

To Speak Ghosts and See Echoes: Longing in *Lolita*

Emily Aucompaugh

Submitted for Honors in English

The University at Albany, SUNY

Directed by Helen Elam

(Date)

## Chapter 1: Echoes and Ghosts

A while ago, when I knew only that I wished to write something about *Lolita*, a friend sent me an internet article titled, “How *Lolita* seduces us all.” The author argues that the success of Vladimir Nabokov’s novel derives foremost from the “tiny Humbert’s” the text creates out of readers who avail themselves “of morally troubling pleasure.” Admittedly, when it comes to a novel like *Lolita*, which explores the extreme taboo of a middle-aged intellect in a sexual relationship with his twelve-year-old stepdaughter, the plot often tempts the reader to measure his or her own moral standing based on the degree to which they sympathize with Humbert Humbert and enjoy his story.

Of course, examining the moral implications of the text in relation to one’s own empathetic response to a murderous pedophile is an important, indeed a necessary, component when analyzing a text such as *Lolita*. I remember reading the novel in my freshman year of college, and making the mistake of stating to one of my English professors that I *liked* Humbert Humbert. She without hesitation corrected my assertion by distancing me from my emotional response. With a slight sneer of disgust, she said, “You don’t like Humbert. You mean he interests you.” I did not mean then, and do not mean now, that Humbert merely interested me, like a spectacle to be observed only through the scientific lens of a biologist. I am not a biologist, I am a reader. So, like a reader, I decided to analyze what initially drew me to such an odious, slimy character like Humbert Humbert. Even his name evokes the image of something aged and filthy. I realized my teacher was partially correct. I did not like Humbert, I felt empathy for him. My sympathetic response to Humbert made me feel filthy in return. Dare I say I pity this man? Dare I say in my empathy I somehow *relate* to him? I concluded, after nearly two years of moral grappling, that identifying with a “bad” character did not make me a bad person, it just made me a

bad reader. At least, it would have made me a bad reader should I have decided to stop there, as many readers of *Lolita* do. In fact, many potential readers that I have come across in my casual conversations decide not to read the novel at all for the fear that exposing themselves to Humbert Humbert's pedophilic desires will somehow reveal a pedophile lurking beneath their own skin. When readers refuse to think beyond the degree to which Humbert corrupts them through their own empathetic response, they fall into Nabokov's crafty trap. In order to escape his trap, his moral pit hole, one must dig farther into it. If the question extends beyond whether or not I relate to Humbert, I must then ask *why* I relate to Humbert. Underneath the brutal pedophile, underneath the languid murderer, lies a man completely possessed by longing. He wants nothing more than for someone, something, to seduce him, and since nothing physical can meet his need, he seduces himself with his own words. Yes, I too, I of sound moral judgment who has never looked once at a child in a sexual nature or picked up a gun to point it at my rival's head, know the lingering rush of the receiving end of seduction, so I invite Humbert Humbert's clever words to seduce me too.

Humbert Humber knows fully well the position in which he places his readership, his "ladies and gentlemen of the jury," when he invites them to both participate and examine the most exposing scenes of his longing. For Humbert too is a reader. He reads Poe and Virgil, and a host of French literary elites. He knows how well he reads almost as soundly as he knows how well he writes. In the first paragraph of the novel he claims, "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style" (9). With the aid of black ink and white paper, he transforms his aching and fruitless longing into a work of art. The nature of the text as an artform, much like Humbert, begs the reader to partake in it, for one of the most critical factors of what separates art from everyday objects, I think, is the degree to which the audience interprets it. Thus, the

audience has just an equally integral role in the classification of “art” as the subject itself. One can read, say, a phone book, but cannot interpret it. One cannot say, “This phone book makes me feel...” or “What I think this phone book means...” On the contrary, Humbert thrives on what he invokes. His longing manifests in three integral scenes, scenes in which the participation of the reader serves vital, and Humbert wields his brilliant, if not breathtaking, capacity to manipulate the English language to in turn manipulate and seduce the “winged” members of his jury to partake in his “monstrous appetite” for an ethereal nymphet and miserable child.

### **The Masturbation Scene**

The masturbation scene, which foremostly captures Humbert’s longing, begins with the setting of a stage. He writes, “Main character: Humbert the Hummer. Time: Sunday morning in June. Place: Sunlit living room. Props: old, candy-striped davenport, magazines, phonograph, Mexican knickknacks [...]” (57). Humbert situates the scene to come in two ways. First, he establishes the scene as performative, and by extension fictional. One must stage an event in order to repeat it, and the very nature of a stage connotes an exhibit occurring outside of the “real.” Humbert estranges himself from the actuality of the event by inserting himself into his own fiction. He fantasizes, “In my self-made seraglio, I was a radiant and robust Turk, deliberately [...] postponing the moment of actually enjoying the youngest and frailest of his slaves” (60). Before this moment, Humbert has imagined the touch of a nymphet, yet even when he captures the moment, he situates it inside the imaginary. He ensures the repetition of his longing by placing it into a literary context, thus ensuring it remains unattainable and unassuaged. Second, Humbert portrays the scene as inherently interior. *Lolita* does not even make it onto the prop list. But why does Humbert wish to eliminate the very recipient of his masturbatory administrations? Longing derives entirely from Humbert’s interior. By the nature

of the verb, it has no one to receive it. One cannot “give” longing as one, say, “gives” love (or at least the concept of love), it simply does not exist within the scope of the English language. Thus, Humbert’s longing remains stagnant, completely interior, able to repeat endlessly but never transferred. Of course, that is not to make light of Lolita’s molestation, for Humbert certainly masturbates against the body of Dolores Haze. In his essay, “Discursive Killing: Intertextuality, Aestheticization, and Death in Nabokov’s ‘Lolita,’” Philipp Scheighauser states, “[...] Humbert’s violation of Lolita in this scene is of a twofold nature, both physical and rhetorical” (Schweighauser 266). Humbert goes so far as to request his readership to partake in Lolita’s physical and rhetorical violation. He declares,

I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay; 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 (57).

Humbert does not beg, or ask; he simply asserts his desire for the reader to participate. He knows he does not have to plead with his audience (as he will do later on in the novel), because they are *learned*. The decision to “participate” in the upcoming, undoubtedly horrendous scene becomes entirely premediated by both the narrator and his jury members. He violates Lolita, but he seduces the reader. The audience may not per se welcome this seduction, but they certainly cannot claim to be blindsided by it.

Of course, the nature of Humbert’s request is paradoxical in itself, much like the masturbation scene as a whole. Humbert desires first for the reader to “participate” in the scene. The reader must then imagine him/herself as a pedophile; he/she must not only comprehend Humbert’s perverse desire but *feel* it as well. However, he then asks for his reader to “examine

[...] every detail,” which connotes an objective gaze from outside of the text, a gaze so unbiased it nearly becomes pathological in its inspection. Reducing the quandary to the phrase “impartial sympathy,” his request becomes not only paradoxical but obscenely oxymoronic. How can sympathy be “impartial”? Humbert does not even give his reader the option of impartiality, as he writes the entirety of the scene, and indeed the novel, with only his interior in mind. The name “Lolita” derives entirely from Humbert’s own lexicon. No Lolita exists outside of his self-made longing for a soft, tactile name that rolls from his tongue to his teeth. Thus, only by touching his own language can Humbert ever touch Lolita.

However, Scheighauser’s declaration begs further exploration. If the audience cannot read the masturbation scene impartially and sympathetically at the same time, then, like Humbert’s longing, it too must repeat. Humbert forces his readers into the inescapable cyclicality of his longing by writing a scene that demands the audience to reread it. The scene echoes upon itself. First, Nabokov articulates a scene for his readers to observe and then experience. Then, the scene must also be read through a physical and rhetorical lens. Humbert physically violates Dolores Haze, but he rhetorically seduces the reader with his language and himself with Lolita. In fact, Humbert conflates his rhetorical and physical pleasure into one image, writing in casual parentheses, “...pity no film had recorded the curious pattern, the monogrammic linkage of our simultaneous and overlapping moves” (58). He rationalizes his molestation of the young girl by replacing her with an imagined rhetoric, in which he transforms their bodies into interwoven letters. Humbert later asserts,

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).

By divorcing the girl from the image he “creates” as a vehicle of his longing, Humbert transforms Lolita into a ghost, reinforced by the fact that Lolita, and Humbert himself, are both quite literally dead before the onset of the novel. Thus, Nabokov sets his novel in an *interior* past to portray the properties of longing which can only function in a *fictionalized* history, where Humbert can “fall in love with Lolita forever,” despite her inability to remain “forever Lolita” (65).

### **The Consummation Scene**

Of course, if language perpetuates longing in the places it echoes, it also perpetuates in the places it remains silent. Whereas the audience must reread the masturbation scene, the consummation scene occurs entirely outside of the text. Humbert devotes approximately half of a sentence to the carnal endeavor, in which he refuses to give any detail and only addresses the passage of time. The lethargy of waiting for the consummation instead consumes Humbert’s narrative. Within the span of the chapter housing the scene, composed of approximately seven pages, Humbert directly addresses the act of waiting an astounding five times. Humbert derives his pleasure not from acts of completion, but rather from the *longing* for completion. He painstakingly invokes a state of anticipatory anxiety in which he obsessively frets over the poetics of nonarrival.

In order for longing to function, Humbert must do more than simply wait; he must wait while “incapable of waiting” (131). Again, a certain paradox must exist to propel longing forward. Humbert does not wait patiently, but instead waits “strained on the brink, like that tailor with his homemade parachute forty years ago when about to jump from the Eiffel Tower” (128). His anxiety for a completion that has not yet arrived allows him to ruminate on his language and drives forward his rhetoric. Vladimir Nabokov, while discussing *In Search of Lost Time* in his

“Lectures on Literature,” paraphrases a French critic by stating the entirety of the work revolves around the words “*as if*” (207, originally italicized). Longing, too, is propped against “as if.” Humbert cannot transfer his longing, but he can certainly convey it through metaphor. Thus, his longing for Lolita allows him to produce language.

Arrival opposes itself to longing, and consummation silences Humbert. At the moment of arrival, longing no longer operates, and so Humbert cannot write about it. He plainly states, “...by six she was awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers” (132). It may appear at first glance that Humbert merely chooses silence, but in fact, Humbert does not possess the ability to describe a scene of completion, for to do so would signal the end of his instrument of seduction. Again, he calls for the participation of the reader, yet unlike the masturbation scene, in this instance he unabashedly begs, “Please, reader: no matter your exasperation with the tenderhearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect hero of my book, do not skip these essential pages! Imagine me, for I shall not exist if you do not imagine me...” (129). Humbert acknowledges a self-awareness in which the reflexive nature of his rhetoric, derived only from his longing, facilitates his ability to seduce the audience into granting him the status of reality or rendering him as ghostly as the ghosts that haunt him.

Even more foreign to Humbert than the act of arrival is the act of sex itself. He blatantly asserts, “...I am not concerned with so-called “sex” at all. Anyone can imagine those elements of animality. A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (134). Humbert deems the physicality of the consummation completely irrelevant, reinforcing the interiority of the narrative established in the masturbation scene. In fact, he estranges the word from its own meaning in an effort to completely divorce the rhetoric from the act. Similar in attitude to his character, Vladimir Nabokov stated in a 1964 “Playboy” interview with Alvin

Toffler, “Sex as an institution, sex as a general notion, sex as a problem, sex as a platitude—all this is something I find too tedious for words. Let us skip sex.” Longing, for Humbert, proliferates on a rhetorical level totally independent of physical action, resting only on a physical desire.<sup>1</sup> Simply because Humbert preforms a sexual act with Lolita does not mean that his desire by any means transforms into completion and ceases all together. I do not mean to give the impression that Humbert’s rhetoric eclipses the physicality of the sex scenes because he refuses to describe the consummation. The two instead work to create opposite but equal forces and in the middle of their resistance dwells longing. In fact, Humbert’s own definition of a nymphet, a girl between the ages of nine and fourteen (16), suggests an ambivalent stage in development, in which a girl is no longer a child, but not rightfully an adult. Humbert fixates on the “before” and resides in the “in-between.” He does not want transformation, he does not want completion, and he certainly does not wish for arrival. His need for the cyclic anticipation of longing allows him to possess his nymphet while also desiring a “Lolita the Second” which leads to “...practicing on supremely lovely Lolita the Third the art of being a granddad” (174). Thus, the scene of consummation cannot serve as a rectifying scene of copulation, nor can readers, contrary to what Humbert dictates, dismiss the sex as irrelevant. Instead, the consummation illustrates a desire

---

<sup>1</sup> However, Elisabeth Bronfen posits in her critical book, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, femininity, and the aesthetic*, that the consummation scene “can be interpreted as that of the *point de capiton*- an arrestation of floating signifiers on to one point. The materialization of his desire is meant to [...] translate his ambivalent desire for fey girls possessed only as images into the stability of a concrete physical ravishment” (367). The “point de capiton” refers to the Lacanian phrase in which a signifier and signified meet, which would then imply that the rhetorical “Lolita” melds with the physical “Dolores Haze,” insinuating that Humbert indeed pursues “so-called sex” after all. If Humbert simply seeks to transform his rhetorical longing into a physical act of pleasure, Nabokov could not write the second half of his novel. I allude to Bronfen’s quote to clarify the false notion that rhetoric and physicality cannot exist in the same space.

Humbert cannot assuage from either ravishment or rhetoric alone. It evokes the image of a split figure which Humbert can physically capture but cannot mentally keep. By silencing the actual consummation, Humbert exposes the fatal gap between the body and the name, in which only absence presides, perhaps reflecting a mirror image of both, but never fully obtaining either, creating a taciturn ghost.

### **The Mural Scene**

Despite the apparent irony of the statement, Nabokov blends together the repetitious and silent modes of narration of the previous scenes by capturing the “fragments” of a different art form: the mural. The mural scene stands out in *Lolita* for three reasons: first, for its fragmentation of the scene; second, for breaking the narratological timeframe, and third, for the choice of artform.

I have imagined on occasion how I, if I were a great painter, would adapt Humbert’s mural into the actual artistic medium he depicts. He begins easily enough with a lake and an “arbor in flame-flower” (134). However, once he lists “a last throb, a last dab of color, stinging red, smarting pink, a wincing child,” (135) my conceptual eye is hopelessly lost in a sea of vague impressions with no clear visual signifier. This inevitably occurs because, despite his vivid attention to detail, Humbert only provides his readers with a “list of some fragments” (134) he might paint on the wall of the hotel in which he partakes in the sex act with Lolita, fittingly named The Enchanted Hunter. The very act of fragmenting the scene connotes a brokenness, a certain rigidity, and perhaps foremost a gap in the picture. Humbert’s list deteriorates into sensations non-synonymous with a clear mental image because of his consistent desire to evoke what he cannot capture. In fact, the act of longing can only exist in the textual format. To write a description without providing an image parallels the simultaneous physical absence and

rhetorical presence of the longed for loved one within the lover's discourse. For a public to consider a painter "great," the artist must possess and display a certain level of mastery over his art. Humbert, inversely, does not master his longing, but in fact the contrary. His longing guides him and drives him quite literally all over the American landscape and motivates him to write his desire into a memoir. However, the portrayal of another art form belies his beautiful mastery over his prose by exposing the fatal ruins of his own longing. Humbert, who describes himself as both madman and poet, suddenly appears much less artistic and instead more insane, with no control of his own narration. Lolita herself fragments much like the painting, both a fantastical "bird of paradise" and a "wincing child." The laceration Humbert reconciles through the interiority of his writing suddenly becomes a blaring discontinuity when exposed through the configuration of a canvas, as he tries to create an image never fully formed outside of the taste and sound of the name Lo-lee-ta.

Within the scene, Humbert asserts himself for one of only two times outside of the chronology of his account in order to contemplate an abstract thought. Indeed, he physically breaks the stream of his narrative by sequestering the mural scene to its own chapter. Why does Humbert, in this moment, remove himself and his reader so completely from his memory, which leaves off right after the consummation scene and begins again once he finishes the mural? He answers with the articulation of a borderline. Humbert posits, "The Beastly and the Beautiful merged at one point, and it is that borderline I would like to fix, and I feel I fail to do so utterly. Why?" (135). Humbert simultaneously wishes to dissect what he has infused. Lolita, a girl so disjointed through the various renditions of her own name, and the different persons they connote ("She was Lo, plain Lo in the morning [...] She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita" (9),

concurrently becomes entangled with all the nymphets that came before her. And thus Humbert, who so easily compartmentalizes Dolores Haze, possesses no solid grasp of the mechanisms of his own longing, which he cannot localize due to his creation of a subject that does not exist. The “borderline” that must exist in the construction of a mural serves no purpose in the paradoxical function of rhetorical longing. Only through the literary medium can Humbert describe what has no image, fixate what he does not understand, and evoke what has no subject. Despite the clear border that segregates the mural scene from other chapters, Humbert’s quest to isolate the boundary of the “Beastly and the Beautiful,” and “to fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets, (134)” remains an impossible goal.

The mural obviously serves a very different purpose than the rhetoric. Where language seduces, the painting exposes. However, one must note what *type* of painting Humbert chooses to depict. Humbert describes his childhood “Riviera Romance” with his first nymphet, his masturbation fantasy, and his time spent with Lolita, conflating these disparate moments into one mental image. Humbert thus expresses a mode of narrative art known as a “continuous narrative,” in which an artist compresses the chronological events of a story into a single pictorial scene. What does this stylistic impression do, other than strengthen the implausibility of a borderline? It allows Humbert to convey time and motion, and also stillness and silence, within the same moment. His mural perfectly captures the innerworkings of his longing. It anticipates movement but never arrival, it imitates language but remains quiet. Humbert implodes “an arbor in flame-flower... a sultan, his face expressing great agony... poplars, apples, and a suburban Sunday” (134), into one fluid and seamless event. His conflation of his entire narrative into one painting illuminates the interior repetition of his longing for seduction, which infinitely echoes, but never answers.

## Echoes and Ghosts

Thus far, I have riddled my analysis with the words “echo” and “ghost.” Though I hope they prove lyrical, I do not write them merely for poetics. Ghostly fragmentation and structural narration paired with the echoing cyclicalness of allusions perfectly describe the functions and effects of longing in *Lolita*. The words, with their myriad of connotations, underscore a distorted perception. What material composes a ghost? Where will an echo travel? These words also describe something not quite apparent. In fact, the ungraspable nature of the echo and the ghost make it difficult to completely separate their definitions. Can one speak ghosts and see echoes? Which causes what to occur? The impossibility of clear distinction parallels the unreliability of Humbert’s rhetorical seduction.

Humbert Humbert’s name echoes on itself, serving as an origin of sorts, representing the dual connotation of longing as both the anxiety and joy of anticipation he feels in his relationship with nymphets. In his essay, “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” Vladimir Nabokov states, “An American critic suggested that *Lolita* was a record of my love affair with the romantic novel. The substitution of ‘English language’ for ‘romantic novel’ would make this elegant formula more correct.” Of course, one of the issues with translation is that in the process certain words lose and gain meaning. Nabokov wrote *Lolita* in English, and I am working solely with the English text. However, in other languages I have encountered, longing means something far from the deep ache of love, an unattainable love to the point of pain, that it evokes in English. For instance, the Germans have a wonderful word “vorfruede” which translates to “the joy of before.” Humbert’s narrative would not compel readers near as avidly should he only relay his sense of heartache. Indeed, the tension that exists between longing as his aim and longing as his pain allows him to

dwell in “a paradise whose skies were the color of hell-flames (166),” and to produce the echoes that seduce his readers.

The novel, also at its core, takes place within the space of two assertions of death, and yet the form of the novel itself allows Humbert and Lolita to live on eternally. First, Humbert’s editor in the forward gives the icy assertion that, “Humbert Humbert, [...] died in legal captivity, of coronary thrombosis...” (3). Toward the end of the novel Humbert himself reveals with astonishing drama, “my American sweet immortal dead love...is dead...if you are reading this” (280). What ultimately seduces each reader is no more than a dead voice speaking of a dead love, and yet an eternity emerges in the space between, opaque and shadowy in its depictions of longing, but an eternity nonetheless. The ghostly nature of the text allows Nabokov to imbricate historical figures and other literary texts in order to create a “ripple effect,” exposing the cyclical function and expansion of longing, which continues to propagate, in individual repetitions, even once the point of origin has disappeared.

## Chapter 2: In Life as in Literature: Edgar Allan Poe

Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* swarms with allusions of every nature; from great French authors to trivial American towns, trying to abstract them all from their crafty and nuanced hiding places has led me on a scavenger trail nearly as disquieting as Humbert’s cross-country

road trip. Nabokov however ingrains the life and works of Edgar Allan Poe, the most prominent and persistent of his allusions, into his narrative with an opulent degree of clarity. It appears that in recent analyses of *Lolita*, the mere mention of Poe has fallen into literary disgrace for the fatal crime of “obviousness.” Of course, authors must mention Poe, but most prefer to weave his name into an apology-of-sorts, as if to say “*I know I am somehow cheating by citing something so easy.*”<sup>2</sup> Schweighauser briefly notes in his essay, “In [...] notes appended to *The Annotated Lolita*, Alfred Appel points out that “[Edgar Allan] Poe is referred to more than twenty times in *Lolita*, ... far more than any other writer” (L 330 n. 9/2)” (Schweighauser 4). Though forceful through sheer quantity alone, one inevitably must ask what purpose these seemingly superfluous references serve to the novel? Nabokov answers this question quite clearly in his memoir, *Speak, Memory*, while discussing the survival tactics of butterflies. He writes, “The mysteries of mimicry had a special attraction to me [...] I discovered in nature the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception” (Nabokov 124-125). Mimicry, the act of imitation and disguise, operates at both an animalistic and artistic level. In the case of lepidoptera, mimicry serves as a purely instinctual masquerade allowing them to better escape their predators; yet ironically in the process these insects capture the highest pursuit of many artists: to transform, to deceive the eyes and mind. Nabokov imitates the butterflies which so deeply fascinate him by writing into *Lolita* the

---

<sup>2</sup>“My reading of the novel will focus less on the more *obvious* themes of obsession [...] The dark undercurrents of *Lolita* are perhaps most prominent in the Annabel- *Lolita* theme with its allusions to Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabel Lee," but they are by no means confined to this aspect of the novel” (Schweighauser 255-256, my emphasis).

“My argument will be that, rather than looking at the more *obvious* intertextual clues in *Lolita*, such as those involving Poe, Merimee, Shakespeare, Joyce, Cervantes, or Hugo, which point to Western sources and are more easily recoverable by the author’s primary (anglophone) audience...” (Bethea 348, my emphasis).

“intricate enchantment and deception” of mimicry, always tracing events, places, and people to invisible contexts that precede the text. Of course, the very act of leading the reader to a text unapparent in the novel addresses the phantasmatic quality of longing. Humbert plainly admits, “I am convinced, however, that in a certain magic and faithful way Lolita began with Annabel” (Nabokov 14). By constructing the image of Lolita out of the remnants of Poe’s whimsical elegy “Annabel Lee,” and the unfortunate death of his child-wife Virginia, Nabokov so closely imbricates fact and fiction that readers cannot divorce the novel from reality. In fact, the name “Lolita” has strayed so far from its initial referent that various subcultures have incorporated the term into diverse discourses, ranging from (quasi)psychology to fashion communities. Rhetorical longing functions only as paradox. In the act of seduction, Humbert longs for Lolita, a patchworked and picked-over assembly of lost loves that came before her, and yet she is Nabokov’s most intricate mirage.

**“Kiss her for me-a million times.”**

A polarized debate persists among critics as to whether or not, and to what extent, one can analyze an author through the themes of his/her work. Vladimir Nabokov asserts his opinion on the quandary in his lecture regarding Proust’s *Swann’s Way*, in which he explains,

[...] The narrator is not quite Proust. There is a focal shift here that produces a rainbow edge [...] It is not a mirror of manners, not an autobiography, not a historical account. It is pure fantasy on Proust’s part, just as *Anna Karenin* is a fantasy, just as Kafka’s ‘The Metamorphosis’ is a fantasy- just as Cornell University will be a fantasy if I ever happen to write about it some day in respect (Nabokov 210).

Despite Nabokov's strongly articulated argument that the disposition of a fictitious narrator never transposes to that of the real author, many scholars declare American Gothic writer, Edgar Allan Poe, as the great exception. From romantic poetry to iconic horror stories, nearly all of Poe's female characters derive from the inspiration of one of his multitudinous muses. And yet Poe's own wife reigns as arguably his most famous and perplexing muse. At age twenty-six Edgar Allen Poe married his thirteen-year-old cousin, Virginia Clemm, and a little over a decade later she died of tuberculosis. Three factors contribute to Virginia's allure among Poe biographers and critics: firstly, her young age, both at the time of her marriage and at the time of her death; secondly, the largely enigmatic nature surrounding her relationship with her cousin and husband (few letters exist between the pair, leaving scholars only speculations regarding the cryptic riddle of their sexual status); and finally, Virginia's suspected influence on Poe's poetry, particularly his well-known elegy "Annabel Lee." If Virginia's death indeed served as the inspiration for Poe's deceased sea-maiden, one must then analyze the girl in tandem with her character in order fully comprehend not only the consequences (as I address in chapter one), but also the causes, of rhetorical longing. Marie Bonaparte writes in her book, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, "It is now time to set ourselves the problem already posited by many who have written Poe's life: what relations, in fact, existed between the poet and Virginia, his child-wife? For, to ignore them, would be tantamount to abandoning all effort at insight into the forces which determined his work and fate" (Bonaparte 77). The concept of a "muse" has come to imply a certain tension between artistry and eroticism. Humbert never *aims* for the physical; however, his sexual desire still holds a vital role in the transcription of his longing. Thus, the tension between consummation (the physical) and longing (the transcription) ensures the status of the muse as the artistic replication of the evasive prototype. The question

which drives critics extends far beyond the consummative status of Poe's marriage and instead hinges on his romantic feelings for his child-wife. The erotic desire Poe has for his real muse aids in the interpretation of his rhetorical longing, present in both his letters and in his fiction.

Just as Lolita infinitely echoes through the women which inspire her, Edgar Allan Poe's proposal letter to Virginia contains an eerily uncanny echo to Humbert's own style, suggesting Humbert himself models his writing and constructs his identity out of the authors he so frequently references. Poe's proposal letter appeared for the first time in Arthur Hobson Quinn's 1941 biography, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*, where he establishes a startlingly sympathetic tone towards Poe's request to marry his young cousin. Quinn posits,

If it were not so necessary to correct the errors that have constantly been made with regard to Poe's feeling for Virginia, the publication of this letter might almost be deemed a violation of the privacy to which even a dead man is entitled. We seem to be looking into a naked soul, pouring out his passion, his craving for sympathy, his weakness of will, his willingness to sacrifice himself, his appeal that Mrs. Clemm will decide for him and for Virginia, the destiny of their lives (Quinn 218-262).

Admittedly, I agree with Quinn's flattering description of Poe's letter. Much like Humbert, Poe knows how to create a persuasive claim. Despite his declarations of love by the dozens, readers must not forget that Humbert writes his history first and foremost as a confession, addressed not to Lolita, but to a critical jury. In the same fashion, Poe's proposal letter functions primarily as an argument, in which he repurposes his own misery into a manipulative tool. Poe addresses the letter to his aunt, rather than Virginia, in order to implore her to allow him to marry his young cousin. Those who long never directly write to the longed-for-loved-one, for to do so would entirely negate the purpose of the rhetoric. Much like mirrors, rhetoric has the ability only to

reflect, thus allowing for the simultaneous absence and presence of the exiled subject. Should Poe have addressed his letter to Virginia (the subject of his longing), the act would have eradicated any form of absence and destabilized the impression of a “ghost,” so he must write his narrative to a non-participatory third party outside of the lover dyad. Poe’s letter clearly extends beyond the purpose of a “love letter,” just as one cannot accurately label *Lolita* a mere “romantic novel.” Instead, the letter demonstrates the discordance of longing, in which Poe invokes Virginia but does not address her<sup>3</sup>.

However, Edgar Allan Poe and Humbert Humbert share much more in common than the mechanisms of their rhetorical longing. Indeed, Poe undoubtedly operates as the invisible character within *Lolita*. His letter begins,

My dearest Aunty,

I am blinded by tears while writing this letter- I have no wish to live another hour. Amid sorrow, and the deepest anxiety your letter reached- and you well know how little I am able to bear up under the pressure of grief. My bitterest enemy would pity me could he now read my heart. My last my last my only hold on life is cruelly torn away- I have no desire to live and *will not* (author’s emphasis). But let my duty be done. I love, *you know* I love Virginia passionately devotedly (author’s emphasis) [...] Pity me, my dear Aunty, pity me (Poe 1).

---

<sup>3</sup> Poe briefly writes to Virginia at the end of letter, in which he threatens “My love, my own sweetest Sissy, my darling little wifey, think well before you break the heart of your cousin, Eddy” (Poe 2). The foreboding tone of the message parallels Humbert’s own controlling and obsessive attitude towards Lolita.

Poe's style alone, the hyperbolic phrases and extravagant emphases, resembles to a near exactitude Humbert's dramatic prose. Beneath their similar writing techniques, however, lies a distinct drive towards exhibitionism. Though the paraphilic context of the word would certainly suit the perversity of both men, it is the connotation of *exposure* that I choose to emphasize. Poe's description of his sorrow serves two purposes. Firstly, his tears serve as evidence. Poe's aunt ultimately holds the decision of the proposal in her hands, and since Poe does not intend Mrs. Clemm as the recipient of his love declaration, but rather his impartial and ambivalent judge, he must assemble his deep anxiety into a tangible exhibit of blinding tears. In the same fashion, Humbert immediately establishes the setting of a courtroom as he states, "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns" (Nabokov 9). Poe starts his letter by commanding his recipient to *look*, to judiciously observe the proof of his longing. And yet, Poe soon mutates the legitimacy of his demand through the second purpose of his sorrow, as an agent to alter emotion. He wishes to project onto his aunt his own feeling of depicted misery by imploring her to pity him. The juxtaposition of evidence and emotion resembles the "impartial sympathy" Humbert conveys to his jury during the masturbation scene. Indeed, it appears that Nabokov reweaves Poe's rhetorical format into the foundation of the paradoxical functions of Humbert's longing. Poe ends his letter with an impossible request, asking his aunt to "kiss her for me- a million times" (Poe 2). The implausible magnitude of the entreaty, the juxtaposing strategies of his proposal, behaves as a blueprint for Nabokov's fictional pedophile, transforming Humbert himself into a literary echo of the famous author he copies.

**"The Kingdom by the Sea"**

Humbert readily proclaims his love for Lolita began with the echo of Annabel Leigh from his childhood romance on the Riviera. He self-assuredly questions, “Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child. In a principedom by the sea” (9). Similarly, Nabokov could not have composed his masterpiece without the elegy “Annabel Lee,” written by Edgar Allan Poe some century before the publication of *Lolita*. In fact, Nabokov inserts the poem into his narrative as the foundation of the novel. Humbert composes his longing through his wordplay, his *nymphancy* and *nympholepsy* and of course Lolita herself, yet the original nymphet -Annabel- escapes Humbert’s own literary tinkering, instead emerging from Poe’s ephemeral sea-maiden, inspired by the death of his ailing young wife, Virginia. Almost every scholar of *Lolita* writes of the string of half-formed girls who cycle through one another to form the penultimate “Lolita,” yet comparatively few acknowledge that the actual texts to which Nabokov alludes encounter the same precursory crisis. Lolita herself only exists as language, therefore the text of “Annabel Lee” operates as Lolita’s predecessor far more than Annabel’s character. Ironically, the names of Annabel and Lolita also function as, and perhaps foremostly, the titles of the literatures. Thus, in order to analyze *Lolita* one must also read “Annabel Lee.”

Aside from the evocation of dead maidens, the solipsistic interiority of the two narrators appear perhaps the most strikingly parallel quality between the poem and novel. In a sublimely barren “kingdom by the sea,” Poe’s narrator describes a romance in which Annabel expresses no agency outside of her paramour role. The poem establishes that “[...] this maiden she lived with no other thought/ Than to love and be loved by me” (5-6). Much like Humbert, the narrator dictates a romantic relationship in which the object of his longing cannot exist outside of her connection to his poetry. Only through his language can Annabel possess any form of identity,

and thus he restricts her character to an amorous symbol that reflects his own subjective status, illuminating the interior operation of longing. Poe reinforces Annabel's lack of agency through her actual death, in which a sepulchre physically separates her from both the narrator and the audience. The distance of Annabel's person, that of which otherwise has no referent, epitomizes her ironically uninfluential position in the narrator's longing for her. In his essay "The Women of Poe's Poems and Tales," while discussing the function of females in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Floyd Stovall writes, "In almost every case in this group of poems, the body is but slightly described, while the spirit is felt as a thing detached, an atmosphere almost tangible brooding over the bier" (Stovall 200). Poe's narrator invokes the echo of a ghost who lingers as the impossible ideal for all of Humbert's nymphets, and yet Humbert knows the not even the reclamation of the original Annabel can satisfy his longing. In one instance, Humbert casually describes a distorted photograph of his childhood love, in which he inadvertently captures her ghostly image:

Among some treasures I lost during the wanderings of my adult years, there was a snapshot taken by my aunt which showed Annabel [...]. (She) did not come out well, caught as she was in the act of bending over her *chocolat glacé*, and her thin bare shoulders and the parting in her hair were about all that could be identified (as I remember that picture) amid the sunny blur into which her lost loveliness graded [...]  
(Nabokov 13).

Annabel exists only as a "sunny blur" in Humbert's memory, the photo in which she appears lost to Humbert like an insignificant memento. How much value can Annabel truly boast as the first nymphet if Humbert casually misplaces his only actual picture of her? Admittedly, she has almost no significance at all. Humbert's longing entirely occupies the "before," deferring any

form of completion and solidity for the anticipation of what is to come. Even the criteria of a nymphet, a girl “between the age limits of nine and fourteen,” suggests a liminal fixation on the postponement of completion which Humbert transcribes onto his longing for Lolita (Nabokov 16). Annabel herself possesses precursors that infinitely spiral back to the works and lives of authors disparate from both Humbert and Nabokov. By creating a creature that evades stability and circumnavigates a solid identity, the opaque impressions of an otherworldly and unattainable idol echoes onward, allowing the novel to expand into a culture.

Humbert’s mimicry of Poe reveals the unstable and non-substantive nature of longing which operates only through the expropriation of literary precursors. Dale Peterson alludes to this phenomenon in his essay, “Nabokov and the Poe-etics of Composition,” where he writes,

Both Poe and Nabokov were well aware of that trick of human consciousness that enables the conjuror of words to straddle two worlds at once and, as it were, to get away with two-timing life. And they both composed texts that deliberately exposed the transference and the transport, the genuine otherworldliness, that could be achieved by an inspired and well-regulated manipulation of the vicarious vehicle of language (Peterson 105).

The poetry and prose analyzed in this chapter convey a world of ghosts, in which one can invoke but not conjure the hazy sun-stained image of the loved one. Thus, Humbert’s manuscript, indeed the vehicle and facilitator of his longing, must rely on the literary echoes of the nymphets and nymphophiles which came before him. Nabokov’s allusion to Poe’s child-bride and sea maiden not only explicates, but also perpetuates, the repetitive cycle of rhetorical longing beyond the physical limits of his novel.

### Chapter 3: The One Who Waits

My analysis of Nabokov's language of longing would dissolve at the seam without at least a brief interlude of Barthesian theory. Roland Barthes, in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, examines the language and reflections of a lover towards his loved subject, and explores how the lover compensates for the absence of the loved one through various states of discourse. It is Barthes who states, with the rigidity of a doctor delivering a particularly despairing prognosis, "The lover's fatal identity is precisely: *I am the one who waits*" (Barthes 40, originally italicized). I would love nothing more than to write, for once with a simple finality: Dolores flees, Humbert waits. While this assertion is certainly not false, Nabokov weaves an infinitely more complex method of movement into his novel. In her essay "Searching High and Lo: Unholy Quests for Lolita," Jennifer Jenkins demands, "Given that this is a pilgrim's story, the central motif of *Lolita* can only be travel. Humbert's chaotic, confused, and circuitous tale employs the devices and desires of the quest narrative both to invoke and to guard against the nymphet at its heart" (Jenkins 2). This assertion is not false either; Humbert leads, and Lolita follows. In fact, particular moments of the narrative plainly expose a cruel Humbert, devoid of his sympathetic longing, in which he most certainly does not fit Barthes' "fatal identity." For example, Nabokov ends the first part of his novel by revealing in Humbert a previously shrouded apathy. He quite chillingly states, "At the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go" (142). Who then, if not (always) Humbert, is the lover? Who is the one left waiting? The deceptively distant "ladies and gentlemen of the jury," the readers themselves, are the ones who wait. Of course, the concept of a waiting readership does not uniquely occur in Nabokov's novel. *All* texts leave readers waiting, and thus always assert the position of the lover onto the reader. A lover's discourse denotes a reciprocal communication between a writer and a

reader, and since the loved object can never function as the reader without the instant completion of desire and termination of discourse, the writer and the external reader (the “ladies and gentlemen of the jury”) must share the role of the lover.<sup>4</sup> Barthes’ initial definition, then, functions as a synonym: The reader’s fatal identity is precisely: *I am the one who waits*. However, the unassuming audience becomes doubly ensnared in their identification with the lover because the reader never produces language. The nature of the discourse restricts him/her to a responsive status, so whereas Humbert creates language in response to his longing, the reader waits not only *through* Humbert’s desire for the loved one, but *for* his initiation of rhetoric. This double entrapment reveals the “fatal” condition of audience. Even in the instances where Humbert temporarily leaves the position of the lover who longs for the ethereal Lolita and exposes his domineering authority over a young child Dolores Haze, *the reader still waits*.

Lolita’s absence fuels Humbert’s longing, and in turn Humbert’s longing inspires his writing. Barthes explains this transformation through the metaphor of a stage. He posits, “Absence persists- I must endure it. Hence, I will *manipulate* it: transform the distortion of time into oscillation, produce rhythm, make an entrance onto the stage of language (language is born of absence [...])” (Barthes 16, originally italicized). Barthes’ allusion to the performative nature of longing persists throughout his text. If language derives from absence, then how does the concept of waiting complicate the composition of longing? At its core, “to wait” simply articulates the *action* of absence. Barthes goes on to insist, “There is a scenography of waiting: I organize it, manipulate it, cut out a portion of time in which I shall mime the *loss* of the loved object and provoke all the effects of a minor mourning. This is then *acted* out as a play” (Barthes

---

<sup>4</sup> I explore this issue farther in Chapter 2, in which Edgar Allan Poe addresses his proposal letter to Mrs. Clemm, rather than his lover, Virginia.

37, my emphasis). As he waits, the lover invokes the absent loved one only to stage his/her instant annihilation. Thus, the paradox of waiting reinforces the art of longing in the conjuration of ghosts.

The lover who waits never achieves a *détente* in the falling action of his/her play. Even when Humbert physically possesses Dolores Haze, he says: “My only grudge against nature was that I could not turn my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys” (165). Humbert’s longing flourishes in the space between his desire and his consummation. Anne Carson explains in her essay, *Eros the Bittersweet*,

Eros is an issue of boundaries. He exists because certain boundaries do. In the interval between reach and grasp, between glance and counter glance, between ‘I love you’ and ‘I love you too,’ the absent presence of desire comes alive. But the boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh and self between you and me. And it is only, suddenly, at the moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realize I never can (Carson 51).

Within Carson’s nondescript “interval” rests Barthes’ “scenography of waiting,” in which rhetoric emerges as the result, perhaps even the symptom, of the unassuaged desire for an impossible union. Humbert too perpetually leaves his readers in the act of waiting, not only deferring moments of completion but mocking his audience for anticipating them. He writes,

The able psychiatrist who studies my case- and whom by now Dr. Humbert has plunged, I trust, into a state of leporine fascination-is no doubt anxious to have me take my Lolita to the seaside and have me find there at last, the ‘gratification’ of a lifetime urge, and release from the ‘subconscious’ obsession of my incomplete childhood romance with the

initial little Miss Lee. Well, comrade, let me tell you that I *did* take her to the beach [...] and Lo was all gooseflesh and grit, and for the first time in my life I had as little desire for her as a manatee (167).

Humbert ridicules his reader for desiring a completion he himself cannot achieve. The seduction of Humbert's longing does not lie merely in his eloquent prose style, as he oscillates between supplication to and accusation of the jury; it instead emerges from his manipulative method of discourse, in which precisely at the moment of consummation Humbert simply states, of both himself and his jury, "*Let us wait*" (129, my emphasis).

#### Chapter 4: The “Theater” of Longing

The final words of Humbert Humbert reveal the infinite artistry of Nabokov’s *Lolita*, in which he assures, “[I will] make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita” (309). Humbert undoubtedly fulfills his promise, inscribing every element of his phantasmic Lolita into his rhetoric, from lyrical poetry to half-formed paintings. However, Nabokov echoes yet another “refuge of art” through his allusion to George Bizet’s opera, *Carmen*. Nabokov’s metric style mimics the musical rhythm of oral theater, and in turn begs for the addendum of bodily movement. Indeed, many writers have adapted Nabokov’s novel, with radically varying degrees of success, into operas, stage plays, ballets, and screen plays. For instance, Edward Albee transformed *Lolita* into a vehemently ill-received but innovative stage play in 1981, and twenty years earlier Vladimir Nabokov hesitantly restructured his own novel into a screen play for film director Stanley Kubrick. Francis Babbage in his book *Adaptions in Contemporary Theatre: Performing Literature*, posits, “Turning prose literature into performance demands a movement across worlds” (Babbage 163). This movement, from Bizet’s opera to Nabokov’s prose, and from Nabokov’s prose back to performance, parallels the cyclic movement of Humbert’s own interior stage, in which Lolita merely reprises a role in Humbert’s mental theater of his nymphetic longing. In *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, Marvin Carlson addresses the palimpsest-like quality of theater, stating,

All theatrical cultures have recognized, in some form or another, this ghostly quality, this sense of something coming back in the theatre, and so the relationship between theatre and cultural memory are deep and complex. Just as one might say that every play might be called *Ghosts*, so, with equal justification, one might argue that every play is a

memory play. Theatre, as a simulacrum of the cultural and historical process itself, seeking to depict the full range of human actions within their physical context, has always provided society with the most tangible records of its attempts to understand its own operations. It is the repository of cultural memory, but, like the memory of each individual, it is also subject to continual adjustment and modification as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts. The present experience is always ghosted by previous experiences and associations while these ghosts are simultaneously shifted and modified by the processes of recycling and recollection (Carlson 2).

The theater of longing emerges from two layers of repetition. Firstly, longing operates on a stage, where the performativity of language allows the lover to anticipate the fulfillment of desire over and over again without ever achieving total completion. Secondly, reminiscent of the masturbation scene, Humbert reinforces longing by situating himself within a script for his own play, where the traces of a precursor constantly underscore both Humbert's sexual desire and rhetorical construction. The theatricality of the seductive rhetoric propagates from both Nabokov's operatic reproduction of *Carmen* and his readerships' perpetuation of the text through theatrical adaptation.

### **“Again, again, death!”**

Befitting of Nabokov's novel, George Bizet's opera too began with a literary predecessor. A short story written by Prosper Merimee in 1846 entitled “Carmen” served as Bizet's inspiration approximately thirty years later for his masterpiece by the same name. *Carmen* and *Lolita* (sisters, one could say) address similar themes using many of the same plot elements. The enchanting gypsy-woman Carmen bewitches the formerly respectable soldier Don Jose into a life of crime, until she revokes her love avowal which calamitously results in her murder and his

suicide. Nabokov alludes to the play's tragic ending through Humbert's vague recollection and subsequent transcription of the "hit song" he sang while having his way Lolita:

O my Carmen, my little Carmen!/  
Something, something those something nights,  
And the stars, and the cars, and the bars, and the  
[barmen-/  
And, O my charmin', our dreadful  
fights./  
And the something town where so gaily, arm in/  
Arm, we went, and our final  
row./  
And the gun I killed you with, O my Carmen,  
/ The gun I am holding now. (Drew his  
.32 automatic, I guess, and put a bullet through his moll's eye) (61-62).

Both the message and the musicality of the song speak back to its operatic origins, and thus serves a theatrical function. Just as *Lolita* echoes *Carmen*, the composition anticipates a cycle, in which subsequent reproductions of a performance allows for a constant but not consistent repetition of the same play. Therefore, in the same way rhetoric invokes a description without providing an image, plays foretell invariable scenes while at the same time transfiguring the stage. Longing, then, inhabits its own theater, where it may shift in costume and character but never complete and cease all together.

Of course, the allusion serves not only as echo but as mocking foreshadow of a false ending. At the moment Humbert finally reunites with Lolita, fists clenched around the handgun in his pocket, he simply states, "I could not kill *her*, of course, as some have thought. You see, I loved her" (270). Humbert's ability, indeed his desire, to mock his jurors with a deceptive promise of completion parallels his own continual postponement and deferral of unassuaged desire. In the instant of Lolita's physical reappearance, Humbert realizes she is nothing more than a "faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo" of the nymphet he constructed in the role of his lover. Elisabeth Bronfen analyzes the dual absence and presence of the focal female character in *Carmen* as well. She theorizes,

...Carmen stages the disturbing dialectic of disappearance/appearance. Not only does she make herself unavailable to Jose's erotic claims without warning, only to reappear just as unexpectedly as his object of desire. She also physically disappears to reappear in different roles [...] an experience of the incessant play of fading/returning of his loved object provokes in Jose fantasies of destruction, of mastery and revenge (Bronfen 185).

Bronfen suggests that Carmen's literal movement in regard to her proximity to Jose effectively transforms her into a ghost. At first glance, Bronfen's thesis appears to directly contrast mine. I argue that longing, evoked through a simultaneous laceration in the manifested loved one, can only exist as a product of rhetoric. How, then, can Carmen, who physically leaves and returns from her scenes on the stage, occupy the same shadowy sphere as the discursive Lolita? Firstly, the answer lies not with Carmen but with Jose. His anticipation of Carmen's perpetual coming and going instigates an inherently interior fantasy of eradication, in which only their mutual mortuary stasis satisfies his incessant jealousy. The action of the stage still produces an interiority within the characters that functions the same way as language in the creation of longing, just as rhetoric and action exist in a singular space within the consummation scene.

Secondly, the structural format of *Carmen* exposes the audience to a premature death scene that prefigures the characters into ghosts. Carmen herself prophesizes the pair's demise through the reading tarot cards, as she expresses with fatalistic certainty,

In vain, hoping to avoid bitter answers,/ In vain you will shuffle,/ No use in that, the  
cards are sincere/ And will not lie./ If in heaven's book your page is a happy one,/ Shuffle  
and cut without fear,/ The card will turn up, gay in your fingers,/ Announcing your good  
fortune./ But if you must die, if the terrible word/ Is written by Fate,/ You can cut and

shuffle twenty times.../ The pitiless card will repeat: death/ [...] Again, again, death!  
(Bizet 83).

The tarot cards, in which Carmen must read and interpret meaning, act as a form of literature and operate as a rhetorical precursor. Despite Carmen's repeated shuffle and cut of the cards, the meaning and ultimate ending remains the same. Thus, Bizet foregrounds his opera in the ultimate death scene, transfiguring all the events that occupy the time in between the declaration and the deed as the work of ghosts.

Of course, longing largely functions through the concurrent contradictions of its own mechanics. How does this element translate to the theater; can one preform paradox? The answer lies in Carmen's wildly famous aria called "Habanera," in which she sings of the ensnaring qualities of romantic love. She articulates with the perplexity of a riddle,

Love is a rebel bird/ That nobody can ever tame,/And you call his quite in vain/If it suits  
him not to come./ Nothing helps, nor threat nor prayer./ [...] Love is a gypsy child/ It has  
never, never known a law;/ Love me not, then I love you;/ If I love you, you'd best  
beware!.../ The bird you thought you had caught/ Spreads its wings and flies away.../  
Love stays away, you wait and wait;/ When least expected love appears!/ All around you,  
swift, so swift,/ It comes, it goes, and then returns;/ You think you hold it fast, it flees,/br/>You think your free it holds you fast... (Bizet 40).

Carmen describes a "love" which more properly exemplifies longing. The lover she identifies anticipates the capture of his/her love-object and yet at the moment of entrapment the loved one not only escapes, but the lover realizes he/she has been trapped all along. As previously

discussed by Bronfen, Carmen reinforces the paradoxical rhetoric of longing through her physical movement and literal manifestation as the “rebel bird” and “gypsy child.”

The theater of longing beckons but never grasps; reinforces language with movement, and yet only provides the audience with the reproduceable simulacrum of a stage. Though written of Godard’s *Prenom Carmen*, a film adaptation of Bizet’s opera, H. Marshall Leicester alludes to the imbrication of discourse and action in his essay, “Discourse and the Film Text: Four Readings of ‘Carmen.’” He suggests, “...such aria-like moments of jouissance and ecstasy traces the ways the plot is conditioned and constructed by desire, the characters’ hunger for those operatic conjectures of sound and image that they feel transfigure both” (Leicester 252-253). Nabokov seeks precisely to demonstrate the theatrical application of longing in the amalgamation of sounds and images to produce a haunting echo within the rhetoric that calls back to the perpetually performative stage. Nabokov even recycles and adapts his own allusion, providing a refrain for the Carmen song within Humbert’s poem where he writes, “Who is your hero, Dolores Haze?/ Still one of the blue-caped star-men?/ Oh the balmy days and the palmy bays,/ And the cars, and the bars, my Carmen!”(256). Theater can operate only as refrain, echoing back cultural memories and lost loves.

### **“Profession: none, or ‘starlet’”**

Nabokov alludes to an operatic piece of theater in *Lolita*, and so it seems only fitting that playwrights and musicians should in turn adapt his novel for the theater. In fact, in 1992 Russian composer Rodion Shchedrin transformed *Lolita* into a libretto; the musical score, released in 2001 under the poetic name “Lolita Serenade, Symphonic Fragments from the Opera of Lolita” belies the dissonant and unsettling nature of the composition. However, I choose to analyze only two examples of the multiple theatrical adaptations of *Lolita*. Firstly, Edgar Albee’s stage play,

which reflects Humbert's subjective interiority by repurposing the author into a character. And second, Vladimir Nabokov's own reluctant metamorphosis of his famous novel into a screenplay for the film medium. Intriguingly, both refiguration's failed to impress their audiences. Critics wrote Albee's *Lolita* vehemently ill reviews, and Kubrick discarded and manipulated much of Nabokov's original script in order to reduce the runtime (Nabokov xiii). In the Forward of *Lolita: A Screenplay*, Nabokov admits his ekphrastic struggle stating,

“Long before, in Lugano, I had adumbrated the sequence at the Enchanted Hunter Hotel, but its exact mechanisms now proved tremendously difficult to adjust so as to render by the transparent interplay of sound effects and trick shots both of a humdrum morning and a crucial moment in the lives a desperate pervert and a wretched child” (Nabokov x).

The difficult implementation of ekphrasis, a rhetorical device which relates one art medium in the form of another, lies at the center of the debate surrounding the question of authenticity in literary adaption. The paradox of adaption demands an aura of originality while maintaining a faithful rendering of the precursory material. Of course, Nabokov himself elucidates in the mural scene that attempting to depict the same occurrences in two different artistic modes can serve to farther expose the inner-mechanisms of the rhetoric. Just as Nabokov echoes writers which came before him in order to portray the repetitive cycle of the narrative, the echo of *Lolita* expands outward to encompass the novel's various transformation unbound to the actual text.

Albee begins his play *Lolita* with a prologue in which the narrator, simply called “A Certain Gentleman” (ACG), introduces himself to the audience as the author of the story and the inventor of Humbert Humbert. Clearly meant to emulate Vladimir Nabokov, ACG acts as the vital intermediary between Humbert and the viewership for the entirety of the play. The interactions between narrator and main character, as well as narrator and audience, serve to

replicate Humbert's novelistic interiority. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Albee said of his pursuit in capturing the "essence" of *Lolita*, "You don't try to copy [...] You try to achieve the point where, if you write two sentences- one by yourself, the other by Nabokov- they can't be told apart" (Berkvist). Albee's efforts to integrate his script with Nabokov's previous text transforms the stage play into a structural ghost, by which the strata of two authorial agencies attempt to reflect and coalesce, creating the echo vital to theatrical adaptation. Babbage likewise advocates for a firm interdependency between "the antithetical qualities of page and stage" by theorizing (Babbage 125),

In the context of adaption practice, it is often supposed that while directors and (re)writers begin with an attachment to a book, they must then necessarily detach themselves from this to a significant degree in order to let the adaption find a life of its own in the new form. However, it is intriguing to pursue an opposite route: to explore instead the consequences-aesthetic, experiential- of allowing this attachment to persist (54-55).

Despite Albee's signature bawdy style<sup>5</sup>, which admittedly clashes with and at some points appears to make an open mockery of Nabokov's sensual prose, Albee excels in concisely articulating the complex themes of *Lolita*. With a casual simplicity that borders, most likely

---

<sup>5</sup> One critic for *The New York Times* wrote, "This "Lolita" isn't more explicit than Nabokov's [...] it's just more smirky. Each time Humbert and Lolita (Blanche Baker) try to engage in a sex act, they are interrupted either by a supposedly farcical intruder or by that certain gentleman, who brings down a curtain and coyly asks us to invoke our imaginations. The most famous sexual incident of the book - in which Humbert has an orgasm while Lolita sits innocently on his robed lap - is painful to witness. Mr. Sutherland gasps and pants and bobs like a fleabag comic cavorting at a stag dinner" (Rich).

intentionally, on anticlimactic, ACG reveals the molten core of *Lolita* through the simple question and response,

Young Man: (*Generally*). Is this a ghost story?

ACG: (*To the Young Man*). Well, it's a story of ghosts... (Albee 68)

Much like the manner Humbert transcribes his hypocritical confession, the adaptive process continually reprises an obstinately ungraspable origin. Because the nature of the stage is inherently passive, the theater of longing reflects back to the audience only what is already memory. After all, empathy lies on a foundation of memory, where the readership imprints onto the narrative their own desires, initiating an attachment to the otherwise deplorable Humbert Humbert. Albee once again deconstructs this facet of rhetorical seduction by which ACG directly explains to the viewers,

ACG: (*To the audience*). You know how ephemeral all things are, how mutable. That piece of music we made our own with our first or second love, would dance to, pelvic-locked, swaying? Hear it again, years later-loves later- and it is what it always was-trite, manufactured, embarrassing. And that face we love, we live with-our own, or another's? One morning- one night, no matter- we see it and the present is no longer there, only the past and the future- (Albee 60).

The theater of longing arouses the past and seeks to reproduce it. However, in order to preserve the ephemeral loved one, the lover must estrange him/her from the present and divorce him/her from the real. Humbert perpetuates his desire for Dolores by constructing her into the ideal character of Lolita, who he can place on the performative stage of his interiority. In fact, Albee's Humbert expresses to his author, "I have found my past and I will have it while I can" (Albee

51). Of course, the paradox of the rhetoric persists even when adapted for the theater, for in longing one can never truly capture the past and keep it. Instead, Humbert anticipates the completion he never achieves through the invocation of a ghost.

Like Albee, many authors, composers, and adaptors have sought to extract the thematic qualities of *Lolita*, to sustain and explain them in their migration to another artistic medium. Yet ironically, Vladimir Nabokov himself faced arduous challenges in distilling the quintessence of his own novel. Nabokov explains in the Forward of *Lolita: A Screenplay*<sup>6</sup> how Stanley Kubrick acquired the rights to *Lolita* in 1958 and wished for Nabokov to write the manuscript for the film. He goes on to describe his initial “revulsion” at the idea of “tampering” with his book (vii). Admittedly, it seems only natural that a man who views adaptation as an act of tamper may have trouble adjusting his original writing for the silver screen. However, in defense of Nabokov, much of *Lolita* persists on floating signifiers and lacerated images that simply don’t appear visually permutable. Whereas the tactility and symphonics of the novel’s language often reconcile the shadowy figuration of the characters, Nabokov himself relays the difficulty in translating the rhetoric into visual scenes. For instance, while trying to simultaneously convey a “humdrum morning” and “crucial moment” during the pivotal Enchanted Hunter scene, Nabokov writes in the stage directions, “With a burst of rough glee she puts her mouth to his ear (could one reproduce this hot moist sound? The tickle and buzz, the vibration, the thunder of her whisper?)” (Nabokov 110). Though clearly meant as a melodramatic remark, the question begs

---

<sup>6</sup> *Lolita: A Screenplay* is only Nabokov’s version of the screenplay and not the same one used by Kubrick in the actual 1962 film. I am analyzing only the screenplay written by Vladimir Nabokov.

consideration. How can one transform a novel, which lacks image and relies on description, into a film, which lacks description and relies on image?

Obviously, Vladimir Nabokov did not approach the problem of modal translation regarding his novel with much optimism. Even Albee dismissed the film version when drawing inspiration for his work because he believed it misrepresented the ironic humor of *Lolita* (Berkvist). However, a majority of critics condemned Albee's own stage play for its heavy dependency on narrative and dialogue. Just as certain words cannot translate from one language to another, adaption cannot seamlessly transpose text into picture. If longing manifests as a product of rhetorical seduction, how then can Humbert seduce his audience through the objective eye of the exposing camera? To put it quite simply, he cannot. Indeed, Humbert loses most of his interiority to the impartial screen, where every character knows the main heroine by the name "Lolita." Of course, film cannot properly invoke a mental signifier detached from a physical signified, and yet the objective and concrete Lolita depicted in the visual medium negates the entire purpose of her character and diminishes the story into that of a grimacing ill-fated romance.

Despite unavoidable obstacles regarding the methods of adaptation, Nabokov still excels in innovating certain techniques to express Humbert's longing. For instance, he illustrates the cycle of nymphets by describing a photograph which rests on Humbert's desk, "...in the photograph the chair next to Annabel is occupied by a young Humbert, a moody lad. Morosely, he takes off his white cap as if acknowledging recognition, and dons it again. Actually it is the same actress as the one that plays Lolita but wearing her hair differently, etc." (Nabokov 66). Thus, Nabokov utilizes a physical image to portray the repetitive performativity of Humbert's romantic desire. In another instance, the "Lolita Song" which plays on the radio in a diner

reveals once again through a musical motif, “Lolita, Lolita, Lolita!/ Forever tonight we must part:/ Because separation is sweeter/ Than clasping a ghost to one’s heart” (Nabokov 127).

However, the cameo of “The Butterfly Hunter” most effectively represents the ghostly echoes that compose the novel. While lost on the road and in search of directions, Humbert Humbert interacts with his own author. Nabokov inserts his likeness into the screenplay by introducing,

The Butterfly Hunter. His name is Vladimir Nabokov. A fritillary settles with outspread wings on a tall flower. Nabokov snaps it up with a sweep of his net. Humbert walks towards him. With a nip of the finger and thumb through a fold of the marquisee Nabokov dispatches his capture and works the dead insect out of the net bag and onto the palm of his hand (Nabokov 128).

The transcription of the actual Vladimir Nabokov into a fictive simulacrum converts the author to an ironic echo of himself, and yet even in fiction he captures his butterflies and displays their dead remains in his hands. At its heart, the theater of longing exists only as simulation. Through the construction of the stage Humbert perpetually invokes the loved one, an interior performance which allows desire to never abate and anticipation never to cease. In the same fashion, Nabokov fictionalizes his own genius to ensure the continuation of the recurrent process of adaptation.

## Work Cited

- Albee, Edward. *Lolita*. New York, Dramatic Play Service Inc., 1984.
- Babbage, Francis. *Adaptions in Contemporary Theatre: Performing Literature*. Broadway, New York, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018.
- Barthes, Roland. *A Lover's Discourse Fragments*. New York, Hill and Wang, 1999.
- Berkvist, Robert. "Nabokov's 'Lolita' Becomes A Play by Albee." *The New York Times*, 1 March 1981, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/01/theater/nabokov-s-lolita-becomes-a-play-by-albee.html>. Accessed on 22 Feb 2019.
- Bethea, David. *The Superstitious Muse: Thinking Russian Literature Mythopoetically*. Academic Studies Press, 2009.
- Bizet, George. "Habanera." *Carmen*, Erato Disques, 1990.
- Bizet, George. "Trio." *Carmen*, Erato Disques, 1990.
- Bonaparte, Marie. *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation*. Great Britain, The Hogarth Press, 1949.
- Bronfen, Elisabeth. *Over Her Dead Body: Death, femininity, and the aesthetic*. Great Britain, Manchester University Press, 1992.
- Carlson, Marvin. *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2001.
- Carson, Anne. *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay*. United Kingdom, Princeton University Press, 1986.
- Jenkins, Jennifer. "Searching High and Low: Unholy Quests for Lolita." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2005, pp. 210-243.
- Leicester Jr., H. Marshall. *Discourse and the Film Text: Four Readings of 'Carmen.'* *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol.6, no. 3, Nov. 1994, pp. 245-282.
- Merimee, Prosper. "Carmen." The Project Gutenberg, 25 Oct. 2016, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2465/2465-h/2465-h.htm>. Accessed on 12 Jan 2019.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lectures on Literature*. Library of Congress, 1980.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. New York, Random House, 1997.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita: A Screenplay*. McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1974.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Speak, Memory*. Vintage Books, 1993.
- Peterson, Dale. "Nabokov and the Poe-etics of Composition." *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 33, no. 1 (1989), pp.95-107.

- Poe, Edgar Allan. "Annabel Lee." *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44885/annabel-lee>. Accessed on 12 September 2018.
- Quinn, Arthur Hobson. *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*. New York, D. Appleton-Century Company, 1941.
- Rich, Frank. "Stage: Albee's Adaptation of 'Lolita' Opens." *The New York Times*, 20 Mar 1981, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/08/15/specials/albee-lolita.html>. Accessed on 25 Feb 2019.
- Rodion Shchedrin- "LOLITA SERENADE-SYMPHONIC FRAGMENTS FROM THE OPERA LOLITA." *Youtube*, uploaded by Best of Classical Music, 8 Feb 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RcWETFhHxw>
- Scheighauser, Philipp "Discursive Killing: Intertextuality, Aestheticization, and Death in Nabokov's 'Lolita.'" *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2 (1999), pp. 255-267.
- Stovall, Floyd. "The Women in Poe's Poems and Tales." *Studies in English*, no. 5 (1925), pp. 197-209.