

## Chapter IV: “So Young, So Lewd”

*“Nature’s first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leaf’s a flower;  
But only so an hour.  
Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief,  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.”*

*Robert Frost from New Hampshire, 1923.*

*“The depiction of the locale is not enough to constitute a narrative; it is the movement of Humbert and Lolita through that locale that is the essential element of this segment of the narrative line. In a sense, the plot concerns making the plot. The landscape is transformed into narrative space.”*

*David Packman, Vladimir Nabokov: The Structure of Literary Desire, 1982.*

### **1. Sealing the Past and Resurrecting the Dead – Humbert Humbert’s “Open Wound.”**

At the core of this dissertation is the argument that America is cast as a mercurial Lolita and Europe as a laxly corrupted gentleman, tired of bloody fights and fickle treaties. Nabokov’s narrator stands for a Europe which has bled too much over the decades, lost too much, and that has sluggishly slowed down its pace.

Although intrinsically European, fictional Humbert Humbert still relates to the American postwar years in this fundamental aspect; he too has an existential wound, and “[...] the poison was in the wound and the wound remained open [...]” for years to come (18). While Humbert’s was mainly amorous, America’s open wound burnt with a poison which would not easily fade. Suspicion and anxiety wore people’s chirpiness thin, provoking a collective “bleeding,” or as Teresa F. A. Alves puts

it, “a spiritual malaise fostered on the nightmarish memories of the preceding thirties and forties [...]” (25). In result, postwar America may be seen as a compound of defensive measures: anti-loss of western world’s hegemony, anti-loss of democratic values, anti-loss of prosperity, anti-loss of optimism, anti-loss of human lives, anti-loss of economic power, and to the forefront, anti-loss of innocence, the true embodiment of a Puritan Eden on Earth. Cautious vigilance was then necessary, and the ultimate contention manoeuvre came with the definitive settling down of America’s borders in 1959, including Alaska and Hawaii as the last states of the Union.

The necessity to dodge loss is thus a pervading aspect of the American postwar, manifested not only in political decisions, but also in the accelerated attitude pertained to the youth culture of the 50s, immortalised in James Dean’s motto: “Dream as if you’ll live forever. Live as if you’ll die today.” In the postwar years, Hollywood A-list movies mirrored Humbert’s concern with youth and pleasure, namely their brevity. A growing appreciation for images of freshness and candour led to a major shift in the way women were represented in popular culture generally, and in motion pictures specifically. As James Harvey recollects,

“The Fifties woman star was [...] younger [...] more girlish than womanly, whether the style was baby doll [Marilyn Monroe...] sophisticated [Grace Kelly] or gamine [Audrey Hepburn]. The trend was apparent not only in the abundance of starlet-stars – Debbie Reynolds, Shirley MacLaine, Janet Leigh [...] - but in the popularity of recent child stars like Elizabeth Taylor and Natalie Wood [...]” – all “girleens” like Lolita herself (46).

Men too underwent a similar, if less noticeable, rearrangement in the big screen. Younger versions of gallant Clark Gable and Gary Cooper were found in the guise of Marlon Brando and Montgomery Clift. They were rebellious and less composed icons, but tenderly boyish, modelled after a new youth culture (*Vide Annexe 5*). Moreover, much ambivalence permeated this “not-so-reliable-boy-man” (124); Harvey describes him as a loveable outsider moviegoers could not blame for his faults, “we were too ‘understanding’ for that [...but we still went on] hoping he’ll be ‘man enough’ to blame himself at least” (*Ibid*). Harvey’s ruefully description of the 50s’ new boy-hero easily checks up with Humbert’s own self- depiction; with “boyish looks” and gloomy disposition, he goes on unveiling his tale with the ambiguity of a James Dean at odds with his stifling society.

Humbert also tries to inspire in his jury the same compassion those anguished idols inspired in their viewers; so touching in their confusion and pain, one could not help sympathising with their weaknesses. As Brando’s and Dean’s audiences, Humbert hopes his jury will also be incapable of judging him too harshly, taking his crimes as follies of an immature heart.

Both male and female cinematic images were changing due to America’s anti-loss policy. America rushed to apply contention methods in order to avert severe leaks of power, much like Norma Desmond in Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Blvd* (1950). She latched herself in a mausoleum-like mansion,

surrounded by her glorious memorabilia, as if by keeping the doors and windows locked time and speedy modernity could not seep in and catch up with her and with her outdated love for silent movies.

Humbert's bleeding wound is similar to Norma Desmond's but more rhapsodic. He too fears the present and cherishes the past. It is that what converts him in a constant outsider, not just a foreigner in Ramsdale, but a stranger in his own skin. He is the lost boy hiding underneath an "adult disguise," living in "a world" that was "split," and [...] maturing amid a civilization which allows a man of twenty-five to court of sixteen but not a girl of twelve" (18). Humbert is the continental Peter Pan, coming to the New World in search of youth and boisterousness, hoping this land could be his long forsaken Neverland – i.e. a replica of his European "princedom by the sea." In Europe loss drenches him so thoroughly Humbert flees to America, idealising it as a place of "[...] rosy children and great trees, where life should be such an improvement on dull dingy Paris" (27).

Momentarily Humbert believes changing from an "old, rotting" world to a new invigorating one will be enough to cauterise his existential wound. He forgets that he is also carrying "[...] his Central-European trunks to gather dust in his corner behind a heap of old books" (65), a synecdoche for his broken European past.<sup>1</sup> These books are synecdoches of his Euro-centred persona, and cast him as "[...] the representative of the European tradition – [shown] by the constant erudite references and in his professional work as a writer of scholarly papers and histories of poetry" (Pifer 168).

Although Humbert tries to go through time as innocently as in his Mirana days, he is not thirteen anymore. The sexual drives in his body led him to many unfortunate, unromantic experiments with paid women and one miserable marriage with a ghastly woman named Veronica, who ultimately left him for a foreign taxi driver. Humbert also spent most of his adult life hopping from town to town, from country to country, and even from woman to woman, dispassionately, searching for the sparkle Annabel once kindled. Clutching to that vague and time-distorted recollection of pure love Humbert never allows his original wound to close. As Ernst Schroeder once said: "The optimist already sees the scar over the wound; the pessimist still sees the wound underneath the scar," and this latter instance suits Humbert to a T.

So he arrives at Ramsdale, so to say, still bleeding. He cannot let Annabel go, and consequently his gloominess and longing are also kept fresh. Humbert's love for memory goes on sustaining his obsession for Annabel because as "[...] Lacan says, desire is insatiable [...] *fantasy depends not on particular objects, but on their setting out*" (Cowie 361, Italics mine). Unluckily, Humbert's privileged setting, his Riviera infancy, his beloved girl, are all helplessly gone.<sup>2</sup> When he finally settles down in America and meets Lolita, Humbert is far from the ideal of innocence encased in Annabel's memory. More than the phantom of a dead lover, Annabel stands for the ghost of an impossible idea and an irretrievable past.

From a “happy, healthy child,” Humbert was transformed in a “creature of infinite melancholy,” prompt to imitate Dante and “[...] fell madly in love with his Beatrice when she was nine, a sparkling girleen;” it is that unhealthy transformation that keeps Humbert arrested in his past while still living in the present (17). This also accounts for his wound’s continuous symptoms of horror and dyspepsia, even when his coveted prey lies defenceless by his side in *The Enchanted Hunters*. The “poison was on the wound,” as Humbert claims in the beginning of his tale; by the time he has met Lolita, however, the poison has already travelled downwards, lodging as “[...] a bubble of hot poison in [his] loins, thus rendering him mad” (19).

Extreme youth matching innocence does not simply mean a twelve-year-old girl as Lolita, but also a country as young in years and history as America was by the late 40s. From Humbert’s perspective New England is a virgin space, cleansed of the vices of Continental societies Humbert was familiarised with. The nymphet in Nabokov’s tale, as in Humbert’s imagination, stands as an avatar for this cultural idealisation which Ricoeur aphoristically described as, “Sin may be ‘older’ than sins, but innocence is still ‘older’” (251).

From this perspective, Humbert’s shock when he first learns of Lolita’s sexual experimentations is very meaningful. He reacts with horror and dismay to Lolita’s unchaste state because now “*the link between the adult world and the child world had been completely severed [...]* by new customs and new laws [...]”. Humbert’s “[...] policy of sparing her purity by operating only in the stealth of night, only upon a completely anaesthetized little nude [...]” is thus rendered pointless (124, *Italics mine*). This disclosure automatically steers Lolita closer to “the nymphean evil” than to his “innocent Annabel.” Furthermore, Ricoeur discusses this antithetic “archaism” by stating “[...] the theme of primordial defilement of sexuality [is connected with] the identity of purity and virginity: virginity and spotlessness are as closely bound together as sexuality and contamination” (29).

Humbert, however, mourns Lolita’s unchastity in a facetious fashion, reducing her to a postwar psychological cliché – the “[...] beautifully formed young girl whom modern co-education, juvenile mores, the campfire racket and so forth had hopelessly depraved” (133). The attentive reader suddenly realises Humbert has already missed the point. Lolita *is* still innocent, if not in her flesh, then in her mind. She contemplates these sexual encounters with utter nonchalance. To Humbert’s mature eyes, these encounters are imbued with perverse symbolism, but for teen Lolita sex came as naturally as a playground game, as a “stark act” which was “[...] part of a youngster’s fugitive world unknown to adults [...]”. This naïf frame of mind allows her to jump into Humbert’s arms guiltlessly, kissing him with “[...] some rather comical refinements of flutter and probe [...]” (137).

Human sexuality, as Ricoeur points out, is largely connected with the defilement of innocence, and this “double assonance” provides a background for European ethics (29). In the postwar America, however, teenagers’ sexual experimentations were seen as a natural step in a youngster’s healthy

development. Humbert's strangeness towards Lolita's sensuality is another sign of his old-fashioned ethics and European upbringing.

For, actually, there is little experience in Lolita; this is made plain by her childish attempts to surprise Humbert in bed and affect a false urbanity. Even Humbert in his self-inflicted state of bedazzlement can see through it, though he chooses to, in his "[...] strange predicament, feign supreme stupidity and had her have her way – at least while [he] could still bear it" (134). More painfully ironic is that Humbert – in his desperate attempt to "[...] twenty-four years later [break Annabel's] spell by incarnating her in another [...]" – ends up smudging the magic aura of his primordial romance, transforming his relationship with Lolita in a travesty of his first encounter with genuine love (15).

Both Annabel and Lolita are indeed frightfully young and appealing in their own way, one the epitome of Old World's sophisticated grace, the latter the epitome of New World's wild youthfulness. What Humbert overlooks constantly is that "[...] when [he] was a child and she was a child, *little Annabel was no nymph to [him]*; [he] was her equal, a faunlet in [his] own right, on that same enchanted island of time" (12, Italics mine). By the time Humbert meets Lolita this has changed. In "September 1952, after twenty-nine years had elapsed [...]" (14), Humbert is still plagued by "[...] degrading and dangerous desires" (24). Lovely children are not his peers as Annabel had once been. Now, that he stands as "[...] a madman with a gross liking for the *fruit vert* [...]" (40), Annabel's doubles are nymphets, not his equals. Age did not only rob Humbert of his young features, but it also provided him with the incapacity of seeing certain young girls as human. Now, in order to explain his peculiar tendency, he must make them demonic. From the first moment he sees Lolita then, Humbert does not see a charming teenager, but "[...] a little deadly demon among the wholesome children [...]," mingled with a gateway back into his incomplete childhood affair (17).<sup>3</sup>

The impossibility of going back in time is evident when Humbert finally possesses Lolita. In the morning after, he quickly realises that he did not start where he had left off with Annabel. Instead, he stumbles into a kind of nightmarish limbo, a "[...] selected paradise – a paradise whose skies were the colour of hell-flames – but still a paradise [...]," a much more corrupted version of his "Sublimated Riviera" (166). These mixed emotions, ranging from extreme pleasure to grim dissatisfaction, are all symptoms of Humbert's initial wound, the one Annabel Leigh left uncured when she died before his passion for her was ever consummated, ever marred by the throbs of sexual (and manifold) experience.

From the start, Lolita and Humbert's trip into the seaside, just like their trips across the United States of America, are doomed to be a sad disaster. Lolita is not the voluntary princess of his "mimosa grove" (15), and Humbert is no longer the pure "[...] child in a bright world of illustrated books, clean sand, orange trees [...]" (10). Even the elements are against them – "foul weather [...]" a thick damp sky, muddy waves [...]" and "the angels" seem to conspire against Humbert's "theoretical thrill"

(166). Notoriously, they are the most apt ones to scorn his affair with Lolita, polluted in its essence, for they have witnessed the purity of Humbert's "Kingdom by the Sea". The raw "Californian beach" is but a poor substitute of the untainted Pacific, and the rift by the rocks, where young Humbert and Annabel unsuccessfully tried to consummate their love, is now transformed in a "kind of cave" where one could find, not love nor excitement, but a "perverse privacy" (167). It is not only the scenery that bears no possible comparison to the "[...] sapphire occasion and rosy contingency of [his] Riviera romance [...]" (ibid); it is the emotions and the players themselves that are wrong and grubbed, driven to that beach for reasons which do not include mutual love.

Lolita is no Annabel either; not because she is not "gay, innocent and elegant" like the latter is remembered, but because she is more interested in "[...] the corniest movies, the most cloying fudge [...]" than in "in the wonderland [Humbert] had to offer" (166). This particular "wonderland" includes melodic thoughts on fate, "competitive tennis, infinity, solipsism and so on," topics once dear to Annabel but not to her American double (12). Furthermore, Lolita is an unwilling leading actress in Humbert's seaside farce. She does not love Humbert, she does not relate to him because for her, Humbert is only a mocking father-figure, and not the intelligent teenager by the Mirana that Annabel once met. She does not meet him casually on holidays; she is not a lovelorn European girl who is being initiated by a boy of her own age; her hand does not creep timidly in the sand, as they "[...] sprawled all morning, in a petrified paroxysm of desire" (Ibid). There is no shade of romance in Lolita's performance, but then again there is none in Humbert's either. "The kingdom by the sea" is now forever lost, poorly copied in a less refined country, with warier and wearier main characters. The "kingdom's" original purity is thus betrayed in a dumb-downed re-enactment, stripping it off of all its former magic.

The aftermath of such depressing errand is that Humbert feels momentarily cleansed of his desire for Lolita's body. This grim experience also proves that the past is impossible to reconstruct, that it is as lost as Annabel is dead. The "[...] rotting trees [...] the fog like a wet blanket, and the sand gritty and clammy, and Lo all gooseflesh and grit [...]" end the nightmarish reversed version of "[...] the glitter of that remote summer [...]" shared with Annabel (13). This is the instant Humbert understands he has gone too far and crossed over to the other side of the mirror, the one deformed and disfigured, Mr. Hyde on the reverse of Doctor Jekyll.

In this artificial seaside scenario, however, Humbert still fails to see Lolita as a substantial human being, an American teen with a personality, and not a mere recreation of his dead lover. This misconception goes on almost until the end of his tale, when Humbert finally realises that this lapse was his greatest fault. After crossing the country with Lolita in his power, Humbert realises that all his extreme actions – marrying Charlotte, murdering Quilty, threatening Lolita – were but a series of ineffective attempts to patch a wound that could not be patched.

When, with his old-world chivalry, Humbert offers all his money and devotion to a pregnant Lolita he is basically giving everything he has to atone for his past mistakes. With this gesture Humbert is trying to make up for his neglecting of the child behind the nymphet. Simultaneously, he is also admitting to himself for the first time that his wound has finally closed. He does not search for Annabel's doubles anymore, but he now exclusively loves a defaced American girl.

This is the reason why, when Humbert admits his undying love for Mrs Schiller, Lolita's identity as a married woman, his contempt for America is transformed in solemn respect, symbolised by Humbert wistfully listening to the children playing in the distance. It is obvious that more than going back to his dead love, Humbert initially wanted to go back to the time and place where he had met his "Riviera one" (42). He wanted Annabel back as the synecdoche for his days of glory and innocence, when he could still believe he would be "a famous spy" (12). Adulthood, nonetheless, thwarted the multiplicity of his possibilities and his capacity for harbouring dreamy expectations. In his love for the wasted Lolita, Humbert ultimately finds his redemption, and his maturity as a human being is no longer hindered by his childhood fantasies and the conjuring of Annabel's ghost. By loving Lolita, he seems to be finally able to mend his open wound and let his dead "girleen" go.

## **2. *Rushing Onwards: Velocity versus Laggardness in Lolita.***

Humbert sums up his emergency against time's ruthless passage when he impatiently speaks of Lolita's sudden departure for summer camp. This event speeds up his urgency in savouring her presence due to the painful brevity of her nymphet stage.

"She would be thirteen in January", he despairingly broods, "in two years or so she would cease being a nymphet and would turn into a 'young girl' and then into a 'college girl' – that horror of horrors! [...] So how could I afford not to see her for two months of summer insomnias? [...] Two months of beauty, two months of tenderness, would be squandered forever, and I could do nothing" (65 –66).

One may fall back on the argument that Humbert's obvious ambivalence is accounted by his incarnation of a "nineteen-century hero out of his age." Displaced in his chivalrous fancies, applying "romantic rhetoric to child molestation" (Pifer 16), Humbert finds himself not only displaced against a set of "brassy America of motels and movie magazines [...]," but also against Lolita's crude slang. Being out of place is turned in something much more dramatic as he stands also out of time "[...] still pursuing the ghost of that long-lost summer with Annabel Leigh [...]" (Frosch 46).

Maintaining his obsession for children as a screening door between stillness and movement, between "the adult world" and "the child world," Humbert tricks himself into believing he is safely protected from time's erosion and from the world's perversion. Regardless of how much Humbert struggles back into his "princedom by the sea," nothing stops the insensible march of time and

nothing can bring back the Arcadia Humbert so dearly treasured. Lolita's prime will pass and, as Norma Desmond's case in *Sunset Blvd.* ruthlessly exemplifies, no celluloid could ever avert this loss – youth is impossible to be contained and captured forever. Still, Lolita's youthful energy possessed the power to animate Humbert one more time, by proxy animating his dormant stamina. In Humbert's mind, his sweeping desire for the nymphet is opposed to his lethargic hankering for Annabel.

And yet Humbert's epitome of enthusiastic youth is intrinsically connected with motion. It is symbolised by Lolita's tennis service where "[...] beauty, directness, youth, a classical purity of trajectory [...]" is captured in the "spanking pace" of her gesture (232). No matter how much Humbert daydreams with the possibility of capturing Lolita's "strokes and her enchantments immortalized in segments of celluloid [...]," the extinguished nymphet cannot be brought back to life by sheer will and inane memory. So Humbert goes on picturing Lolita in various tasks, "acting to swimming, and swimming to tennis" (Ibid), that require a velocity and flexibility that are more than ephemeral. All of Lolita's movements are described as vital and nimble, and therefore strong enough to sustain a waning, middle-aged dreamer. Simultaneously, such restlessness and adroitness suggest the fast-paced qualities of a motion picture, which may account for Lyne's and Kubrick's attempts to adapt Nabokov's novel to the big screen, and it led me to closely analyse both these movies in the following chapter (*Vide Annexe 10*).

Humbert's memory of Annabel, on the other hand, is closely connected with a different visual medium – photography. Humbert speaks of a single blurred photo where she is indistinctly represented, ducked over a cup of cocoa. This dear token has naturally proved to be an ineffective method to bring back an absent beloved and, now in the early 50s, Humbert aims higher at the possibility of cinematic preservation. While photography is essentially a separate fragment of time that has been frozen, motion pictures allow for the wonders of continuous movement. That is the reason why Humbert dreams of capturing his nymphet on film; with his nymphet on tape, Humbert would never have to let go of his equation that motion plus youth equals Lolita.

Lolita fundamentally differs from her processor Annabel, even in the way Humbert chose to immortalise them. If Annabel is represented by the Old World love for photography, she is also epitomised by its aristocratic immobility; she becomes a fossil and a still life, as posed and anaemic in Humbert's mind as she had been when alive. Lolita, on the other hand, is consecrated in America's passion for films and in their trademark liveliness. As the formal art of photography mirrors Annabel's personality, so the moving pictures mirror Lolita's restlessness and speed.

The presence of cinema in *Lolita* is a fundamental topic because, as David Packman argues, it is directly tied with Humbert's race against the erosion produced by time. It is his "long[ing] for a trace of the nymphet's presence [...]," that feeds his recurrent flights of cinematic fantasy. "But why, one asks, would a film provide so much more [than a still picture]? The ontology of film would seem

to lend itself to recording the nymphet's classical purity of trajectory, while snapshots would only violate, fragment that continuity into icons of discontinuous desire" (135).

Remarkably, Humbert's repeated descriptions of Lolita in active situations places an emphasis on his need to immortalise her through art, literature being his final homage to her. In the absence of film, Humbert utilises language as his motor and it is through his visual imagery that one keeps *Lolita* running. The visual luxury of the narrative might account for the enormous fortune this novel has been enjoying since its publication. It is the reader's job to bring Lolita back to life while perusing Humbert's words, especially his minute, rhythmic descriptions of "the exquisite clarity of all her movements [...] the pure ringing of her every stroke [...] raising her bent left knee [...] vital web of balance between toed foot, pristine armpit, burnished arm and far-flung racket [...]" (233).

Can the reader truly blame Humbert's yearning for an everlasting childhood? Is it a crime to remain loyal to an ideal as extolled as first love? Is it not what any ordinary human being or any poet most desires, to have a second chance in loving as carelessly and completely as when an infant? And is it not that what Humbert claims Lolita ultimately means for him, a second try, a shot at immortality? And may that noble pursuit account for his acts, for Quilty's murder, for Lolita's stolen freedom? These are indeed the pervading questions of the novel.

Humbert wishes more than anything to be kept forever in the kingdom of fairytales pertained to infancy. Dreaming of it, he drags Lolita down with him, slowing her down, stunting her growth in a state of artificial childishness. More importantly, Humbert also drags the reader down with him through his morose rhetoric. He tries to delay the reader's pleasure for closure (and resolution for the action's main enigma) with his minute descriptions. Impeding the reader's desire mirrors Humbert's own ordeal towards possessing his Lolita. As he sets to slowly seduce the nymphet, Humbert is also slowly seducing his reader, retarding the plot with linguistic detours and languorous details.

Humbert wants Lolita to partake his delusions, a play where he stars as a humble lover ("l'Amant Ridicule") and she stars as a sleepy stand-in for Annabel ("La Petite Dormeuse"), but moreover, he wants the reader, his jury, to partake in the game as well (129). The necessity to put Lolita to sleep is once more a method to assure a safe exploration of her body without being disturbed by "[...] an ominous hysterical note [ringing] through her silly words [...]," as it will happen later on, when trying to detour her into a conspicuous byroad (141).

As a sensory parasite, he gorges on Lolita's supple movements. These still flourish apparently fluid regardless of how hard the life with Humbert is. This could be explained because in the 40s girlhood was intrinsically peripatetic, more so than any masculine form of development. Devlin states that "[...] girl's culture [was] more mutable. Girls were an ever-changing barometer of times, guiding and being guided by the engine of consumer trends" (90).

As for Humbert's own timing, it is notoriously slowed down when he first sees Lolita, as if to better linger on the loving trifles which turn her in Annabel's twin:

“[...] the same child [...] half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, there was (his) Riviera love peering at (him) over dark glasses [...] the tiny dark-brown mole on her side [...] the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair [...]” (39).

In Humbert's eyes, Lolita's unique movements are synonymous of her youth and nimbleness. He paints her walk that “excites [him] so abominably” as a lascivious choreography, a gingerly timed inventory of steps: “[...] a faint suggestion of turned in toes. A kind of wiggly looseness below the knee prolonged to the end of each footfall. The ghost of a drag. Very infantile, infinitely meretricious.” (41). When she visits his room in Ramsdale, she arrives as from a parallel dimension, sliding sensuously “[...] in her dirty blue jeans, smelling of orchards in nymphetland, awkward and fey and dimly depraved, the lower buttons of her shirt unfastened” (92). Every detail is recorded in amorous sluggishness, as if to delay the apotheosis of pleasure, the orgasmic feeling of actually possessing her forbidden body.

Such deliberate laggardness mirrors the instant when he masturbated with the girl sitting casually on his knees and eating her “Eden-red apple.” That was a supreme experience he skilfully described as “a bubble of paradise [...] burst *in slow motion* within me” (58, Italics mine). When Humbert still inhabits the realm of fantasy, as he does in the previous situation, then time slumbers, flowing dreamily and with no cadence at all. The same takes place when he remembers ephemeral Annabel, framed in “[...] that last mad immortal day behind the ‘Roches Roses’ [...],” a close-caption of an old black and white movie, haltered and caulked. (78). Also when Humbert aims to seduce Lolita, he keeps his timing tightly controlled, as in The Enchanted Hunters' room, retarding predatorily the best opening to pounce without risking being caught; in the meantime, she moves around the room, unwrapping his presents in “[...] a kind of *slow-motion walk* [...]” (120, Italics mine).

Humbert, moreover, uses such sluggishness of movement because “[...] nympholepsy is a precise science. Actual contact would do it in one second flat. An interspace of a millimetre would do it in ten. Let us wait.” Only “after a long stirless vigil [did his] *tentacles moved towards her* [...]”, reprising his watchfulness when illicitly caressing Lolita in her mother's davenport (129 – 130, Italics mine). As the attentive reader, Humbert longingly savours every movement, stretching that modest contact ever so dilatorily, for he tells himself it is all he will ever be able to achieve out of his “[...] idle and idiotic fancies” (53). The consummation of these, however, will be a rushed, drab affair for no reality could ever exhibit the languor of detail Humbert's dreams had been ripe in.

Although Humbert openly admires Lolita's eager motion, he is not shy to admit that had not his abuses led to “something within her [to be] broken [she might have been] on the top of her perfect

form [and have] the will to win and [...] become a real champion” (233). As it was, captive Lolita, like a fragile butterfly, weakens, being “left helpless [...] by any abrupt attack, or sudden change of tactics on her adversary’s part [...]” (Ibid).

That her natural motion is cramped by Humbert’s obsession is made clear by his admission “[...] not to mind where to dwell provided [he] could *lock* [his] Lolita up somewhere” (176, Italics mine). She is still nimble at this point, fuelled by her tender age, but not moving forth. Her movements grew calculated, as when she lets Humbert’s car slide to the edge of a cliff, or when she plans their second journey through the country skilfully, so she can cavort with Quilty behind Humbert’s back. Her steps are not foolishly unconscious any longer, as they had been in her mother’s house, crazily inventing dances while hearing the radio, jitterbugging absentminded like Dominique Swain in Lyne’s movie, oddly gawky and reckless as the misbehaving child she was (*Vide Annexe 10*).

Once his continuous possession of orphaned Lolita is guaranteed by his legal position, however, Humbert’s sweeping desire rushes in unrestrained, leading him to act with crazy velocity, compulsively dragging her to dirt-roads, hidden groves, motel rooms, any place he can find where he may speed up the consumption of her youth. For nymphetism is a period which flies by so quickly, Humbert has no time to lose but to drink Lolita’s magic up as fast as he can, insensible to the fact he would probably ruin the child she was in the process.

When Humbert realises that their affair will be but a race against time, against her sprinting development, against the law, and the waning of his bliss and desire, then he rushes into a crisscross through the United States of America. As if “by putting the geography of the United States into motion [...]” (148), he was escaping his conscience, the authorities, fate, his fossilised past, and time – more than anything, the ruthless power of time working over him and Lolita.

Every passing instant is a second stolen from her infancy, transforming her in an “aging mistress” although she is barely thirteen, aging her youth at the same merciless pace it had aged him, deteriorating his capacity to be the boy who had been shocked by “those ribald sea monsters” who scared Annabel away from him. She too walked away from Humbert with a decisive act of motion – “skipping on one foot to get into her shorts” – fleeing away from him and into her sudden demise (53).

Time stole Annabel away from Humbert because mercilessly, as well as unexpectedly, it took her away. Time stole Lolita away from him too, for it aged her precociously. Nonetheless, Humbert resorts to his imagination until the last minute, projecting his memory of the brawny nymphet onto the wasted Mrs. Schiller. The epitome of such imaginative process of reminiscence is encapsulated when Lolita, unknown to be observed, allows Humbert to revel in her wistful “[...] spinning up and down Thayer Street on her beautiful young bicycle; rising on the pedals to work on them lustily, then sinking back in a languid posture while the speed wore itself off” (167).

That scene transforms Lolita in an icon, the image constantly revisited by Humbert as the paramount example of unfettered ingénue beauty. Due to this mental picture, Humbert effaces the possibility of ever truly taking Lolita at face value, hence failing to discern that, if she looked so genuine and unalloyed at that time, is only because she was moving, metaphorically as well as literally (the Quilty ploy was already *in motion*), away from him.

In Humbert's narrative a forgery of motion runs in parallel with chasing down youth and innocence, as well as beating time and fate. So "[...] during about 150 days of actual motion [they] covered about 27,000 miles! Plus some 200 days of interpolated standstills [...];" nonetheless, they "had been everywhere" solely to "really see nothing [...]" (175). The artificiality of this motion, the aimlessness of it, culminates in Lolita's sullen declaration that "[...] there is no point in staying anywhere [...]" anymore (244).

They had indeed been running in maddening circles, just like in the beginning of their "extensive travels all over the States," when Humbert still felt the need to deceive Lolita by giving her the false "[...] impression of 'going places,' of rolling on to some definite destination, to some unusual delight [...]," when all that really waited for her was a "quick connection" on a back-road (152). By the terminus of their trips together, a potentially wiser Lolita is aware they are getting nowhere, evolving to nothing; regardless of their address, they are continually stagnated in their rut of blackmails and sorrows, of tears and feigned indifference, of spasmodic happiness and false appearances.

Lolita's manipulations of Humbert in the case of Quilty may seem harsh, or even malicious, but she was left no other choice but to grow up fast and catch up with Humbert's sly schemes if she wished to survive. What is funny and sadly ironic is that, in his fervid race to beat time and maturity, Humbert ends up forcing Lolita to grow up even more rapidly, skipping the natural evolutionary states of pubescent languor and adolescent mindlessness. She immediately grows up into a full-fledged practical middle-aged woman trapped inside a seventeen-year-old washed-out body.

In that final scene, Humbert and Lolita, now Mrs. Schiller, meet as equals in her dingy living room. That scene has a vivid reversed-mirror effect: he is the child disguised as an adult, possessing still a boy's imagination, but festered by adulthood's cravings; she is the grown woman, prematurely aged by a wary soul riddled with survival tactics, but disguised still in a girl's body. Their reunion in her rundown house could but mean a confrontation between conflicting tempos, his eagerness to return her to their past together, back to his "old car," back into his imperviously dilatory "bubble of paradise;" hers solidly moving forward into Alaska, into motherhood, into a future steering decidedly away from her past.

While Lolita is indeed the essence of her country, forever pacing forward, never letting her arms down to cry over past mistakes and misfortunes, matter-of-factly stating that she is "[...] sorry [she] cheated so much, but that's the way things are [...]" (279), Humbert is a loyal servant of his, an

Old World that has nothing else to rely upon but old glories now that the shadows of war had plunged it in debris. Hitherto, he maniacally sets off to hunt and gun Quilty down because he “cheated [Humbert] of [his] redemption” in the New World. Humbert could take all his past miseries back by marrying Lolita and fostering a litter of children. That was *his* American Dream, and Quilty stole it away as nonchalantly as one who “[...] took a dull doll to pieces/ and threw her head away” (300).

Humbert is ready to overlook Lolita’s schemes, for her mischievousness is an inherent part of her demonic allure, but that transformed Quilty in the scapegoat for his tragic loss. Unable of taking responsibility for his part in the manipulation that tore Lolita away from him, this “not-so-reliable-boy-man” Harvey alluded to decides to unleash his wrath on his foil, the sinister girl-child adorer, word-player, urbane and eluding, Clare Quilty.

Quilty’s death is reasonably justified in Humbert’s logic; because Quilty “[...] took advantage of a sin/as [Humbert] was helpless [...] hoping for the best/dreaming of marriage in a mountain state/aye of a litter of Lolitas [...]” (Ibid). This seals Quilty’s fortune; he has to die. The dragging pace of the death-scene seems oddly reminiscent of seventeenth century Italian *commedia dell’arte*. The slow-motion in which the horrible act gradually takes place, leaving its terror hanging in the air by several pages; Quilty taking its time to let the urgency of his situation sink in; the witty showdown between the two “rival demons” (301); the grotesque chase inside the labyrinthine Pavor Manor while Humbert shoots Quilty morosely, as if it was all a dream sequence, a madman’s fantasy in a madman’s laggard imagination. All these details show that Humbert is nearing the end of his tether, vertiginously approaching the edge of his own physical and emotional precipice. Death is rehearsed with temperance and poetry first, then with violence and ugly revenge towards its grand finale.

Movement is pivotal in this final confrontation too. Accelerated at first, Humbert’s ire is spent rapidly in unison with his last energetic gasps. As soon as Quilty perishes, Humbert collapses wearily, all motion drained away from him, driving recklessly on the road, and then perfectly stilled on the top of the bluff. Humbert purposefully delays the disclosure of Quilty’s identity, the same way he delayed the consumption of Lolita’s body in the Enchanted Hunters, only to prolong his and his reader’s suspended pleasure. The novel works as a structural and rhetorical striptease, even more than a puzzle. The teasing of the reader’s imagination until the occulted part is revealed in the end allows for “everything to f[a]ll into place” (245). It is Humbert’s mad motion after Lolita’s anonymous abductor and Lolita’s schemes to conquer and cheat Humbert that keep the narrative alive after the night in the Enchanted Hunters has passed. In this linguistic striptease, it is not the physical nakedness that counts, but the emotional one. Here the striptease is not over until Humbert is rid of his evil double Quilty.

Quilty’s death allows Humbert to accept his loss and let it go, facing the fact that now he is not going anywhere, that truly, at last, there is nowhere else to go. No more hopping from small town to small town, from miser hotel to miser hotel, skimming for clever witticisms scrawled on the guest’s

book. Now, after his ultimate goal being attained, Humbert's soul stands petrified, immovable on that bluff, waiting for the ultimate demise of the body that shields it. This final death will come some months later, when Humbert is sitting in jail and his heart ceases to pump, finally resting still.

For Lolita was Humbert's life source, his reason to actively exist; for she was his sin, and moreover his soul, as soon as she was removed from his grasp, so was his anima. Considering her dead, and thus immortalised in her inaccessibility when he leaves her behind in Dick's house, Humbert advances towards his last journey. He is now a soulless man; not the "artist" who in the first part of the novel had proudly declared "poets never kill" (88), but a shell of that man, a "madman" doomed without a soul, i.e. a lusty sin, which could keep him in motion, pushing him forward.

In the meantime, Humbert may not have planned to pall Lolita, to halt her childhood into a "little ghost," but egoistically, he did want to play with Lolita forever in that "pubescent park [...] mossy garden" (21), a place where he believed only virginal children were allowed to enter. To allow it to happen, Lolita had to be kept inside "Humbertland's" walls, securely severed from the outside velocity of her "world of tough kids." That is what Lolita's childhood ultimately encapsulated for Humbert, an ephemeral state, as pungent as the playful children's voices; as fleeting as nymphetism, the speed on her bicycle wearing off as suddenly as Lolita's lively eyes had turned " [...] washed-out gray [...] strangely spectacled [...]" by the time she had escaped him into a dingier lifestyle (272).

Still, it is Lolita's ability to get on with her life, and away from Humbert's paralysing influence, that granted her immortality, that transformed her from a mere disposable creature into a perennial adoration. Annabel was the only one who had penetrated this pantheon so far, and only because untimely death rushed her away from Humbert's sight, thus not allowing him to witness her age and wither. Lolita's resilience conciliates Humbert with America, ultimately shedding his previously recalcitrant spite for this country. This is clear when Humbert finally galvanises Lolita as his true "[...] American sweet immortal dead love" (280). Immortality in Humbert's world means incapacity to change or to move, the butterfly pinned to a static frame, the lithe girl playing a service frozen in rewinding celluloid. It also means that "[...] art is the way to the 'only immortality' he and Lolita may share. Having in effect destroyed [the nymphet, Humbert, the aesthete] now wants to make her 'live in the minds of later generations' [...]" (Frosch 48).

When Humbert finally accepts that Lolita, the nymphet, is dead, and that Dolores Schiller, the pregnant housewife, now replaces her, he is then capable of adding Lolita to the realm of dead but immortal loves. It is the realm where Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde, Orpheus and Eurydice everlastingly dwell, the same plain where Lionel Trilling would place Nabokov's Humbert and his Lolita.<sup>4</sup>

A subtle peace between the Old and New Worlds comes through the conciliation of time continuums; the merging of past and present in the same overlapping fashion Annabel had been

previously reincarnated in Lolita. Even the two girls' names blend and merge into one another, from "Annabel Haze, alias Dolores Lee, [to] Loleeta" (Maar 167). This closeness also comes through the internalisation of America's immensity, of its perpetual wildness, which Humbert's lust could not truly tame. As it has been argued, "one can compare reading a literary work with visiting a country. This is precisely the comparison Nabokov animates here" (Packman 65).

Once again child and adult seem to have missed each other on their final descent, repeating the pattern they had woven throughout the novel – she running into his arms when he less expected (before leaving for summer camp, at dawn in *The Enchanted Hunters*), and then running away from him and to Quilty when he thought she was his forever (in their second trip across America). These continual failures to meet become more tragic for they were quite obvious from the start – a man and a child live in different emotional worlds, in opposite tempos, one racing towards life and the latter descending towards death.

Lolita, moreover, is a snotty American child while Humbert is a European educated man, the cultural gap between them opening twice as deep as the one already cleaved between kids and adults in the American 50s. The only road towards a conciliation of these two antonymic cultures is indeed art, but, more remarkably, the Shakespearean kind of high art which teaches impossible love to live on through untimely death, a lesson Humbert had already learnt with Annabel's early death. Initially all Humbert wishes to do is incarnate her in Lolita's sturdy frame, but later – wicker, and moved by the fast-paced technological inventions of his foster country – he wishes to conjure his lost lover in an artificial, but much more perennial medium: that of the cinematic art. Both were doomed to fail and Humbert would have to die fully aware of his failure, and finally understanding the irretrievability of his loss. His shortcomings, however, did not mean others, Americans and Europeans alike, would not try to animate Lolita again. This time Adrian Lyne and Stanley Kubrick made their post-modern attempts in a time-defying medium: the motion pictures.