

# Conclusions

Love, like growing up, is woven with the most visceral matters. This may account for Humbert's references to his tale as covered with "[...] bits of marrow sticking to it, and blood, and beautiful bright-green flies [...]" (308). Simultaneously, it may also account for the ambiguity permeating Humbert's prose.<sup>1</sup>

What is sublime is moreover abstract and incorporeal, and metaphor is sometimes a poor substitute for hard evidence. The same happens with the interplay between America and Europe. What sustains it goes beyond physical evidences, such as merchandise and consuming goods; the traffic of influences, and especially of dreams and myths, is as sublime, and hence as immaterial, as the love Humbert ultimately feels for Lolita.

The first part of the novel might be described by lust with Humbert chasing after the nymphet, and the second by love, marked by his realisation that the possession of her body was just the first step into a complex relationship. The interagency between Lolita and Humbert, therefore, goes beyond the gross accusations of pornographic exploitation. If Nabokov's novel had to be described in two simple words, they would not express pornographic pleasures, but instead perilous desires.

Finally reaching the conclusion that his love for Lolita is immortal leaves Humbert is changed, but also moribund. Finding a resolution for his ageless prejudice against the New World showed Humbert that he was still capable of love, but also that once such love was out of his reach, then there was not much to live for. So, in order to immortalise that admiration, that girl, but above all, his redeemed views on America, Humbert set to write his story.

For Humbert loving Lolita is a process as surprising and painful as growing up - watching her age and shed her nymphetism or, in his own case, growing up and away from an ideal past. By writing his memoirs, Humbert is essentially trying to synthesise his passion for a regular American teenager, trying to deliquesce her "[...] eerie vulgarity, stemming from the snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures" from her nymphetic magic (44).

This filtering process, closely linked with the one employed to distil fragrances during the seventeenth century, is similar to what a literary critic must undergo in order to find a resolution to one's premise. This dissertation's point of departure was to discover whether Europe and America were indeed caulked to one another in Nabokov's novel, or whether there was an active bilateral traffic between them.

My prevalent conclusion is that, quite like Humbert discovered, the gap between Old and New Worlds is not necessarily hostile and clean-cut. Humbert and Lolita may, of course, stand at odds in view of their different cultural heritages, and be set in motion as contenders, but that is just one of *Lolita's* superficial layers. These characters are symbolic elements of the twentieth century's crescent interplay between two worlds. All the extreme emotions that pass between them, in my opinion, are Nabokov's own homage to the two continents that moulded him: his birthplace, the old disenchanted Russia, and his foster parent, the burgeoning United States of America, as well as the emotional links that unite them.

It is Humbert's undying love for Annabel Leigh that leads him to dream up her American double: the nymphet Lolita. Ricoeur would call this procedure "restoration of lost intermediaries" (22). It happens when, in order to suppress the lacunae in one's memory, one recuperates past symbols and puts them in the place of the old recollection, thus allowing for a continuum in one's personal history and memories. Humbert, by reincarnating Annabel in Lolita's features, is doing exactly this in order to cease his past pain and his pivotal loss. Annabel, however, stands for the 1920s European adolescent – docile, erudite and aristocratic. The image Humbert is searching for in Ramsdale is the girl in an old picture, ducked coyly over her cocoa in a "princedom by the sea." Humbert miscalculates that years have gone by since Annabel died and that a 1950s American teen could never be his dead lover's simulacrum; not even in similar chronological period would an American teenager replace Annabel.

That is the first fundamental issue in *Lolita*. It is not just that Lolita is young and Humbert is old, but that, culturally, she is a New World youngster and he is an Old World gentleman. The same goes for his female idealisation represented by Annabel Leigh. From the start, America fostered teenagers that were symbolically more forceful and less cultured than Europe's young icons. If one remembers the idealised upper-class youths wandering around Oxford and Cambridge, one can have an idea of what erudite youth meant to Euro-centred Humbert. For Lolita, youth in the American postwar meant Hollywood stars, fun, and consumerism, and embracing new experiences (*Vide Annexes 1 and 2*).<sup>2</sup>

What truly defines Humbert as a European is the desperate way he clutches to an elusive idea of his past, the constant feeling of homelessness, of forced exile, of estrangement and fated bewilderment. Supporting this view, Paul Ricoeur has said that "[...] exile is a primary symbol of human alienation [...]" that although factual, it is also connected with the mythical,

"[...] expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise [...]. Exile is a primary symbol and not a myth, because it's a historical event made to signify human alienation analogically; but the same alienation creates for itself a fanciful history, the exile from Eden, which, as history that happened in *illo tempore*, is myth" (18).

One must conclude that the reason why Humbert never feels at home in America does not originate in his European citizenship. After all, America is a country made of thousands of immigrants; it should shelter him from his wretchedness and from old battered Europe. Humbert himself seems to have travelled towards America propelled by that same idea of escapism.<sup>3</sup>

Succinctly, the paramount question in this dissertation was why America's giddiness was not enough to save Humbert from his old-world bereavement. From my point of view, his healing process does not happen because Humbert's hopelessness is not simply historical or temporal. Removing him from the haunted European setting does not immediately cause him to change and heal his wounded self. It is not his cynicism that impedes him from mingling with Lolita and her youthful rites either; it is not his petulance that blocks him from feeling at home in the accelerated United States of America. It is his own experience, his paralysing loss, which kept him grounded to an impossible past. They kept him cleaved from the stream of cultural velocity associated with Lolita's world, with its jovial fads and optimistic enthusiasm.

If Humbert suffered only from a case of homesickness, of longing for a beloved Europe, then he would have faced his exile in America as a replenishing moratorium. The European place Humbert so hungrily craved, however, is now forever out of his reach: Annabel is dead, the Mirana is gone, Humbert is not a boy anymore; the world already had its way with him and stole his naivety. The pivotal lesson Humbert learns in the USA is that, ultimately, no one can turn the clock back and revisit one's youth in order to amend it.

Humbert's loss may thus be seen as the symbolic loss of Europe's golden days: the "Nature's first green" that "is gold". On the other hand, it is also an individual loss, the one every human being, whereas American or European, must undergo: the defeat against time which in Humbert's own cosmology is often confused with a race against fate ("The motion of fate was resumed" 66).

With her merciless speed, Lolita eludes Humbert and escapes him, leaving him face to face with the legendary "friendly abyss" (195). That congenial abyss is nothing less than a replica of this dissertation's original theme: a hazy gap between cultures, between continents, between generations, between velocities – Humbert's and Lolita's, Europe's and America's. The journey towards a conciliation of New and Old Worlds takes Humbert more than 300 pages, but less than four months of writing. Quite like this dissertation, it resembles an autopsy, not only of America during the postwar years, but of its emerging adolescents, of their demands and their shortcomings.

So Lolita stands as an avatar for the American postwar, and one may give Lionel Trilling his due. Nabokov's novel is, moreover, about love; a delirious account of an impossible love affair between two irreconcilable tempos, but not two inimical countries. As Humbert himself found out, the greatest gap between he and Lolita is not cultural, but emotional; after all, Lolita never loves Humbert back. It is not the cultural traffic that is unilateral, but the libidinal one. For Humbert, his sojourn in

America is the revival of the Orpheus's myth, but while Orpheus had only his music as a weapon against mortality, Humbert has solely his poetic words. Nonetheless, both must vainly try to conquer time and fight destiny the sake of a doomed girl. The only possibility of consummation for Humbert's unilateral affair will be death. It is in that immortality, the immortality of characters who represent an era, who capture the ineluctably humanity in their struggle (some pathos, some hubris), that Humbert will be finally reunited with his whimsical Lolita.

Ultimately, Humbert is a functional symbol of Europe's mourning, but simultaneously, he is a symbol of human's intrinsic nostalgia, always looking for one's past and longing for its golden moments. Does not Humbert's creation of Lolita from Annabel's memory gives witness to the following passage,

“Our cultural memory is unceasingly *renewed retroactively by new discoveries, returning to the sources*, reforms and renaissances that are much more than revivals of the past and constitute behind us what one might call a ‘*neo-past*’”? (Ricoeur 21, Italics mine).

Regardless of her unfortunate fate, Lolita works in Nabokov's novel as Humbert's greatest enigma. He can never truly decipher her, not just due to the “[...] dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden [...]” for him, but mostly due to Lolita's passion for the gossip, the food, the music and all those “awful juvenile clichés” which compiled a world utterly separate (and hence unfathomable) to Euro-centred Humbert (284). It is love that finally allows him to take the leap of faith that results in a shared immortality.

Her otherness is one of the reasons why Lolita goes on taunting Humbert even after he had possessed her body; such otherness also explains why she does not taunt the other grown man in her life, Quilty, in this same pervading fashion. For Quilty is an American like Lolita, embedded in a culture of fast consumerism and fast trades, her charm is drained in the moment of possession. To Quilty she does not symbolise an immanent mystery; she is just an All-American girl-toy as he is just an All-American pervert.<sup>4</sup>

As soon as Lolita has deserted Humbert and is now entirely his, Quilty loses interest in her and sees her as a disposable object of pleasure, another young player to act in his lascivious home-movies. But for Humbert, the European émigré, Lolita is more than a delectable body, even more than a mere symbol of her parental nation. In her rudeness and giddiness, she is the essence of a country he cannot grasp, which eludes him as evasively as the magic of the nymphets.

By originally refusing Lolita's culture, Humbert placed her in a realm perpetually out of his reach. Lolita became, therefore, more alluring than a mere fey child, which is what other pubescent girls had been to Humbert until then. Without her specific culture, Lolita would have been a victim to Humbert's predatory impulses. Her American self, however, she kept her otherness untapped in Humbert's baffled eyes. Lolita shone on, not as a simple “ageing mistress,” but as a lingering

conundrum which Humbert simply could not resist (188). In this way, more than in her physical features, Lolita perfectly checks Annabel's appeal. More than extreme youth, Lolita is enshrouded in an undecipherable mist, not of European charm and precocious death like her forerunner, but of tellurian liveliness, of cinematographic longing, things Humbert's erudite mind could hardly grasp, and hitherto conquer.

Intriguingly, Humbert's European sources are the seeds for the bridge linking both continents. Annabel, an avatar for the Old World, propitiates Humbert's love for Lolita and, most enduringly, his acceptance of the New World. Therefore, the cultural cleavage in Nabokov's book is quaintly resolved – the nubile passion fuelling Humbert in Europe is simply “renewed retroactively by new discoveries,” i.e. the American Dolores Haze (Ricoeur 22). In the end “[...] she, this nouvelle, this Lolita [...] was to eclipse completely her prototype” (Nabokov 40). This replacement, however, is not sudden but rather gradual; it is combined with Humbert's love, not just for Lolita's identity, but also for her country's, the territory of his “neo-past”.

Once Lionel Trilling described *Lolita* as “[...] the history of his [Nabokov's] love affair with America [...]” setting love as the touchstone of this novel (7). One has to agree that in his tragic passion and inability to match Lolita's sprinting pace, for a young girl is more resilient than a middle-aged man, Humbert created an icon that will stand the trial of Time, the same Time he always felt was his greatest enemy. He did not need to direct a movie to imprint Lolita's name into the future generations' minds; his florid rhetoric sufficed.<sup>5</sup> In a warped way, this is the most lasting eulogy Nabokov bestowed on his two influential cultures – European and American; at least metaphorically, he wove them back together as one criss-crossed, dialogistic quilt.

Whether admired or despised, *Lolita*'s intrinsic value is depicting a love affair that, although unconventional, it kept growing, crossing times, boundaries and prejudices. More importantly, perhaps, it is that in this new millennium Nabokov's novel commemorated its fiftieth anniversary and amazingly, after half a century on American and European bookshelves, *Lolita* still goes on challenging its readers (*Vide Annexe 12*).