's alibi, he goes downstairs to confront Lolita: "As she sprawled there, biting at a hangnail and mocking me with her heartless vaporous eyes, and all the time rocking a stool upon which she had placed the heel of an outstretched shoeless foot, I perceived all at once with a sickening qualm how much she had changed since I first met her two years ago" (203-204). Much of Humbert's distress comes from others' lack of respect towards him or when he perceives, or at least believes, that others are mocking him. Lolita's mocking him at this moment adds insult to a situation that is already stressful for Humbert. He adds that she is "biting at a hangnail," which seems inconsequential but contributes to her devolvement into what Humbert sees as the average American teen. He notes with great pain how much she had changed during the time that he has known her, but what he sees as change is simply her natural development. He notices this development with a "sickening qualm" because he knows that she is no longer the young nymphet with which he originally fell in love. More importantly, though, he knows that this change will lead to the end of their relationship, as she becomes increasingly perceptive of the nature of their relationship.

Her growing awareness is made clearer as Humbert describes her following actions: "She said she loathed me...She said I had attempted to violate her several times when I was her mother's roomer. She said she was sure I had murdered her mother. She said she would sleep with the very first fellow who asked her and I could do nothing about it" (205). According to Humbert, Lolita explicitly states that she knows that Humbert "attempted to violate her."

Humbert carefully limits these violations to the time during which he lived with her and her mother, noticeably excluding their time on the road when he was legitimately violating her. By doing this, he only concedes that he *attempted* to violate her and not that he actually did. Limiting it in this way also retains some semblance of complicity in their relationship after Charlotte's death. Additionally, Humbert places Lolita's statement that she was going to "sleep with the very first fellow who asked her" alongside her accusations of his violating her and murdering her mother. The thought of Lolita being with someone else concerns her more than, or at least as much as, the idea of her believing he violated her and murdered her mother. It is Lolita being with others, although not in the sexual sense that she suggests, that allows Humbert to escape the curious ears of their neighbors overhearing their argument. Upon receiving phone calls complaining of the noise, Humbert responds, "I apologized for my daughter's friends being so loud. Young people, you know—and cradled the next quack and a half" (206). Humbert's greatest fear in this scene is Lolita's association with other children, but here, it is this exact idea that frees him from the suspicion and anger of his neighbors. It functions well as an excuse because it is the expected norm—that children in school spend time with other children their age and make noise as they do so. Humbert's use of this as an excuse shows that he knows this is normal, expected behavior of children Lolita's age, yet he still prioritizes the protection of their relationship and his secrecy. Their concurrent awareness of their situation and its problems presents a great threat to Humbert's plan, and it comes as a result of their time in one place.

Humbert believes that this shift occurs as a direct result of Lolita's time at Beardsley. He begins to wonder about the time over which this change has happened: "Or had this happened during those last two weeks? *Tendresse*? Surely that was an exploded myth. She sat right in the focus of my incandescent anger. The fog of all lust had been swept away leaving nothing but this

dreadful lucidity. Oh, she had changed!” (204). Humbert is troubled by Lolita’s changes, but what is most enraging to him is her newfound “dreadful lucidity.” Her awareness threatens him, and he suggests here that this is something new that has come as a result of her spending more time with her peers. He adds to this when he laments of her changes in appearance, “Her complexion was now that of any vulgar untidy highschool girl who applies shared cosmetics with grubby fingers to an unwashed face and does not mind what soiled texture, what postulate epidermis comes in contact with her skin” (204). Central to his frustration with her increasingly mature exterior is the dirtiness of her skin and that this lack of cleanliness stems from the fact that she is sharing cosmetics with her classmates. Similarly, it is the sharing of information with her peers that he fears most and causes his anger in this moment. Her aging appearance is a concern to Humbert, as he loves her mostly for her childlike features. As these begin to disappear, he becomes less concerned with maintaining secrecy and more concerned with maintaining their relationship. However, he is also anxious about Lolita spending time with other children and other people more generally. His solution to this problem is to cut off her contact with others.

In addition to limiting her interactions with other children, especially in intimate settings, he is also wary of allowing her to see other adults. He says of her interests in the arts, “Because it supposedly tied up her interest in dance and dramatics, I had permitted Lo to take piano lessons with a Miss Emperor (as we French scholars may conveniently call her) to whose blue-shuttered little white house a mile or so beyond Beardsley Lo would spin off twice a week” (202). He says that he “permitted Lo to take piano lessons,” and the fact that he sees this as a great allowance is important. In most father-daughter relationships, this would not seem like a problematic phrasing, as he certainly does not owe his daughter piano lessons, but he does not initially deny

her this pleasure because of ordinary factors such as money or time. Instead, he is cautious about how he allows Lolita to spend her time, and he regulates the choices that she makes about how she spends this free time. He speaks similarly of her recital, to which he is not invited. He mentions it only briefly, referring to “the very special rehearsal Lo had not had [him] attend” (202). Again, he is not hurt that he is not invited to see Lolita’s performance but rather distressed about any time that she spends outside of his sight and control. As they spend more time in one place, she becomes more integrated in the Beardsley community, which is evidenced by her new interest in “dance and dramatics.” These new passions require her to spend more time at the school and with the other girls. Humbert is not opposed to keeping Lolita happy with pleasures such as these, as he indulges her frequently throughout their travels. Here though, his desire to keep her isolated outweighs his desire to keep her happy. Their staying in one place is what threatens this isolation and pushes Humbert towards a move away from Beardsley.

Lolita’s Access to Private Spaces

Another aspect of their time in one place that is damaging to their relationship but improved during their time on the road is Lolita’s ability to maintain privacy. During their fight in Beardsley, Lolita becomes enraged and difficult to control. Humbert writes of the moment, “I said she was to go upstairs and show me all her hiding places. It was a strident and hateful scene” (205). Because they stay in the house, Lolita is able to keep her own private spaces, such as her own bedroom and other hiding places throughout the house. When they travel, their time is mostly limited to the car or hotel rooms, in which they stay for only a night. Without that sense of permanence, they only occupy borrowed spaces, and Lolita is unable to hide things and

secrets in the same way that she is able to in Beardsley. The spaces that they occupy when travelling are also much smaller, keeping them in close contact and preventing Lolita from being able to be on her own. Humbert carefully seeks spaces in which they are able to have privacy as a couple, away from the outside world. In doing so, Humbert restricts the privacy that Lolita is able to have from Humbert. As Lolita ages and becomes more like the other girls with whom she associates, her cravings for this privacy intensify. This drives her to abandon her piano lessons to spend time with someone her age, and it also drives her to run from the house. Humbert notes of her getaway, “Downstairs the screen door banged. Lo? Escaped? Through the casement on the stairs I saw a small impetuous ghost slip through the shrubs; a silvery dot in the dark—hub of bicycle wheel—moved, shivered, and she was gone” (206). By using the word “escaped,” Humbert presents himself as the captor, with her as the captive. Upon hearing the screen door banging, he immediately and correctly assumes that she has escaped, revealing his recognition of the fact that she is perhaps a less willing participant in their relationship than he lets on in his narrative. This also supports his prior allusions to the fact that he needs to have a close eye on her whereabouts.

As the captive, Lolita’s freedom and privacy are greatly diminished. One of Humbert’s first threats to Lolita after his realization of her growing discontent shows his willingness to directly remove these freedoms, “I am ready to yank you out of Beardsley and lock you up you know where, but this must stop” (205). His solution to gain control is not to repair their relationship or attempt to fix the things that are driving her away, but rather to simply lock her up. Roper notes that this idea is borrowed from the Sally Horner story: “La Salle abducted Sally after watching her commit a crime (shoplifting), hence the threat about sending her to ‘a place for girls’” (Roper 158). Roper also directly connects this to Nabokov’s creation of Humbert and

Lolita's relationship and the forces that keep them together, "Humbert also persuades Lolita that she has broken the law, has 'impaired the morals of an adult in a respectable inn' by inviting him to 'know her carnally' when they spent the night at the Enchanted Hunters hotel" (Roper 158). La Salle engages with Horner after she commits an actual crime, and this gives him the ability to threaten her with legal trouble. Humbert only has Lolita believe that she has committed a crime, when in reality, she is the victim of Humbert's own illegal actions. This distinction, though, is irrelevant, as Humbert relies on deception and must only make Lolita believe that she could be in trouble in order to maintain influence over her. As Roper adds, "Precocious and in many ways bright, Lolita is finally just a child. She can be gulled" (158). Just as children are targeted in advertising for their vulnerabilities and the ease with which they are able to be persuaded (as discussed in the second chapter), Humbert taps this same vulnerability as he exploits Lolita. Humbert is not targeting Lolita because she is easily manipulated; he targets Lolita because of his perverted preference for younger girls. However, this age difference allows Humbert to persuade Lolita, through no fault of her own.

Regardless of their actual guilt, Lolita and Sally Horner each believe that they would be in legal trouble if they do not comply with their captors' demands. Humbert threatens that her freedom would be in jeopardy if she fails to listen to him, but in using this tactic to gain power and control, he is still taking away her basic freedoms. As early as their first night together in The Enchanted Hunters, Humbert begins to restrict those freedoms by locking her in their room. He tells Lolita, "Go to bed, go to bed—for goodness sake, to bed," and then proceeds to lock the door and go downstairs (123). His locking the door is crucial because it simultaneously excludes her from the outside world and prevents anyone from the outside world from reaching her. This isolation represents an extreme withholding of freedom. This moment is also one of the few

times during their travels in which Lolita is able to have any form of privacy, as she is alone in their room, but there are critical aspects of this privacy that prevent it from being the true, pure privacy that she craves. First, because it is a temporary space, as they are renting it for the night, she is unable to make it her own or use it to hide anything from Humbert. She is also not able to use it to interact with her peers or any other humans, as she is locked inside and isolated. She experiences here the same kind of privacy that an inmate in solitary confinement might experience. Because this is their first night together, this structure sets the tone for their travels and notifies the reader of their relationship as captor and captive.

For their first night and many others to follow, Humbert forces Lolita to stay with him in the same room, but after telling Lolita about the death of her mother Humbert allows her to stay alone. Humbert writes, “At the hotel we had separate rooms” (142). The night before, they shared a room, but Lolita’s anger towards him after learning of her mother’s death leads to uncertainty about their relationship. In order to give her space to grieve, he allows them to stay in separate rooms. Because he is aware of the volatility of their relationship at that moment, he grants Lolita her own private space for the first time since becoming aware of her mother’s death. It would seem that in a time of so much anger and uncertainty that Humbert would want to keep a closer watch on her, as he is uncertain about her behavioral tendencies at this point in the narrative. His next line to follow, one of the most significant of the novel, explains why he is able to give her this private space without fear that she will run away: “...in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go” (142). Lolita does not need her own space. She needs Humbert and his company, and this forces her to go to his room. As a young girl who just lost her mother, she is dependent on Humbert as the only adult that is able to provide for her. He moves further into the

father role, and the relationship becomes more incestuous, in addition to pedophilic. Here, his granting Lolita temporary privacy drives her closer and ultimately restricts her freedoms. It is Humbert's control of when and how she is able to experience this privacy that allows him to manipulate her agency.

Looking at their second night together, after Lolita learns of her mother's death, alongside their last night in Beardsley, when Lolita runs away, is particularly revealing of the shift that requires them to resume their nomadic lifestyle. The scene in the hotel represents the height of Lolita's dependence upon Humbert. Even at one of her angriest moments of the narrative, she is forced to turn to Humbert for comfort. She also has a private space for the night, in which she is able to remain freed from Humbert's influence and manipulation, yet she forgoes this privacy for his comfort. The end of their time in Beardsley shows Lolita at the moment that she realizes her ability to be independent—so much so that she is able to confidently run from their house into town. Humbert does eventually find her in town, but this moment gives her the agency that allows her to make her first major decision. He writes of the moment he finds her, “I saw—with what melody of relief!—Lolita's fair bicycle waiting for her...Some ten paces away Lolita, through the glass of a telephone booth...cupping the tube, confidentially hunched over it, slit her eyes at me...hurriedly hung up, and walked out with a flourish” (206-207). He notes her secrecy in the telephone booth as he finds her, but even the transparency of it provides enough relief to put his worries at ease for the time being. This reflects the varying degrees of privacy that he grants Lolita, as well as the various forms of privacy with which he is comfortable. From what is known of Humbert, any sense of confidentiality expressed by Lolita is ordinarily a worrying sight for him, but in this moment, simply the sight of her is all he needs to know that he still has control. Part of this is a shift in his expectations, as he was preparing himself to find that

she had completely run away from Beardsley, but he also remembers her dependence upon him, and her vulnerability gives him comfort.

Lolita's Increasing Agency

The decision that Lolita makes in this moment, allowed for by her increasing agency, concedes to Humbert's exact desires. She tells him, "I want to leave school. I hate that school. I hate the play, I really do! Never go back. Find another. Leave at once. Go for a long trip again. But *this* time we'll go wherever *I* want, won't we?" (207). By recognizing Humbert's desire to take her back on the road and away from the school that has caused them so many problems, Lolita begins to manipulate Humbert and initiate a chain of events that will lead to her freedom and his demise. She hints at the control that she will have by deciding where and when they travel, but Humbert does not care about this concession because he is simply interested in keeping them on the move. It is not the destinations that he cares about, but rather the fact that they are not remaining in one place. Humbert responds with pleasure, "I nodded. My Lolita" (207). He refers to her as his possession because he does not realize that this marks the moment in which she begins to slip from his control. Because his sole intent is to keep her away from one place, he pays no attention to any other part of her plan, choosing to focus instead on the fact that she wants to leave Beardsley and "go for a long trip again." Their move away from Beardsley begins to have positive effects immediately, in Humbert's eyes at least, as he writes, "She bared her teeth and after her adorable school-girl fashion, leaned forward, and away she sped, my bird" (207). Just before this moment, he was describing with disgust the lipstick that "had left stains on her front teeth," and the memories of prostitutes with diseases that the image brought to his mind

(204). Immediately upon her sharing her plan, she is reverted to the old Lolita that he has grown to love. She is no longer the detestable school-girl that follows her peers, but the “adorable school-girl” that he loved before. Writing as a reflection, he knows that this moment leads to her eventual and final escape, and his description of her speeding away, as his bird, evokes the imagery of this freedom that is granted in this moment, albeit unwillingly.

The way in which Humbert views their road trips is critical to his granting Lolita the freedom to make their choices as to where and when they travel. He notes earlier, as they are finishing their first road trip, they “had been everywhere” but “had really seen nothing” (175). This is not Humbert’s lack of attention to detail, as the narrative before this point is packed with details of their destinations and sights seen along their path. Instead, this points to Humbert’s motivations in keeping Lolita away from others. Through the false pretense that he is granting Lolita freedom by taking her around and showing her the country, he is in fact taking away her freedom by restricting the choices that she is able to make and the relationships that she is allowed to form. Humbert reflects:

And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep. (175-176)

This is one of Humbert’s more remorseful moments of his narrative, in which he reflects upon their travels and his actions and notices the impact that he has had. He notes that their journey “had only defiled” the land that he now finds so wondrous, and this framing suggests that his defilement of the country was the sole impact of the journey. He extends this remorse to the land

but not to Lolita, whom he actually and more importantly defiles. In this way, the land that they travel across holds more value in Humbert's eyes than Lolita. This relates back to the second chapter in an important way. Lolita is simply viewed as a commodity, and consumers seldom feel remorse for the effects of their consumption on the commodity. Humbert's view of Lolita is no different, as he only feels remorse for the effects that his consumption has had on the land. His commodification of Lolita requires that he travel across the country, and his defilement of the country is seen here as an unfortunate byproduct of that consumption.

Humbert is also so focused on keeping their relationship a secret through their travels that he fails to recognize the beauty that he so obviously sees in the land. He claims that they had seen nothing but been everywhere, yet his description in the same sentence of the land reflects a clear understanding of America's beauty. The "trail of slime" is not an appealing image, but he writes that that trail crossed "the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous" America that he comes to love (176). This description also reveals a shift in Humbert's understanding of their travels, as he recalls understanding the land at that point as nothing more "than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires" (176). He laments that the beautiful landscape had been reduced to popular consumer imagery associated with family road trips, and unappealing images at that. This unflattering version of events stems from Humbert's commodification of Lolita and strong focus on restricting her freedoms and privacy. It takes his eventual downfall and reflection to notice the greatness of the country and the wonderful sights that his travel affords him.

It is also important to remember the ways in which Humbert employs the ideas of freedom and privacy to defend his own actions. It is his freedom to make choices for himself that he argues allows him to form a relationship with Lolita, and it is the privacy guaranteed to him by classic American values that protects that relationship from watching eyes. What Humbert

fails to notice, however, as he uses these essential rights to defend his own practices, is that through his actions he denies Lolita these same rights. He takes Lolita on the road to keep her in motion and prevent her from spending enough time in one place to form meaningful relationships with her peers. The extent to which Humbert denies Lolita basic freedoms is highlighted by how excited Lolita is to gain the freedom to decide where and when they travel. This concession is meaningless to Humbert, as the direction and destination of their travel is nonconsequential to his goals, yet it gives Lolita the opportunity to make decisions for herself. Beyond this, however, Lolita is totally stripped of freedoms and freedom of choice. For Lolita, these freedoms take different forms. In some ways, it is a very literal freedom, as Humbert locks her in hotel rooms or threatens her with the prospect of spending time in jail or a juvenile home. In others, it is simple freedoms of choice such as choosing friendships or how she spends her time. Similarly, the privacy that Humbert allows for Lolita also takes different forms. Humbert's greatest concerns occur when he is unable to monitor and regulate her activity. Because of this, she is rarely allowed out of his sight or earshot. Just as important as the freedoms and privacy that Humbert denies Lolita are the small forms of these rights that he grants to her. For example, Lolita is rarely turned down when asking to buy something or participate in American consumer culture. Humbert's control of Lolita centers upon her exploitation of her as a commodity, and his ability to commodify her in this manner depends on her ability to be bought—for Humbert, this opportunity is presented through her own desire to participate in the same consumer culture as he. The privacy that Humbert grants to Lolita is similar in that it is never complete and only granted when it serves his own interests.

The Role of the Automobile

While Humbert and Lolita, and Nabokov during his own travels, are on the road, their means of transportation—the automobile—gives them control over their travel and allows them experience America by a route and pace of their own choosing. While there are certainly cars in Europe, they are often times viewed and used differently in America as a result of the country’s geography. Roper writes of Nabokov’s travels, “They were Americans now, able to go where they wanted in their own car, when they wanted” (Roper 156). Again, there is nothing stopping Europeans from owning a car, or using it when they wish, yet there is something inherently American in the freedom associated with owning a car and using it to drive around the country. This freedom unlocks spaces between places that can be seen far differently than from a train or bus. Roper adds of Nabokov’s travels, “The previous spring, after a car trip with Véra, he had described to Wilson the ‘lovely soft-bosomed scenery’ they saw between Ithaca and Manhattan; his wife had driven him ‘beautifully,’ he said” (Roper 156). Public transportation, widely used and available in Europe and also available in America, though to a far lesser extent, functions as a transaction that allows individuals to move from one place to another. A schedule might read, “Departure: Manhattan, Destination: Ithaca,” and the sole goal of that bus is to safely transport people. Those buying tickets for such a bus and taking it to Ithaca are almost always doing so with the sole intention of arriving in Ithaca, and the trip is entirely unfocused on the space between. By car, the details of the journey are unlocked. Nabokov is able to witness, at an intimate level, the space between the two towns, and it is so beautiful that he comments on it as he speaks with his friend. While travelling by bus or train, passengers can see the landscape that they pass, but they are separated by more distance and more speed. Modes of public transportation have schedules they must maintain, so they do not have the freedom to slow down

while passing beautiful lake or stop to enjoy an overlook. A personal car can stop whenever the driver wishes, for whatever reason, and this allows passengers to enjoy the journey at a closer, more methodical level. Additionally, Nabokov suggests that even the transport itself is more enjoyable, as he tells Wilson that Véra drove them “beautifully.” It is unlikely that anyone would report a bus driver driving “beautifully.” Some may take the train for the enjoyable experience, but even those passengers are further removed from the passing landscape by their inability to dictate their own schedule.

Furthermore, the car provides a private space while travelling, in which the passengers can be freed from outside distractions. Roper describes the ways in which Nabokov utilized this quality of the automobile, “The Olds was the *Lolita* car, the one Véra parked in the shade of roadside trees when Vladimir wanted a quiet, upholstered place to write” (Roper 156). The privacy afforded by the car can be used at virtually any time while travelling. Upon boarding a bus or train, passengers forfeit their privacy until they arrive at their destination. Even then, passengers are usually in towns, where privacy is not easily found. Nabokov recognizes this potential in automobiles, and it is often used by Humbert during his relationship with Lolita. During one such instance, Humbert is insecure about Lolita’s distant behavior upon picking her up from camp. He asks about this standoffishness, and she replies, “Well, you haven’t kissed me yet, have you?” (112). This is the moment when a switch flips in Humbert’s mind, and he acts immediately upon his new understanding of Lolita’s reciprocation of his feelings for her. He writes, “Inly dying, inly moaning, I glimpsed a reasonably wide shoulder of road ahead, and bumped and wobbled into the weeds. Remember she is only a child, remember she is only—” (112). The change in tone of their conversation is quick, and Humbert’s recognition of and action upon that change is nearly just as quick. The freedom of the automobile allows them to travel to

The Enchanted Hunters, or anywhere else they wish to go, but it also gives them flexibility as they actually travel. The moment that follows as they pull off of the road is the first important moment in their relationship after Charlotte's death, and the freedom of automobile travel allows for it to occur. As soon as the situation calls for it, they are able to find a private space in which they are able to be alone.

While cars are able to provide a certain degree of privacy while on the road, this privacy is incomplete, and Nabokov uses this moment to show that Humbert is not as far from public eye as he believes himself to be. Humbert describes the way that he "bumped and wobbled into the weeds," and it appears to the reader that he has driven off the road and into a more secluded area (112). They proceed to hug and kiss as if no one would be around to see them, and during their romantic endeavor, nobody is, but as soon as they separate from each other, a highway patrol car pulls alongside them, asking if they have seen a car similar to theirs drive by. Lolita and Humbert both say they did not see such a car, and this answer is sufficient for the highway patrolman (113). During this interaction, there is never a threat posed of them being discovered. The patrolman shows no signs of suspicion, and the exchange is quick enough for them to slip away unnoticed. The highway patrolman only exists here to remind the reader that Humbert is being watched, despite his thinking that he is sly enough to evade public view.

While Humbert is not caught by the patrolman here, this scene still has serious consequences for the rest of their travel. This is only the first instance of their having sexual contact while on the road, and it ends in a very close call. In fact, it is only "intuition" that leads to their separation before the patrolman pulls up: "...as above all I was agonizingly anxious to smuggle her into the hermetic seclusion of The Enchanted Hunters, and we had still eighty miles to go, blessed intuition broke our embrace—a split second before a highway patrol car drew up

alongside” (113). Humbert finds a relatively private space on the side of the road, a space that is private enough for him to kiss Lolita, but he still recognizes that a more private space is necessary for them to go any further. He mistakenly hopes that The Enchanted Hunters will provide them with a more “hermetic” space, and his eagerness to arrive at the hotel forces him to separate from her, which happens just in time for the patrolman to arrive. While he knows he has not been discovered, he also knows that it was little more than chance that allowed him to escape unscathed. This leads to a great amount of anxiety as they continue their travels. In this instance, he was careless—and he recognizes this—and the close call forces him to proceed with much greater caution. To Nabokov, the automobile is able to function as a private space in which he is able to write whenever inspiration strikes. To Humbert, the automobile allows him some privacy when illicit inspiration strikes, but the level of privacy afforded is insufficient. The key difference is that Humbert is trying to hide from the public eye, whereas Nabokov is simply trying to avoid being among the public, as he would be on a bus or train.

While the automobile is a place that can be controlled by passengers and allows for a greater degree of freedom, it is still not a place that is entirely independent of rules and laws. In one scene, Lolita’s antics leave Humbert distracted as he drives, “Enmeshed in her wild words...I drove through the slumbering town at a fifty-five-mile-per-hour pace in continuance of my smooth highway swoosh, and a twosome of patrolmen put their spotlight on the car, and told me to pull over” (171). Because of Lolita’s distraction, he fails to notice that he has begun to drive through a town, and he continues at a pace that is too fast for the “slumbering town.” On one hand, this serves to remind Humbert that even though the American system of highways provides him with a great amount of freedom as he travels, there still remains a set of laws by

which he must abide. Additionally, it is another opportunity for Humbert's pedophilia to be discovered by the law.

As the patrolmen approach Humbert's car, his anxiety begins to show. He notes that "the men peered at her and [him] with malevolent curiosity" (171). It is important that the patrolmen say nothing and ask nothing about their relationship. This leaves room for the possibility that the entirety of their suspicion rests in Humbert's imagination. It is likely that the patrolmen see nothing more than a father and daughter, as they have no reason to suspect otherwise. It is only Humbert's paranoia that introduces the possibility that they are in any way curious about the relationship between Humbert and Lolita. Regardless of whether or not the patrolmen are actually suspicious of their relationship, Humbert is still faced with the possibility of being charged for speeding. Lolita quickly deters any possibility of legal repercussions, "Suddenly all dimples, she beamed sweetly at them, as she never did at my orchideous masculinity; for, in a sense, my Lo was even more scared of the law than I" (171). This is ironic, as Lolita's fear of the law cannot come close to Humbert's paranoia. It is also yet another of Humbert's expressions of his own insecurities ("...as she never did at my orchideous masculinity..."). At the same time, though, "the kind officers" pardon them, and she achieves her objective of deterring further police involvement (171). Humbert is relieved to escape the encounter without legal repercussions for either his speeding offence or his relationship with Lolita, and his relief is accompanied by a certain degree of surprise. He believes he is fooling the officers that fail to notice his illicit relationship, but in reality, his protection stems from the protection of the law and American values. This encounter greatly contributes to the image of freedom associated with American travel by road. While Humbert is not able to act outside of the law, as is shown by his being pulled over here, he is still afforded greater protections than would be expected, even

while he is under suspicion of the law. The Constitution of the United States of America protects citizens from unlawful searches or questioning, and Nabokov shows here that this protects travelers and gives them a veil of anonymity.

Nabokov and Travel

It is also useful to consider Nabokov's own relationship with travel in America, as his experiences shape his portrayals of Humbert and Lolita's travels. The idea behind *Lolita* took its first form in a novella titled *The Enchanter*, which Nabokov wrote before coming to America. He later said of the work, "I was not pleased with the thing and destroyed it sometime after moving to America in 1940" (Roper 141). Regardless of Nabokov's feelings on *The Enchanter*, its beginnings are important for thinking about the development of *Lolita*. Roper writes of the novella, the text of which was later discovered by Nabokov and donated to the Library of Congress, "Writing about the ravishing of a child challenged him, reduced him to near incoherence. The opening pages are off-putting and opaque. The protagonist, unnamed, in an unnamed European city, anatomizes his attraction to little girls" (Roper 141). Roper's description of Nabokov's original story reflects a distance from the story's content. Roper suggests that this could be in part a result of Nabokov's wish to distance himself from such a difficult subject matter, but Nabokov's eye for detail throughout his writing and his willingness to confront challenging subject matter makes this an unsatisfactory explanation. Rather, this points to the high importance of place in Nabokov's final version of *Lolita*, and not just place in the plainest sense, but place that includes significance and emotion.

By setting the novel in America and infusing the narrative with rich descriptions, Nabokov adds the sense of place that was missing from *The Enchanter* and deepens the levels of emotion and reality that make *Lolita* such a seminal work. Though to infuse the novel with these deep connections to America requires an intimate knowledge of the country, and this is where Nabokov's own experiences become so important. Of the time that Nabokov wrote *Lolita*, he spent much of it on the road with his wife and son, traveling by car from town to town, much in the same manner as Humbert and Lolita.⁴¹ Roper writes of these travels, "These years of *Lolita* were also the years of some of his most extensive, most joyous wanderings in the West. Places visited...were ingredients from which he fashioned the locales in the novel" (Roper 150). These travels were clearly as enjoyable as they were extensive for Nabokov and his family, and the positive experiences from these times made them attractive elements to include in *Lolita*. Roper includes some examples of these places: "the Corral Log Motel, Afton, Wyoming; Teton Pass Ranch, near Jackson Hole; the 'optimistic and excellent Valley View Court,' Telluride's only motel in '51; the Chiricahua Mountains, near Portal, Arizona, a 'sky island' range isolated in the desert" (Roper 150). The influence on the places listed by Humbert during his travels is obvious—for example, Humbert and Lolita stay in the "Mountain View Courts" and "Sunset Motels" (*Lolita* 146). Yet, the places that Nabokov visited still maintain a greater degree of reality, as they are fixed to real, known places, such as Jackson Hole and Telluride. Humbert, too, includes real places in his narrative, but when he lists many of the places to which he and

⁴¹ Ryan Wepler, in *Nabokov's Nomadic Humor: Lolita*, argues that Nabokov felt no allegiance to past experiences in a place before America, and this led him to adopt the mindset of a nomad, rather than one of an individual in exile. While this is true, and I too use the word "nomadic" to describe both Humbert and Nabokov's travels, the more interesting narrative is Nabokov's shift from a nomad to an American. This is the story that is reflected in Humbert's experiences, and it is this transition that informs Humbert and Nabokov's development of an American identity.

Lolita travel, he ignores the towns in which the generically named motels are located, or he mentions in passing a town but fails to detail any actual experiences within those towns.

It is often debated how much of this American influence actually contributes to the novel. Roper poses one possibility, “The idea that his vision of his new book, his ‘brew of individual fancy,’ awaited only the injection of local-colorist details—Canadian or Mexican would have served as well—advances the idea that Nabokov liked to propagate, that he was on the Mozartian side of things, his imagination supreme, largely self-contained” (Roper 150). On the surface, this version has some merit. A shell version of the story (*The Enchanter*) comes to life with details of Nabokov’s own travel that give Humbert’s experiences a backdrop and gives readers a ready-made connection to place, and thus the characters in the novel a connection to place. Nabokov, too, is certainly a largely self-contained writer with a beautiful imagination that contributed to some truly incredible writing throughout his life. This imagination, though, and Nabokov’s own large contributions to the novel, does not necessitate a complete removal of the importance of America in the novel, and more specifically with regard to Humbert and Lolita’s travels.

Roper begins to argue against his point that America added only “local-colorist details” when he states that instead, “the American context was determinative. It fed meaning and amplitude into fancy’s brew. The dead scrap he had brought from Europe lived on, revived copiously, in America” (Roper 150). This version gives more weight to the importance of American values in the novel and considers the possibility that Nabokov’s move to America gave his story this life. America finds itself at the center of Humbert’s narrative by adding color and place, and the country is so important because Humbert and Lolita make the entire country their home. Tuan argues of places within the home, “Above all, the bed is a personal place. ‘Happiness is to sleep in one’s own bed,’ says the cartoon character Charlie Brown. After a long

trip, when do we feel that we are finally home? Is it...as we step inside the house...—or is it, finally, as we snuggle between the sheets of our own bed?” (Tuan 153-154). Because of their travels, Lolita and Humbert are deprived of the most basic pleasures associated with having a home to themselves. They lack a personal place in which they are able to set roots. This does not mean that the greatest act of harm committed against Lolita is preventing her from having her own bed, or that she even craves a bed of her own, but more importantly, she is prevented from having a home or personal space of any kind for any extended period of time.

One thing missing from Humbert and Lolita’s lives because of their constant movement is a point of departure and of return. Tuan explains how the bedroom is able to fill this role by zooming in on the bed itself: “The bed is a center of meaning for reasons beyond familiarity, comfort, and security: each day it is a point of departure and of return” (Tuan 154). They have no familiar space that is able to provide comfort, as their home is the road, and America is their home. For the reader, this presents an engaging narrative. Roper argues, “America contributed specifics, and many readers respond with shocked delight to the *en passant* travelogue of their country at midcentury, filmed in period Technicolor as well as in noir black and white” (Roper 150). *Lolita*, in this way, acts as a kind of guidebook, exposing various corners of America to readers, and to readers, this seems like an exciting way to view the country. To Humbert, though, his actual travels seem all too close to a guidebook, and he believes he knows the country only at a surface level. Rather than having the entirety of the country as a home, he instead has no home at all. Without a familiar place to which they are able to return, they do not have a central place of comfort.

At the same time that America is too big for Humbert to consider a home, he also has intensely passionate feelings about the country. Tuan writes on this seemingly contradictory

subject, “If the region is too big and sprawling to be known in the course of day-to-day living, the nation-state covers a much greater area and hence is even less capable of being directly experienced. Yet to its citizens the nation is certainly a place, a center of meaning, a focus of loyalty and deep attachment” (Tuan 159). Critical to this contradiction is the idea of time. Tuan adds, “Experience takes time. Sense of place is rarely acquired in passing. To know a place well requires long residence and deep involvement. It is possible to appreciate the visual qualities of a place with one short visit, but not how it smells on a frosty morning...or how the pavement...melts bicycle tires in August” (Tuan 164). This length of residency is critical, as places change from time to time, and a singular experience is unable to capture the entire essence of one place. Humbert spends a very long period of time in America, and his travels allow him to see the country in many different times, places and forms. Importantly, however, he is not able to have this same range of experiences in any one localized place. Tuan considers place on a large scale, as a country, and he also considers it in the narrowest sense, such as a single bed. Depending on the scope of any one definition of place, an individual is able to know it differently. Humbert is able to feel the emotions associated with loving a country, but he does not have the experience of having a home to return to, and this is his one of his great frustrations as he travels throughout America.

Distinct Meanings of Individual Places

Even if Humbert has no place to which he is able to return, he still occupies physical places, and many of those places have distinct meaning for many people, but to him, those places are still something different. Tuan writes on the distinction between place and space, “Space, not

place, tantalized Americans when the frontiers were open and resources appeared limitless. Space is abstract” (Tuan 165). The nothingness that lied West during westward expansion sparked excitement about the possibilities of a new life in a new place. There was an uncertainty about what that new life would look like, but it offered the chance to experience something new.⁴² As Tuan notes, though, “space is abstract.” Before being settled and instilled with culture, tradition and structure, a space does not have much of any meaning. Tuan also hints at the Americanness of the idea of the frontier and expansion into new spaces. Because of Europe’s old age and deep, rich history, there are no vast, unexplored spaces like the ones found during the settlement of America. Even during the 1950s, there was far more open, empty space in the American west than could be found in Europe. It is this abstract space that Humbert takes to when he is on the road with Lolita. Tuan further describes these spaces, “It lacks content; it is broad, open, and empty, inviting the imagination to fill it with substance and illusion; it is possibility and beckoning future. Place, by contrast, is the past and the present, stability and achievement” (Tuan 165). This definition of space contains two conflicting, but not contradictory, ideas. On one hand, this space is a place of excitement and promise, in that it leaves room for the imagination to create a sense of place and meaning within its abstract space. On the other hand, it lacks the substance that enables experience. There is no possibility for home or meaning until it becomes an actual place. This conflict explains in part why Humbert is disappointed in his search for place in space, as Humbert hopes for the emptiness to be a place of

⁴² Frederick Jackson Turner, in his writing on the frontier, notes this desire for all that is new: “American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West” (Turner 2). Because Nabokov’s own experiences before his travels were limited to the East coast, his travel west gave him the opportunity to see something that was not a variation of the American East, but rather an entirely new region that offered a refreshing point of view of the same country he already knew in part.

possibility, where his relationship with Lolita can find meaning. Humbert, though, is unwilling to stay in any one space for long enough for it to become that place. He hopes for the stability and achievement that he found earlier with Annabel at the Hotel Mirana, which was truly a place in the greatest sense of the word, but he fails to realize that he cannot find that same feeling and meaning in the short time that he spends in a space.

Humbert, at times, shows an awareness of what it means to occupy a space and create this meaning discussed by Tuan. Early during his time in America, he leaves New York to find such a place: “Upon signing out, I cast around for some place in the New England countryside or sleepy small town (elms, white church) where I could spend a studious summer subsisting on a compact boxful of notes I had accumulated and bathing in some nearby lake” (35). Tuan’s writing discussed in this chapter was not done until after the publishing of *Lolita*, so Humbert is certainly not aware of the implications of his use of the word “place” as he departs New England, but his descriptions of what he hopes to find there align with what Tuan describes as “place.” The elms and white church reflect the character of a place that has been settled with the intention of human occupation and stability. He hopes to spend a summer there working on his literary studies, as he believes this will grant him stability and sense of place. Tuan adds about the idea of a home, “Apartments in high-rise buildings may be even more deficient as intimate homeplaces. Not only are the tactile and olfactory rewards meager, but apartments cannot be seen as bounded units. From the outside one set of rooms looks much like another” (Tuan155). These high-rise apartment buildings account for most of the housing in New York, and very likely the kind of housing that Humbert uses during his time there. His desire to move to a quieter space and find a home in a small New England town reflects his desire to find a place with more stability and character. The shift that occurs with *Lolita*, as he wants to move away

from these small towns, is not a result of his changing desires, but rather his recognition of the fact that such a place threatens his secrecy and his relationship with Lolita. Even on the road, Humbert attempts to find this sense of home, but he is unable to do so because of his unwillingness to stay in one place for long enough.

Tuan argues that even spaces that have been established places do not necessarily remain places forever. He writes, “To remain a place it has to be lived in... To live in a place is to experience it, to be aware of it in the bones as well as with the head. Place, at all scales from the armchair to the nation, is a construct of experience; it is sustained not only by timber, concrete, and highways, but also by the quality of human awareness” (Tuan 165). Per this definition, America can certainly be considered a place. Beyond the possibility of being considered a place, America welcomes it. Humbert eventually does achieve this point of awareness, as he considers the beauty of the country and calls it a “lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country” (176). To understand America in these terms requires a certain degree of consideration, but importantly, Humbert is unable to have this awareness while he is actually traveling. The hope and possibility associated with America makes the country important to Humbert’s narrative, as it cannot be easily replaced by Canada or Mexico, like Roper briefly suggests (Roper 150).

While American ideals and values help endear Nabokov and Humbert to American society, the point of attachment remains the country itself, rather than the ideals. Ryan Wepler argues the opposite, claiming that “rather than tying it (or himself) to any national culture, Nabokov elevates nomadic freedom to the status of metaphysical fact” and derives his allegiance to the United States, not “to any *a priori* American cultural ideal, but from what he saw... as the potential for imaginative freedom from such ideals” (Wepler 80). Wepler makes the important point that Nabokov enjoyed “imaginative freedom” in America, but this freedom cannot be

separated from the way in which this individualism bonds the nation. Individualism does not lead to a mass of separate individuals, but rather a collection of unique individuals that together form an important piece of a national identity.

Conclusion

Humbert's lack of an actual home in Part Two of the novel and eventual troubles in his relationship with Lolita force him into a nomadic lifestyle. He does attempt to settle down, but this proves threatening to his relationship with Lolita, which he values above all else. He is forced to make a home for himself on the road, and the tensions associated with loving the country that he travels across, while also having the intense desire to stay in one place and find meaningful attachment to place, are revealed through Humbert's narrative and Nabokov's inclusion of details from his own travel across America. While these contradictions are on the surface difficult to understand, Tuan's "Place: An Experiential Perspective" provides a framework through which it is easier to discern the difference between space and place. This spectrum is not immediately clear to Humbert, as he struggles to understand why he cannot find meaning throughout most of his travels and finds it difficult to articulate his emotional attachment to various places, but reading Tuan's work alongside Humbert's narrative of his travels clarifies and begins to resolve some of this tension. Humbert's narrative effectively becomes two parallel love stories. There is the obvious story of his love with Lolita, which is destined to fail from the moment it begins, built upon a foundation of illegal, perverse desire. At the same time, Humbert gradually comes to love the country that he does not see himself getting to know. While he feels that his travels have moved him from one empty town to the next, his

experience of America has revealed the subtler aspects of the country, from the sights and sounds to the smells, tastes and touches. Much of this experience is allowed for because of his mode of transportation, the automobile. This travel by car also allows Nabokov to explore what it means to be American and to travel across the country. By using his own experiences driving across the country with his wife and son, Véra and Dmitri, to inform Humbert's travels and his vision of America, Nabokov gives color and meaning to the previously empty story of *The Enchanter*. The car gives Humbert a higher degree of freedom than is afforded by modes of public transportation, such as busses and trains. It allows the driver to stop when they please and move wherever they choose, experiencing all that America has to offer. It is this travel that helps Humbert understand his role within American society, while at the same time developing an understanding of America's national identity. As Humbert comes to understand the essence, rather than the surface, of small American towns and places, his views shift. He sees the American West, and the country more generally, not as a vast expanse of empty space, but for the "lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous" country that he learns to love (*Lolita* 176).

Coda

Humbert's growing understanding, and following love, of America closely aligns with Nabokov's own story, yet it also diverges in many ways. While these differences mean that readers must consider Humbert and Nabokov's motivations independently of each other, these differing perspectives of the story of a European emigrant show readers the ways in which Nabokov himself viewed America and chose to represent it in his fiction. While *Lolita* is only one of a handful of novels in which Nabokov writes about America, it is unique in that it traces a character's past in Europe through to his exploration of and learning about America as a whole. In this thorough examination of the country, Nabokov challenges widely held ideas and values of American society by showing the often-existing contradictions and uses Humbert's own misunderstandings to explore the ways in which the American values of privacy, capitalism, freedom, individualism and liberalism are related to each other and contribute to the formation of an American identity.

Nabokov's vision of America is in many ways revealed in *Lolita* through his critiques of various aspects of American culture and society, ranging from legal concepts and social norms to entertainment and leisure. While Humbert's narrative is often critical of America and Americans, it seldom takes a stance of complete denunciation or celebration. Rather, Nabokov analyzes the complexities of American culture, and in doing so, he creates a space in which the reader is able to engage in an intellectual exercise of their own. As discussed in the first chapter, Nabokov's creation of this space, and his following intrusion of it, allows the reader to think about the ways in which privacy protects individuals but also creates spaces in which vulnerabilities are able to be exploited. The form of the novel—a narrative written by Humbert, who is in a state of partial

isolation and able to reflect on his experiences—makes room for often times unclear portrayals of American life. What this means is that Humbert never presents the reader with a strict outline of the way in which privacy, consumerism or travel and place function in American society. Rather, through detailed accounts of his own experiences, Humbert shows the reader where these topics arise. For example, Humbert’s time in the advertising business in New York stands in contrast to moments when the reach of these persuaders is seen in his rural life in New England. Similarly, his time on the road and his confrontations with law enforcement welcome questions on the ways in which privacy and liberalism intersect with travel and Humbert’s nomadism. This makes it difficult to describe in a clear and concise way how these ideas exist in society, but it does provide something much more valuable. It not only gives the reader a window into Nabokov’s mind as he wrestles with these considerations, but it also creates a private space for the reader in which they are able to engage in the same intellectual debates about an American identity and the individual’s role within that space. Through this process, Nabokov tells the story of Humbert, as Humbert finds his own identity, while also arriving at a greater understanding of America.

Humbert’s narrative can be read as the story of his Americanization, but describing his experiences in this way implies too strongly that he becomes more of an American through his time, in a way that implies personal change. Humbert does not change significantly throughout his narrative, at least in this manner; rather, his conception of his place in American society changes, and along with that shift comes a developing understanding of the identity of America. Two large factors that allow for this development are the American ideas of individualism and liberty, and these shape Nabokov’s understanding of privacy, consumer culture and travel in *Lolita*. This focus on the individual creates a space that refuses to change individuals to fit a

prescribed norm, but rather welcomes individual attributes that together shape America and American people. When Nabokov stated in his interview with Playboy that *Lolita* was his hardest novel to write because he was forced to consider his view of America and American people, this difficulty was not a result of his not belonging and thus not understanding, but rather a result of the difficulty of boiling down hundreds of millions of unique individuals into one snapshot of a “lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous” country (*Lolita* 176).

The inevitable result of these complexities is that the answer to one question leads to the creation of another. Much of my analysis points not only to the fact that Humbert and Lolita’s relationship is morally and legally wrong, and the effects that has on his formation of American identity, but also to Humbert’s motivations in writing the narrative and the message he is trying to convey. But what happens in works of Nabokov’s like *Pnin* or *Pale Fire*, where many of these same factors are absent but Nabokov still makes similar commentaries on travel in America and the role of privacy, as he explores same sex relationships in a small town or a professor on the road? The idea that static life in a small town strips individuals of their anonymity is certainly prevalent in those novels, but it manifests itself in different ways as a result of characters’ varying circumstances. *Lolita* is perhaps most useful in thinking about these questions because of how intertwined Nabokov’s life was with Humbert’s narrative, but an analysis of these ideas in the novel welcomes new questions about the ways in which these answers function in his other works. It may have been through *Lolita* that Nabokov started to put into text his search for an American identity, but that left him with new ideas and understandings that are embedded in his other writing about America, and this opens the door to questions about how this newly formed identity influences Nabokov’s other works of fiction and understanding of his own life.

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