

Chapter III: “The World of Tough Kids”

“If a roadside sign said: VISIT OUR GIFT SHOP – we had to visit it, had to buy its Indian curios, dolls, copper jewellery, cactus candy [...] She was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster.”

Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita, p.148

“She’s the quintessence of the horror behind the bright billboard. She’s the smile that tricks you into throwing away your money and your life. She’s the eyes that lead you on and on, and then show you death. She’s the creature you give everything for and never really get [...]”

Fritz Lieber, “The Girl with the Hungry Eyes”, 1949

1. The Invention of the Teen Girl – Overview of the Youth Culture Epitomised by Lolita.

If *Lolita*, the novel, is a shrewd interpretation of postwar America, then Lolita, the girl, is a nimble embodiment of the then inchoate youth culture. If Nabokov’s America is a quilted puzzle of “[...] American roadside restaurants [...] ‘humorous’ picture post cards of the posterior ‘Kurort’ type [...] life savers, sunglasses [...] celestial sundaes [...] inept waiters (ex-convicts and college boys) [...]”, gullible optimism and extravagant characters, then Nabokov’s nymphet is the faithful portrait of rapid youth, blooming consumerism, hungry whims and vapid tantrums (155).

But is Lolita more a reflex of Humbert’s love for Old World’s fairytales and myths, than a real account of an ordinary American teen? Or more importantly, is not Lolita more of a regular teenager than of a delinquent-in-the-making, as Ray’s “Foreword” accuses her?

John Ray’s “Forward” comes to instil some moral sense in Humbert’s polemic tale. Ray tags Charlotte as “the egotistic mother,” Lolita as “the wayward child” and Humbert as “the panting maniac,” the clichéd characters of this “general lesson” (5). He describes them after postwar stereotypes the sensible audience could easily relate to and accept. If his account of Lolita’s pejorative

portrait, however, comes from Humbert's unreliable insights, then Ray's analysis loses much of its credibility, and ultimately reveals its fatuous morality. His assumptions can not be backed up by solid facts, but by the ravings of what Ray himself dubs a "demented diarist". Ray chooses to take Humbert's word on the description of Lolita as a "wayward girl," although Ray is the first to attest Humbert's unreliable rhetoric, exactly because he is "demented" (61).

As Humbert unhappily admits, Lolita *is* quite conventional in her tastes and quite in concord with the day's fashion. If she seems so unique it is mostly due to Humbert's fervent passion and his tendency towards embellished prose. Dolores Haze, the girl stripped of nymphetic attributes, may then be taken as a real prototype for an era, and more specifically, for the whole culture which was blooming at the same time she was – the youth culture.

Teenage was not a concept invented on the late 40s however. Signs of a specific youth culture had been noticed by a limited number of magazines and marketers since the early 20s. Advertisement and cinema had already targeted a class of privileged college girls who aimed to imitate Clara Bow's flapper style, Lilian Gish's ingénue beauty or Mary Pickford's coy cuteness. On the late 30s, and into the late 40s, several young starlets also captured the imagination of many girls across the United States of America; Judy Garland, Elizabeth Taylor or Deanna Durbin, were some of the dimpled cuties who boosted the "under eighteen" girlish appeal, not only on the big screen, but in popular culture. The nymphets Humbert pursues in Nabokov's postwar scenario are therefore found in America's imagination as early as the dawn of filmmaking, with D.H. Griffith's nubile characterisation of Lilian Gish in many of his movies, namely *Broken Blossoms* (1919).

By the late 40s, however, teen culture emerged with a mass appeal. Businessmen in many fields perceived the economic value youth culture had as a consumerist market, especially after the bleak years of WWII. "The world of tough kids" Lolita embodies did not bloom spontaneously on the postwar, but the focus placed on girlhood was so intensified by the early 50s, that eventually Hollywood began producing low budget movies on typical youthful themes, such as delinquency, dating, high school routines, gangs and parental control. Retailers too followed, and so did the other media channels - radio, TV and magazines - all sponsoring items directly centred on the youth market.

Clothes, makeup, jewellery, music and films were suddenly available to every middle class teen and not just to the reduced number of girls who, in the 20s, had had the means, the money and the boldness to acquire them. It was a brave new world that came into the public eye by the late 40s, but whose seeds had long been sown.

Rachel Devlin elaborates on that particular world's creation, which would come to be regarded as the lair of the modern "teenager." This concept itself resulted of "[...] an outgrowth of the 'Sub-Deb', a social designation for the adolescent girl that has existed since the First World War" (90). By 1945, a time when the war had ended and Lolita was rapidly coming into contact with a culture of

economical lures, the 'Sub-Deb' appellation had become suddenly outmoded - it referred only to girls who were upper-class and usually enrolled in private schools.

Due to the teen culture's drastic cleavage from the mainstream adult market, since the products kids were interested in did not entice their parents in the least, it quickly became obvious that there was much to be gained in catering youngsters' wishes. Quite like Lolita, American teens in the 50s were the target "every foul poster" was designed to hit (*Vide Annexe 1*).

The cultural change that turned everyday girls into avid consumers permitted that, by 1947, Lolita already came into her teens in a society molded by the younger generation's whims. Devlin refers to *Life* journalist Paula Flass, who in 1951 reported that it was due to these girls' energetic originality that the ordinary bobby-soxer had been upgraded to a symbol of a new American subculture. Due to the massification of goods which were specifically targeted at the younger generation, being a teenager ceased to be something reserved for moneyed kids who purchased select products, and it became accessible to the middle-class girls. Thus, when they "[...] brought public attention down from debutantes and to college girls themselves [...]" (i.e. to their bountiful ordinariness), the inclusive nomenclature of the "teenager" was born (91).

Teenagers' social status was moreover enhanced after WWII because they now held a great share of their parents' incomes. If this new financial power did not pass Humbert by, leading him to accept a "system of monetary bribes" through which he could control Lolita's capriciousness, it most certainly did not pass Lolita by either, who rapidly fell prey to the delights of a consumerist age (Nabokov 149). The unorganised teen spending would be seen as closely linked with teen disturbance for the years to come.

Consumerism is in itself a core issue in "[...] the legendary conflict between New World possibilities and Old World sensibilities" (Pifer 148). It is Lolita's avid consumerism for "every foul poster," every "goeey food," every "Icecold Drink" that, in Humbert's eyes, intrinsically transforms her in an American. Constantly, he repeatedly separates himself from her consumerist world, looking down on it cynically, using his European intellect as a screening-door between the true bratty Lolita and his dreamy version of her. This interplay is once again a version of that "legendary conflict" - her inferior American culture versus his old-world refined one.

Lolita represents the average teenager who, by 1947, wanted to irresponsibly indulge in America's economical boost. In her conventionality, Lolita is the perfect paradigm for the young American culture erupting from the shambles of two bleak decades. She laps at food luxuriously, never satisfied, never full. Lyne's filmic adaptation of Nabokov's novel shows Lolita in that bountiful light - gorging on apples, milk, bananas, ice-cream sodas, jawbreakers, etc (*Vide Annexe 10*). Through the consumption of chewing gums, sandwiches, and most of all, America's sterling trademark, Coca Cola, Kubrick also finds a way to give his mature nymphet a rude youthfulness (*Vide Annexe 11*).

The way Lolita devours food noncommittally mirrors the same eagerness she devotes to the world. Lolita experiments everything passionately: Humbert before and after summer camp, Charlie behind the bushes, Elizabeth Talbot and her “Sapphic diversions”, Quilty and (one can only guess) his unique line of seduction (117). She hungers after food, experiences, sex and trinkets with the same ruthlessness typical of a child in a candy shop, or of a giddy American on a postwar land of plenty - where everything is there for the taking.

While she pounces for cheap thrills, like “the cheapest of cheap cuties,” Humbert cultivates his love for the past, for Dante and Poe, for poetry and existential themes (70). Lolita’s world goes on in the terrestrial plane filled with tangible pleasures, while Humbert transforms even his guiltiest craving, her body, in an intellectualised experience: that of deliquescing the ever-eluding borderline between “[...] the beastly and beautiful merged at one point [...]” (134).

Not just chronologically, but also culturally, Lolita stands in a limbo; she is not just a child verging on adolescence (the beginning of the mythical ‘teens’), but she is also a product of the multiple, “[...] opportunities provided by postwar prosperity: leisure, automobiles, organized activities for youth (summer camp, school plays, group dates, etc) [...] and a more ‘legitimate’ youth culture that easily shaded into the illegimate” (Devlin 57).

There is a remaining softness about her, nonetheless, which is reminiscent of the period she lives in, those years before the surge of a set youth culture and the surge of a widespread juvenile delinquency wave that appeared around the mid-late 50s. Although teasing and demanding, Lolita inhabits the harmless “world of tough kids” Humbert so well recognises in her clumsy “kissing game” (135).

James Farrel nostalgically spoke of this teen world in 1958, in an article for the *Coronet Magazine*. When recalling his own youth before the Second World War, Farrel states that “[...] in his day, juvenile delinquency involved tough boys from young neighbourhoods who fought with their fists and stayed mostly on the right side of the law.” But since he was a teenager, juvenile delinquency had “[...] spread [to] many layers of our society [including...] well-to-do neighbourhoods’ and girl’s subcultures” (58).

As Lolita dwells between these two antithetic epochs – she is still an uneven mixture of the rough innocence of the fading “world of tough kids,” while being already exposed to the racy influence of a youth culture. This subculture conveyed, in the most extreme cases, illegal activities, violent outbursts against the law, and a general emotional sickness sponsored by the delinquent girls who felt misunderstood by their parents.

In his blind infatuation, Humbert disregards all these volatile scenarios. Struck dumb by what he sees as a striking physical resemblance between Lolita and his dead lover, he miscalculates, henceforth, that no matter how much he sacrifices his “[...] jealousy to whatever pleasure Lolita might

hope to derive from mixing with dirty [...] children [...]" she would never be truly his. Mostly she exists as an abstraction in his mind. When clasped in his arms, nonetheless, she is still impervious to his colonisation – she really exists in that "[...] outside world that was real to her [...]," the "world of tough kids" that Humbert is never allowed to visit (284).

Humbert's initial goal is quite clear then: to cleanse America's suburban, juvenile ways right off Lolita's skin, scrub from her the stench of that "[...] white-frame horror, looking dingy and old, more grey than white – the kind of place you know will have a rubber tube affixable to the tub faucet in lieu of shower" (36). He wants to put her to sleep, keeping her in a lethargic slumber where she, like him, like his dead Annabel Leigh, could never grow up, and never lose the nymph's freshness, which is as ephemeral as a rose's (and indeed Quilty sagely warns: "Sleep in a rose").

By keeping Lolita half-asleep (metaphorically as well as literally, with his "[...] pills filled with Beauty's Sleep [...]"), Humbert does not allow her to exhibit her brazen slang, her illiterate tastes, her favouritism for "[...] the most cloying fudge [...]" (166), all items far removed from his ideal "*enfant charmante et foube*" (20).

Humbert's idealised version of a perfect youngster was built after Annabel's example: candid *and* cultured. Like her, Lolita should share a brain turned in "[...] the way those of intelligent European preadolescents were [...]" tuned in the days near the Mirana, and not like those "[...] matter-of-fact, crude, standard-brained youngsters of today [...]" (12 – 14). A separation is implicit here – in the 40s America was producing morose bobby-soxers like Lolita, while in the 20s Europe had produced original intellectuals like Annabel's.

Initially Lolita appears to the reader as the postwar All-American girl, a notion supported by her tastes, attitudes and callowness. For Humbert, nevertheless, she embodies a very old-world notion that of babyishness equalling innocence, the Romantic belief every child has a pure soul. Simultaneously, her New World forcefulness disgusts him, creating then a paradox of desire and disgust, a common trait in the new depiction of young American girls.

Humbert regards American teenagers as an undifferentiated amalgam and this is made clear in his famous description of Lolita as a "[...] disgustingly conventional little girl." He begins listing her favourite hobbies as a generalised array of teen America's early junk-culture: "[...] 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).

He goes as far as ridiculing many American items that are correlated with the country's young culture: America's ads "[...] where schoolchildren are pictured in a subtle ratio of races, with one – only one, [...] chocolate coloured round-eyed little lad [...]" (181); its adored high school teachers like Gaston Godin, who Humbert ironically deems "[...] a worthless scholar, a glum repulsive fat old invert, highly contemptuous of the American way of life [...]", as if Humbert himself was not one too;

America's liberal advices to deal with female coming-of-age: "Draw them (the boys) out, make them laugh and fell at ease' - welcome, fellow, to this bordello"; America's teaching system with its frivolous "[...] four D's: Dramatics, Dance, Debating and Dating [...which defended that] the position of a star is important, but the most practical spot for an icebox in the kitchen may be even more important to the budding housewife" (178 – 180).

Through his tone of educated finesse, Humbert not only denounces his European superiority, too much acquainted with true class not to see right through its inferior imitations (as he once did with Charlotte's artless Van Gogh's painting), as he also immediately infantilises Lolita. He sees her not really as the teenager she is, but as a perpetually colonised being, with tastes so ludicrous and ordinary it is but his magical take on her that allows dirty Dolly to be elevated into the stature of a mystical creature.

He is basically suggesting that Lolita, the "plain Lo in socks" (9), is but a bland American teen with no interest whatsoever. It takes "an artist or a madman" to find the occulted beauty lurking inside the superficial banality, much in the way it would take a compelled journalist to find the agitation gleaming beneath the young generation's cover of apathy. Thus, Humbert transforms himself, not only in an observer, but indeed in a magician, who makes use of his acute sensibility to erase the unoriginal Dolores and give birth to the enchanted Lolita.

In the *Time's* article "The Younger Generation," Humbert's bafflement and repulsion towards Lolita's teen culture is visibly echoed. The article comprehends a rather awkward attempt to find a behavioural pattern among the younger crowd. The nameless author discusses the fact that the younger generation lacks the enthusiasm their forerunners had exhibited.¹

An onlooker adds that "[...] this generation suffers from lack of worlds to conquer [...]" (57), blaming once more the excess of security Schlesinger would later declare had given natural way to the typical 50's inertia, a kind of post-scarcity cornucopia that led "[...] more teenagers to go wrong because of overprivelege than underprivelege"(45). As a girl from Minneapolis confirms "[...] the individual is almost dead today [...]" When they (kids) are alone they are bored with themselves [...]" (47).

In her hunger for consumerist goods, one clearly stands out – motion pictures. Lolita "had a veritable passion" for them; for the en vogue musicals where "[...] real singers and dancers who had unreal stage careers in an essentially grief-proof sphere of existence where from death and truth were banned, and where at the end, white-haired, dewy-eyed [...] father of a show-crazy girl always finished by applauding her [...]" (169); and the spectacular westerns where "[...] the warmed-up hero embracing his gorgeous frontier bride" rushed towards a Technicolor happy-end." (170).²

Already attracted by the flicker of a screen and the road signs announcing an endless array of goods, Lolita feels the urge to consume any product which is flashily advertised. She sees herself as

entitled to all these products, lusting over them as an overweening child. Moreover, Lolita, like Humbert, lunges after an impossibility: that of choosing among the many offers her country unrolls before her. She lunges after the impossibility of ever being totally satisfied.

Hopping from one cold drink to the other, from chewing gum to jawbreaker, from Charlie to Humbert and from Quilty to Dick, Lolita is, quite like Humbert, a victim of her rushing society where consumerism impedes complete contentment. If Humbert romantically chases after the impossibility of “the rose never to be grey” (165), a dream of eternal youth and satisfaction in an idealised “princedom by the sea” (9), then Lolita chases over ineffectual products and lovers that can never successfully fill her up. She must always have more and more, also searching for an old-world notion of perfect fulfilment her limitless culture did not accommodate. In this singular point, Lolita’s and Humbert’s paths cross, proving that the abyss between New and Old Worlds is not as straight and narrow as one may have imagined.

2. Fathers and Daughters – a Cultural Interplay Present in Postwar America.

A crucial theme in Nabokov’s *Lolita* is America’s postwar preference for picturing its families - adults and adolescents alike - like law-abiding and friendly people. The TV shows of the time were followed attentively because they projected an idealised version of the American Dream, which was condensed in the tableau of “[...] a reasonable happy family life” (Podhoretz 89).

Willy Loman strives for that image in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949), and it is for this sole dream that he lays his life. It is also for this ideal that Charlotte gives herself up rather melodramatically to Humbert, hoping to find in him the ruling father-figure and husband she needs in order to weave her portrait of family bliss while simultaneously keeping Lolita under control. That is the prime reason why Humbert’s “[...] small income [...] impressed her as a brilliant fortune; not because the resulting sum now sufficed for most middle-class needs, but because *even [his] money shone in her eyes with the magic of [his] manliness*” (77, Italics mine).

To be accommodated in a sound family is what mostly haunts Constance and then Allison in *Peyton Place*. They have not been safely tucked away in a stereotyped model where a caring husband and father holds the family together. Constance’s greatest shame is faking her state as a widower; her greatest regret is not being able to provide her daughter with a genuine father.

When the truth is finally delivered, Allison is so broken she runs into the arms of an older, married man, as if she tried to find in him the substitute for the ghost of her fake father. Until she comes to terms with her new family, compounded by her mother and Michael Kyros, Allison goes on

roaming aimlessly through life, a blunder after a blunder. When she at last forgives her penitent mother, then Allison can wholeheartedly accept David's love and feel jauntily at home in "[...] the toy village that was Peyton Place" (379). For Selena, it is the horrors and violations of her stepfather Lucas and her mother's inertia that rip her apart, transforming her in a circumstantial murderess and proving once again that all a child needed to grow healthy and morally sound was a stable family.

Nabokov's postwar readers would relate easily to this premise. Those who did not cast Lolita as a temptress, cast her as a poor victim of a fractured family, firstly raised by a widowed "egotistical mother," then orphaned, then seduced by a lascivious stepfather, and then by a substitute male-lover, Quilty, who only hurt her more deeply. Could the drama have been averted if she had had a well-balanced household? The postwar reader would say possibly, if at least she had had a rightful father.

He is the central figure in the postwar praise of the nuclear family. He alone secures the bastion of American values and embodied the anxieties of this period. Moreover, he is described by Norman Podhoretz as,

"[...] soft-spoken, controlled, never-glamorous looking, but always carrying himself with great dignity and self-assurance [...] (but, nevertheless exhibiting) [...] *the palpable scars of a long combat with life*. His humility, patience and sadness are the product of many frustrations. [However he still went on epitomising] reasonableness, tolerance and good will: *the image of American maturity*" (96, Italics mine).

Coincidentally, Jim Stark's father in *Rebel without a Cause* is an emasculated figure and his mother is a domineering wench. Humbert too wears an apron around the house and dotes over Lolita, alternating between the roles of jealous lover and wretched housewife. The same happens to Allison in *Peyton Place*; until she finds the truth about her not-so-heroic father, she is locked in a misleading trap, running in circles, being belligerent and constantly arguing with her guilt-ridden mother.

One should keep in mind that Humbert, in his Old World attire, collided disapprovingly with Lolita's American "world of tough kids", and that this collision happened almost by accident. It could have never come to pass were it not for Humbert's heedless obsession with nymphets. The budding youth culture where Lolita is embedded in the late 40s is a mere side-effect for Humbert. He is not equipped to deal with the moody class of pubescent American girls erupting by then. In his fatherly incompetence and short-tempered egoism, Humbert ironically resembles many other American parents who found themselves unexpectedly having to deal with restless teenagers.

The first sign of Lolita's agitation comes from the exasperation she brings forth in her mother. She steers away from the well-mannered kid parents liked to believe were being bred in the suburbs. Actually, a test Charlotte takes in a "[...] fool's book she had [called] *A Guide to Your Child's Development* (produces) the following epithets [...]" to bedeck young Lolita with: "[...] aggressive, boisterous, critical, distrustful, impatient, irritable, inquisitive, listless, negativistic [...] and obstinate"

(81). Hardly the list a parent would like to find describing one's child and still, as Humbert would rapidly and painfully discover, quite an accurate assessment of Lolita's character.

This negative description, moreover, closely matches the one that, after 1945, psychologists were using to pin down the standard characteristics of delinquent girls. These girls "[...] tended to be 'infantile', 'withdrawn', 'violent reactors', 'angry', 'moody' and 'unresponsive' [...]", similar terms to those Charlotte uses to describe *her* own daughter (Devlin 67). The role of female rebelliousness had evolved from the pre-war to the postwar days, keeping up with the boom of adolescent consumerism. Therefore, a girl "[...] who was described in 1939 as 'fresh, impudent, disrespectful, lazy or otherwise beyond control' [...]" had, by 1955, become the girl who was "[...] 'defensive, hostile, provocative and challenging' (and who often threw) 'violent temper tantrums'" (68).

Although by the end of the 50s adolescent girls were still mostly depicted as fun-loving and meek, like movie teen queen Debbie Reynolds, some were already influenced by the "wayward girl" phenomenon, the exact term John Ray uses to describe Lolita in Nabokov's "Foreword."³

Both these versions of adolescence, the sunny and the troubled, got their features widely explored during the next years in movies and songs, ads and books, and both these descriptions seem to fit Lolita rather well (*Vide Annexes 1 and 3*). However, they were invented in order to find clear distinctions between a mostly harmless "[...] *freshness and impudence* that represented an affront to a system of manners [...]" and a quite pressing and problematic "[...] *hostility* [...]" and emotional distress" (68, *Italics mine*). Suddenly it became necessary to find a boundary between the bratty "world of tough kids" and the real troublemakers who were increasing by the mid-50s.⁴

Lolita is in-between two stereotypes, which themselves are a synecdoche for a mutating decade. Much like she incarnates a divided being in Humbert's eyes, an impossible conciliation of innocent child and experienced vamp, Lolita also symbolises the blur between serious delinquency and harmless rudeness. More noteworthy, Lolita meets Humbert exactly on that blurry twilight between childhood and adolescence. She is twelve, only some months away from crossing the "teen's barrier", and about to embark in a journey towards womanhood, while at the same time she remains still a naughty child eating the bacon out of a stranger's bread. Lolita's antonymic combination between naiveté and deception may moreover be seen as an indictment of "[...] brattiness or bitchiness or trampiness [...]" the ubiquitous traits of the rising teen heroine of the postwar (157). Such derogatory qualities were facetiously presented in many theatrical father/daughter interplays and comedies of the time. They walked hand in hand with a definition of female adolescence which was beginning to be generalised – that of the spoiled, irreverent, mouthy girl, "[...] the centrality of consumerism and juvenile delinquency [...]" Lolita so perfectly would come to embody in Humbert's mind (158).

On the other hand, Humbert is not so far removed from American fatherly representations of authority as one may initially think. If Lolita incarnates the postwar teenage girl, “[...] *demanding, opinionated, presumptuous, irreverent, discriminating* [...],” then Humbert in his cynical deprecation of the American ways plays her out quite aptly by sliding into the American father’s most pervading characteristics: “[...] a tendency to be *critical, confrontational, self-indulgent and bored by middle-class mores*” (151, Italics mine). This is an incisive portrait of Humbert in a few words. Simultaneously, it is one that weaves him together with the culture he mocks and the girl he paradoxically takes in as an ineffectual stepdaughter and a reluctant lover. This liminal phenomenon can be explained by the fact that, by 1947, the year of Lolita’s rendezvous with Humbert, youth culture had begun to accelerate. It was fomented by the independence many teenagers achieved through their ample pocket money. This income was not thoroughly produced by their better-paid parents, but also due to small part-time jobs like babysitting or doing newspaper rounds. A third of American teenagers dropped school and got a fulltime or part-time job that still allowed them to enjoy the leisurely culture of their peers.

Lolita is already having a taste of such seductive moneyed way of life when Humbert heavily bestows on her a magnificent wardrobe in *The Enchanted Hunters*. Wanting to impress her, Humbert resorts to the only method he has realised it is one hundred percent effective on American teen girls – that of seducing them with luxurious goods, such as fancy dresses, sweets and comics. Through his offerings, Humbert will paradoxically become a supple provider and also a courting lover.⁵ The idea that teenagers can be appeased and manipulated by consumer goods explains Lolita’s obsessive tendency towards every trinket that is exhibited in every trivial gift shop. Adolescence, in its early days, was actually described as a girlish love for meaningless trifles and cheap jewellery.

As stated before, marketing industries, as well as cosmetic and clothing producers, came to realise what a gold mine vain teenagers could be if managed properly. Ads in teen magazines like *Seventeen* rose in price and bulk over night. By 1959, the teenager consumerist power was estimated in \$10 billions, which proved the enticing techniques had indeed worked their magic. (*Vide Annexes 3 and 4*) Lolita encapsulates these magazines’ ideal consumer because she heavily relies on the literary example of “[...] Jill, an energetic starlet who made her own clothes and was a student of serious literature [...]” as a serious role model (Nabokov 148).

Unbridled consumerism, however, did not mean total independence for the teen girl. Marketers’ exploitation walked the same thin line Humbert’s did; by providing increasable material goods to children, one kept them addicted to variety, quantity, and consumerism itself. Without a stable financial platform where to retrieve funds from, the girls needed to please their parents, especially their breadwinning fathers, so they could buy the items which had caught their fancy. The fathers, on their turn, could exert their virile authority by defining rules and punishments according to this newfound passion: a badly behaved girl could easily lose her allowance or her telephone

privileges, thus falling back into the father's sway. This vicious circle of watering young appetites through ads or billboards was as used by the media as by warped father-figures like Humbert. He quickly realised that America's blithe obsession with young culture could actually be capitalised in his favour (*Vide Annexes 1 and 6*).

So if Lolita is a child of her times, then those same marketing techniques that transformed her into an eager brat also facilitated Humbert's (and Quilty's) access to her. As long as they kept providing her with trinkets and clothes, or in a more derogatory twist of this trend, sexualised monetary bribes, she was theirs, their dependant and their little mistress. Lolita is not just literally captive under Humbert's tight surveillance, but she is also spiritually arrested. Humbert wants her forever young for she is his second Annabel. Desperately trying to find redemption in Lolita's youth, Humbert does not realise that he is retarding her development.

As a central character and a prototype, Lolita allows for a deeper understanding of America's postwar contradictions concerning the teenage girl and her family ties. Like most youths, she had been "[...] granted unprecedented sexual freedom [...but] every aspect of her sexual life [went on being dominated by the...] primacy, power, and inescapability of her [...] relationship with her father" (Devlin 73). In most cases this arresting "inescapability" was merely an unresolved psychological prison, but in Lolita's case, it is a real incarceration stemming from her stepfather's particular fantasies. Captivity for the pubescent American teenagers was thus monetary, but also emotional, tied by complex mental bonds which impeded some girls of maintaining a healthy relationship with other men and with themselves. In order to release them from their daughterly frustrations, fathers should be more involved with the private world of female accessories and girlish worries. They would be encouraged by sociologists, as well as psychiatrists, to approach their daughters more kindly, trying to express true interest in their anxieties and romantic dramas. As Humbert's *Do You Know Your Daughter?*, a real book written by Alice Barr Grayson in 1944, tries to explain to conservative parents like Humbert, all it would take was a tactful approach to the girl's dating routine and the boys she socialised with.

This apt domestication of a girl's sexual maturation was portrayed rather competently in the famous coming-of-age Broadway play *Junior Miss* (1945). In this play, Judy Graves' father finally accepts his chubby child's transformation into a dainty teenager, standing on the play's last scene dazed by her beauty. He then dashes downstage allowing her prom date to take Judy from his arms, and ultimately, from her cloistered childhood.

This example, however, was but a sweetened version of reality. If for formal Humbert this sudden emancipation of his teen beloved seems abhorrent, for the conventional and virile postwar fathers - some veterans of the World Wars and victims of the Great Depression, thick-skinned, level-headed men - the idea of entering their daughters' realm seemed almost surreal. Mothers had always

been the prime ladies-in-waiting in the teenagers' secret universe. Being suddenly summoned to play a huge part in "[...] sanctioning and encouraging their teenage daughters' sexual identity usually hinged on the acceptance of symbolic signs of maturity, especially the use of lipstick [...]" was not something that came naturally for most old-school fathers, as Judy's exemplifies in his famous scene in *Rebel without a Cause* (70).

When confronted with his pretty daughter's blooming sexuality, Judy's father rages at her dolled-up look, accusing her of being a "dirty tramp" because she wears red lipstick. He rubs it all off so violently Judy thought he would "rub off [her] lips". She forlornly retells this to the police officer Ray, who caught her loitering in the middle of the night after she had run away due the tearful scene. Judy expresses then great confusion about her own identity, which ultimately stems from her father's abrupt scolding. She believes he sees her as "the ugliest thing in the world," failing to understand that, just like she, he cannot deal wisely with her maturation.

The symbolic importance of lipstick in teenager girls' transition from childhood to adulthood seems to suggest that, if forbidden by the fathers, it could be interpreted as a sign of male dominance over womanhood. This could only mean an unhealthy attachment between father and daughter, which was deviously interrupting the girl's natural evolution. Sequels resulting from such unwholesome relationship could range from an epidemic of uncontrollable wayward girls, to Nabokov's own tragic version of stunted teenage growth. Due to Humbert's repeated advances, Lolita will be burnt out and dead before being of age. She is the prototype of the child devoid of a proper infancy, a precociously aged girl who never got to be a teenager and truly enjoy the benefits of her own youth culture.

Just like Humbert, postwar fathers were dreadfully afraid of losing their baby girls into the world of adulthood, and, consequently, of losing their unconditional affection for the men they would attract with their painted lips. It is not random that Lolita is described by Humbert as one of those teen girls who "mope[s] on a suburban lawn and use[s] mamma's lipstick, and pursues sly studious gentleman, and goes into tantrums at the least provocation" (64, Italics mine).

In Humbert's eyes, Lolita's difficult temper and sexual forwardness is connected with her use of lipstick, the same way it was to Judy's father. Curiously, in several book covers or representations of Lolita, it is still displayed a picture of a girl provocatively applying lipstick, painting her nails, or sporting a smudged mouth (*Vide Annexe 12*). The same occurs in the two cinematic representations of the novel; in Lyne's Dominique Swain plays with red lipstick and wears it blotched; in Kubrick's Sue Lyon gets her toenails painted by Humbert himself (*Vide Annexe 11*).⁸

For the American teen girl, make-up is an inherent symbol of growth; simultaneously, for the fathers it is a sign that the time has come to accept their daughters' sexual awakening and ease it the best they can. As any American father, Humbert resents the "special languorous glow" his stepdaughter gives off when other boys are around (159). But what turns this description into

something startling is that the reader knows his vigilant obsession is not rooted in fatherly concern as in the previous examples. At this point in his narrative, Humbert exhibits a criminal impulse: the need to stifle and secure the complicit silence of his prey.⁶ Humbert's fear of losing Lolita to the outside is shaded by more sinister hues because the reader knows that his despair in containing her is intimately twined with his fear of getting caught in an illegal situation.⁷

The psychologists warned that, by sanctioning a teen daughter's dating skills and sensual charms, hence impeding her to come-of-age as gloriously as Judy Graves in *Junior Miss*, a regular father was already hurting his daughter more profoundly than he could ever imagine. Now imagine the damages a grown man could knowingly inflict on a thirteen-year-old by keeping her separated from her peers and culture. Parents who, unlike *Rebel without a Cause* Judy's father, did go on coddling their daughters in a too naïve or a too controlling way (like Humbert) were stunning their kids' growth. Instead of allowing innocence to live longer (as Humbert so ardently desired), the father would be "[...] blocking (the child's) path to sexual maturity – a goal with was the father's particular responsibility" by the late 40s (Devlin 76).

In Humbert's defence one can say that when Humbert sees Lolita, he only sees "[...] the thousand eyes wide open in [his] eyed blood [...]" – i.e. a reincarnated Annabel Leigh and a chance to mend his disrupted past (42). And that is all at first; Lolita, the American girl, is blocked underneath her Annabel-loo-alike quality. Humbert goes as far as admitting he "[...] would drill Lo, and try to relive the days [...he] fed ball after ball to gay, innocent, elegant Annabel [...]," all attributes that contradict the ones that truly describe Lolita (162). Humbert cares very little for Lolita's American heart or for her teen mind, or for the real orphaned girl who lies beneath his dream of an "[...] immortal daemon disguised as a female child [...]." In his eyes, she is but the shadow of a child, always a step closer to a "fairytale vampire" than to a human kid (139).

Consistently, Lolita is a nymphet to Humbert, not a teenager. In the beginning, all he does is brood over her Ramsdale room, catching glimpses of her "[...] fragrant ghost [...] spread[ing] [his] web all over the house [...]", mooning over the possibility of caressing her, plotting her mother's death so he could be left alone with Lolita and enjoy his "[...] beautiful warm-colored prey [...]" (47 – 49). She is but an abstraction in his eyes – delectable and airy. The array of items that make her the teenager who despairs her mother – "[...] the strutting and prancing baton twirler or jitterbug [...]," the poor grades, the "moodiness" and "[...] sullen and evasive [...] rude and defiant [...]" behaviours – are all effaced by the "[...] awe and delight [...] [of] her bright beauty [...]," her ability to revive Humbert's "passionate recognition" of his "princedom by the sea" (45 – 46). Instantly, Humbert underestimates Lolita as a real human being, and also as a potentially troublesome teenager, i.e. "a wayward child".

So before initiating their sensual liaisons under the cover of legal guardianship, Humbert did not picture himself as Dolores's father at all. What he really wanted was to steal more than a unilateral "[...] honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor [...]" (62).

Lolita's actual participation in this fancy is always debatable. Humbert sketchily remarks that, when he pleased himself with her on his lap, "[...] she stood and blinked, cheeks aflame, hair awry, her eyes passing over [him...]," the telltale signs of a temptress after her seduction scene (61). However, because Humbert is such an unreliable narrator, his emotional outbursts about the nymphet are inevitably coloured by his flights of fantasy. In Humbert's favour one can argue that the postwar years were very concerned with the loss of parental authority over kids, especially as,

"[...] the father- as object of ridicule, psychological point of reference, or absently absent party – was at the centre of the public understanding of teenage girl's delinquent and destructive behaviour that suddenly came to the fore during World War II [...and that also...] the bounds of acceptable youthful behaviour – particularly on the part of girls – were growing less clear" (Devlin 49).

By 1947, Lolita is a thirteen-year-old girl, and has reached the sensual state of puberty in which she already felt the pulse to experiment with girlfriends at summer camp. It is possible she had actively participated in Humbert's advances, not just out of malicious curiosity, but also out of physical predisposition. It is also plausible that she has been more prone to these precocious sexual experimentations with Humbert, and later on with Quilty, because, as psychology argues, she was a fatherless child.⁹ With that preponderant figure absent from her life, she geared her attraction for fatherly stands-in, older, distinct and apparently protective male-types such as Quilty and Humbert.

Also relevant to understand Lolita's attraction to Humbert as a postwar cultural trait, and not as part of the "wayward girls" phenomenon, is to contemplate the sparse number of young idols Lolita had at her disposition by the late 40s. The "[...] number one throb-and-sob idols of [her] coevals [...]" were clean-shaved older men like Fred Astaire, Frank Sinatra, Eddy Arnold, Red Foley, Kay Kyser, or Tony Bennett (149). Plus, the sweet-looking singing "girleens" featured by Jane Powell, June Allyson, Judy Garland, Deanna Durbin, or the beautiful-then-ingénue Elizabeth Taylor, were hardly good role models for a dauntless tomboy like Lolita (*Vide Annexe 5*).

This clearly alerts to a void in the ruling adult society; it "[...] did not provide American girls with examples of how to be 'an individual' [...]," Devlin observes (171). A culture solely focused on rearing good housewives and malleable young females allowed for a bit of teen bossiness and cheerfulness, but not for a revolution in girls' standard attitudes. So Lolita's complete absence of celebrity role-models may account for her necessity to fabricate a (unnatural and thus unhappy) relationship with her own suburban middle-aged celebrities – scholar Humbert and playwright Quilty. Movie screens and magazines did not give her a real account of hormones and sexuality, so beginning

to act out could have been Lolita's way to rebel against chirpy (but intrinsically flawed) postwar suburbia.¹⁰

Although Humbert is generally an unreliable source of information, as far as her characterisation of an American-daughter stereotype goes, Lolita is quite matter-of-fact. Like unhappy Selena and Allison in *Peyton Place*, Lolita is always a child without a father. Her household is also without order, without tolerance or good will. She grows to be a disobedient daughter, “[...] a wayward child [...] spiteful [...] at the age of one [...] at twelve she was a regular pest [...] a sullen and evasive [...] rude and defiant [...]” teenager (46), a “[...] fall nymph [...] hopelessly worn at seventeen [...]” and dead at childbirth before she is eighteen (277).

Even when Lolita is living in an apparently regular environment in Beardsley, attending classes and befriending other teenage girls, order is still absent from her routine. She “[...] has the radio on at full blast till all hours of the night [...]” (180), causing the neighbours to complain about her misbehaviour, unaccustomed to teenagers who run wild without house rules to grind them into proper civility. This obviously signals that her household is still not a well-balanced one - the grounding father-figure is more concerned with the feeling of living in “[...] a lighted house of glass, [where] some thin-parched face would [...] obtain a free glimpse of things that the most jaded voyeur would have paid [...] to watch [...],” than caring for the sliding morals and manners of his young daughter (181). Nabokov's caustic prose nicks the fragile texture of America's idealisation of formulaic patterns, where one role model, like “the breadwinning, distinct father,” or one aphorism, could be panacea for any situation; where evils were sanctimoniously recognised and assuaged with standard remedies; where the positive majority was the norm and a headstrong individual the defect.

In Nabokov's novel the father-figure, who steps into the limelight wrapped in “old world politeness” (38) and “manly looks” (53), is all what the scriptures recommended: “[...] soft-spoken, controlled, carrying himself with great dignity and self-assurance [...]” (124), a superiority which Charlotte confuses with “[...] an old-fashioned, old-world way [...] old-world reticence” (68). He exhibits the previously mentioned “[...] palpable scars of a long combat with life [...]”¹⁶, resulting of his premature encounter with Annabel Leigh, and the life-long suffering her death caused. Moreover, he still exhibits an admirable patience with troublesome Lolita, his “incipient pupil” (47).

Humbert is a most competent simulacrum of America's most beloved “image of maturity” then, the one Podhoretz described as the perfect father-figure broadcasted in popular TV shows.¹¹ Nonetheless, Humbert is also a “maniac,” a “devil,” a “madman,” the trickiest of illusionists, for he appears “[...] lanky, big-boned, woolly-chested, Humbert Humbert, with thick black eyebrows and a queer accent”, while hiding “[...] *a cesspool of rotting monsters behind his slow boyish smile [...]*” (44, *Italics mine*).

The gentlemanly father is hence a dual character in *Lolita*; he is the calculating man who will “[...] marry a mature widow (say, Charlotte Haze) [...] merely in order to have (his) way with her child (Lo, Lola, Lolita) [...]” (70), but he is simultaneously the altruist stepfather that gives Lolita all his money when she is pregnant and desperate, that offers her sensible advises in his last words: “Be true to your Dick. Do not let other fellows touch you. Do not talk to strangers. I hope you will love you baby. [...] And do not pity C.Q. [...]” (309).

Nabokov’s duality parallels the 50s own ambiguities, a time when parents were victims and warders, and the teenagers were sufferers and menaces. Podhoretz describes this particular period as,

“[...] an era where parents rather than children are perennially on trial [...] everything is *overcast with a sadness* that seems a new element in American popular culture [...] there is a *shade of disillusion* over the discovery that human possibility is not finite [...]” (94, Italics mine).

Humbert’s dutiful and somewhat funny disclaimer to Lolita after Charlotte’s death – “For all practical purposes I am your father. I have a feeling of great tenderness for you. In your mother’s absence I am responsible for your welfare [...]” (119) – provides Nabokov with an excellent opportunity to mock that genteel, preponderant figure in American imagery: “the American dad”.

Nabokov pushes further in his mocking of American familiar stereotypes when he subverts the usual patriarchal tone the father/daughter stories sponsored in the 40s. In *Lolita*, fatherly Humbert is an emasculated figure; duped by his malicious charge and her clever lover he is frequently portrayed as pathetically as a D.H. Griffiths’ female character.

While teen girls’ presence in American culture continued to grow steadily through the 50s, a parallel enhancement of fathers’ roles was also noticeable. It is not a coincidence that a good number of teen heroines of the time –Elizabeth Taylor in *Father of the Bride* (1950), Jeanne Crain in *Take Care of My Little Girl* (1951) and Debbie Reynolds in *The Catered Affair* (1956) – were designed as smart and authoritative, but at the same time pliable to their fathers’ wishes.

Examples of this new intimate interplay between father and daughter, and the teen girls’ awareness of their sexual appeal over their debonair fathers, is highly illustrated in Edward Streeter’s stories *Father of the Bride* (1947) and *Mr Banks’ Other Daughter* (1950), as well as F. Hugh Herbert’s facetious plays *Meet Corliss Archer* (1942-1945), later transformed in two movies starring curly teen Shirley Temple: *Kiss and Tell* (1943) and *A Kiss for Corliss* (1949). Corliss, moreover, is described as “a compound of girlish innocence and female perversity,” a duplicity which mirrors Lolita’s (Nash 124).

Bitchiness and femininity were two blurred concepts that usually described the teenagers in many popular publications, namely F. Hugh Herbert’s stories. Herbert dramatised the teen girl’s malice and sensuality juxtaposed with a father-figure’s ignorance and despair, thus paving the way to

Nabokov's famous couple - the cruel Lolita and her hapless Humbert – and the eroticization of father/daughter relationships. In Nabokov's warped take on the sensual power-play between father and daughter one finds Humbert wholeheartedly obliging to this notion. Being a nymphet lover, Humbert trespasses the acceptable barriers of parental flirtation and pride, so well guarded in Herbert's and Streeter's universe, and enters the territory of sexual manipulation. If one looks closely, however, the roles Nabokov deployed on Lolita and Humbert are not so far removed from the solar atmospheres previously described.

As Devlin declares “[...] fathers and daughters, during the postwar period, were depicted as being involved in an intricate dance, a drama of mutual seduction and manipulation [...]” (121). What better way to describe Lolita and Humbert's complex relationship if not the one expressed in those words? Obviously, intercourses were not contemplated in the compendium of proper feelings a generous father was supposed to feel for his charming daughter. Her beauty was a gift for him, a torment sometimes, like for poor Mr. Banks when his darling Kay decides to get married and escape from his fatherly bosom; even a reflex of his power and wealth, but never a plaything. Nevertheless, the suggestion had always been tauntingly present, even if sub-repetitiously so.

In Streeter's sequel to Mr. Banks' agonies in *Father of the Bride*, called *Mr. Banks' Other Daughter* and published in *Good Housekeeping* by 1950, a picture was placed to promote the piece. In this picture one finds Mr. Banks slouched in a chair, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a smoking jacket, looking quite scholarly and distinct, a cross between Nabokov's Humbert and Peter Sellers' Quilty. Over him, there is a very well-dressed, seductive young woman leaning over and placing a kiss on his head, rising her feet a little while doing it so. The image is clearly romantic, if not so familiar and homely as one would imagine,

“The beauty and glamour of both characters throws their status [...] into question. Because Mr. Banks looks young and his daughter looks of an indeterminate age, it is difficult to discern whether he is her father or her husband. *The confusion adds to the sexual tension, as one is temporarily uncertain of their relationship to one another.*”
(124, Italics mine)

Although Nabokov's *Lolita* takes this flirting suggestion into the obscure outskirts of sexual manipulation and incest, the novel still tackles on the increasing confusion about the familiar roles practiced in the postwar. There is, of course, an indubitable touch of mockery and sardonic exaggeration in Humbert's plots to catch Lolita in his web of seduction, as well as in his pathetic attempts to remain an inconspicuous father-figure. There is also an ambiguous touch in Lolita's daughterly coquettishness. While in Streeter's illustration father and daughter pull and tug in a rather suggestive manner, but within the patterns of humorous normalcy, Nabokov or Grace Metalious pushed those little quandaries into the field of abnormal behaviour – rape and violence, as in Selena and Lucas' stepfather-stepdaughter brutal relationship in the case of Metalious, and a much softer version in Nabokov.

The dubious roles played inside the households of the 50s suffered from the long absence of their males, and then their sudden return from the war. Mothers, daughters and sisters alike had learnt to coexist in a world completely dominated by femininity. It was not unusual, as Lolita and Charlotte show, that mothers and daughters saw themselves as equals within their households; sometimes both workers, both women, both responsible for keeping their economy afloat until the men came back home. Equals meant also rivals in some cases, as in Lolita and her mother, especially regarding men's attention. Girls were forced to grow up fast in the warfare situation they were also sexually maturing much faster. Devlin quotes Jules Henry, who argues that by 1963,

"[...] the years between twelve and fifteen thus became a critical period in the sexual cycle of girls in our culture [...] It is a serious responsibility, but she has hurled herself into work with the pathetic yet joyous blindness of childhood" (78, Italics mine).

This argument may account for Lolita's surprisingly sexual maturity at twelve, still mingled with a naivety about adult relationships, as well as for her stubborn view of her mother as her contentious rival. Due to her father's early death, Lolita had been brought up exclusively by her maudlin mother and a coloured maid, plus various girlfriends and female celebrities who plastered her magazines and walls. Geared by her emerging culture into rapid sexual experimentation, she chose the man who most resembled, whether an idyllic father with whom she had no chance to play the seductive daughter, or a replica of Hollywood's older leading man: Cary Grant, Gregory Peck and Clark Gable, "[...] the movie-star hero resembling Humbert, whose pictures she pins to her bedroom wall" (Pifer 176). Understandably, those were the same object of desire her mother was being bombarded with, thus the conflict between two generations was assured ensues.

In other fundamental ways, although a sharp cleavage between Lolita and her mother already developed, they still are both paradigms of American women. More than a generation gap, one can see Charlotte's moral and proper ways clash with Lolita's dishevelled and rude manners. Their relationship mirrors how the ideal of womanhood had rapidly changed in postwar America. Charlotte's propriety is symbolic of a conservative education, whereas Lolita's rashness is a sign of a new rebellious culture. In her physical enthusiasm and sensual easiness Lolita is actually closer to the 1920s flapper than to her mother's generation. Lolita's hunger for life and fun mirrors those wild girls belonging to a time when America was enjoying a break from conflict.

The new role taken by the teen girl within her household could sometimes irk her mother by different, less sexually menacing, reasons. Not only the girl began taking over her mother's formerly exclusive domestic decisions, but she also began posing as the monopolist of the whole house, pushing her mother to a derogatory second place in the family man's affections. Teens also made a habit of lingering eternally on the bathroom, hanging on the phone, or petting their fathers in order to receive more pocket-money and more privileges, these ranging from an extended curfew to a new car.

Grotesquely mimicking these mundane routines between fathers and daughters, Nabokov rehearsed Lolita and Humbert's sad, manipulative dynamic. The author expertly navigates the innocent daughterly games into a rather direful setting, with Lolita touching her stepfather in order to receive some monetary or social reward. Summarising after Lolita's flippant words, the majority of American teenagers were being "[...] taught to live happily and richly with others and to develop a wholesome personality. Be a cake, in fact," or at least they were being propped to learn how to conceal their shortcomings and grow up as serious-looking as their parents (114).

Lolita, however, illustrates that the "very select" summer camps where kids were sent to socialise healthily are the most propitious places to engage in sexual rendezvous. Far away from the tight supervision of their rigid parents, Lolita, as many other teenagers, met a "tent-mate," "a half-crazy [...] swell-kid (who went to) [...] a swanky private school [and whose...] father is an executive" and were then sensuously "[...] instructed [...] in various manipulations" (136).¹²

With so many different Freudian-oriented theories about abnormal teen behaviour in mind, one is tempted to wonder if surly Lolita was not actually the norm beneath the stillness of those white picket-fences. Perhaps she was misunderstood because society was prone to ignore teenagers' hostile behaviour. Or perhaps Lolita's portrait as a difficult brat is but a by-product of Humbert's unreliability as a narrator, and heavily influenced by his disgust with American values. It is not a coincidence that he skilfully keeps Lolita - his primordial victim - mostly silent while he recounts their affair to his juries. The transcripts of dialogue between them are a rare instance and when there are any, they appear to be there only as a device to service Humbert's innocence.

If he is indeed searching for sympathy in order to escape his criminal charges, silencing Lolita is an apt method of diminishing his guilt. Without her active voice to accuse him, and by depicting her as an irascible teen, Humbert undermines her role as a clueless victim. Humbert leaves the reader, his most insightful jury, deaf to Lolita's testimony. If children should be seen and not heard in the typical postwar American household, in Humbert's Beardsley abode, it is not that different. Lolita is remarkably "[...] antagonistic, dissatisfied, cagey [...]" about her home life, and so "[...] morbidly uninterested in sexual matters [...]" that Humbert is called to discuss her odd silence with a progressive, "[...] huge [...] gray-haired, frowsy" Miss Pratt who is employed at Lolita's school (193 – 195).

In her domestic life Lolita was schooled by Humbert in the importance of "being a cake" (i.e. secretive about their relationship). So if now in school she "[...] has exceptional emotional control (and) cannot verbalize her emotions [...]", in Humbert's narrative this forced silence is exerted again (195). Her plights and opinions are still not heard at all; her voice is diffused in his florid prose, as if by smouldering it with his comments, Humbert could lead the jury to forget Lolita was an unhappy child, and picture her only as a literary artifice in a middle-aged scholar's mind.¹³

As far as one knows, Dolores Haze might have been just one of those temperamental girls who were becoming notorious by the late 40s; nothing less or nothing more than a precocious stereotype of juvenile rebelliousness which after 1953 – with *The Wild One* (1953) and *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) releases, the proliferation of the American-International Pictures' B-movies *Runaway Daughters* (1956), *Hot Rod Girl* (1956), *Girls in Prison* (1956), and *Dragstrip Girl* (1957), as well as rock and roll's widespread success – became the stuff of teen idolatry.

So indeed, in the beginning of his journey, Humbert did not expect to find in *Lolita* anything more than “[...] the gaze of young memory, the juvenile breasts [he] had fondled one immortal day” (39). Surprisingly, he found an American brain already predisposed to sex, to mock and defile not only the English language but Europe's passion for poetic romance. *Lolita*'s blunt description of “[...] all caresses except kisses on the mouth or the stark act of love [as] either 'romantic slosh' or abnormal' [...]” corroborates this idea (133). Her behaviour had been latent in the strong screen personas of Bette Davies, Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, and it would be mimicked again on TV and cinema when James Dean, Marlon Brando, and all the other tough loveless boys, became America's young idols (*Vide Annexe 5*).

The conservative wing in every family would be horrified by the new cinematic rebels but the teenagers were mesmerised by their boldness. They had someone to relate to now, someone who could understand their daily struggles against society, growing pains, and especially parents who, like Jim Stark's in *Rebel without a Cause* typify, were tearing them apart.

The tumultuous relationship between “daughter and father” in *Lolita*, nonetheless, represents more than a literary artifice; more than a reversed mirror-image of a passing social concern; more than an extension of the rivalry between grown-ups and kids so many postwar movies and plays had already staged. *Lolita* mirrors, in fact, a dramatic and metaphysical dilemma lining American culture – that of loss and contention, which in turn is linked with the everlasting theme of velocity and motion, something that defined America itself, always characterised by the continuous shifting of its geographic frontiers.