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American Fiction 1950s – present

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Butterfly's Dilemma: The Captured Children of *Lolita*

In his 1956 essay “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” published one year after the release of *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov acknowledges that many people didn't finish his novel because it wasn't racy enough, stating, “They expected the rising succession of erotic scenes; when these stopped, the readers stopped, too, and felt bored and let down” (314). Having completed *Lolita*, if they in fact complete the novel, many readers struggle to grasp any purpose or meaning, especially since Nabokov himself admits, “*Lolita* has no moral in tow” (315). Further into his essay, however, Nabokov sheds some valuable light on his relationship with his novel:

But even so, there are certain points, ... favorite hollows that one evokes more eagerly and enjoys more tenderly than the rest of one's book... such images as Mr. Taxovich, or that class list of Ramsdale, or Charlotte saying “waterproof,” or Lolita in slow motion advancing towards Humbert's gifts, or the pictures decorating the stylized garret of Gaston Godin, or the Kasbeam barber (who cost me a month of work), or Lolita playing tennis, or the hospital at Elphinstone, or pale, pregnant, beloved, irretrievable Dolly Schiller dying in Gray Star (the capital town of the book), or the tinkling sounds of the valley town coming up the mountain trail (on which I caught the first known female of *Lycaeides sublivens* Nabokov)... These are the secret points, the subliminal co-ordinates by means of which the books is plotted – although I realize very clearly that these and other scenes will be skimmed over or not noticed, or not even reached... (316).

By revisiting some of these “secret points” on which “the book is plotted,” the novel begins to confide to the reader a consistent anxiety concerning the relationship between children and adults, thereupon providing a more attuned understanding of Nabokov’s intention with such a controversial novel.

Early on in his essay, Nabokov states that he and his wife went butterfly hunting each summer, and that it was on one of their annual, butterfly-hunting trips that the task of writing *Lolita* “was energetically resumed in the evening or on cloudy days” (312). Nabokov’s hobby of catching butterflies, of capturing something beautiful and then fixing it into the appreciative yet analytical world of the arts and sciences, cannot be ignored when considering his novel *Lolita*. Nabokov frequently frames Humbert Humbert and Dolores Haze’s relationship as predator-prey-like, notably in one of his “favorite hollows...*Lolita* in slow motion advancing towards Humbert’s gift” (316). By dazzling her with presents in the not-so-discreetly named hotel, “The Enchanted Hunters,” Humbert lures Dolores further into his perverted trap, yet he ironically describes Dolores as a huntress, stating, “She walked up to the open suitcase as if stalking it from afar, at a kind of slow-motion walk, peering at that distant treasure box” (120). He then states that she picked up one of his gifts, “as if she were a bemused bird-hunter holding his breath over the incredible bird he spreads out by the tips of his flaming wings” (120). In this moment, leering at his so-called “pet,” Humbert projects his own predatory qualities onto Dolores; However, she is the one that will become trapped, once she “[pulls] out the slow snake of a brilliant belt and [tries] it on” (120). Humbert steals Dolores out of her world and fixes her into his, and she becomes *stuck* to Humbert because she has “absolutely nowhere else to go” (142). With Humbert’s trapping of Dolores and their subsequent road trip, Nabokov emphasizes a tension between hunted and hunter, between movement and fixation, but, most importantly, between

child and adult. This tension only intensifies from this point on, especially once Humbert and Dolores land in Beardsley.

At the end of their road trip, Humbert and Dolores settle in Beardsley because of Humbert's connection with the French professor Gaston Godin. Godin serves as an obvious double for Humbert because is also a pedophile, one who "knew by name all the small boys in our vicinity...and had some of them...perform simple chores about the house, and...feed them fancy chocolates, with *real* liqueurs inside – in the privacy of an orientally furnished den in his basement" (181). Godin uses systematic grooming tactics to lure boys into his basement, but his operation includes multiple neighborhood children instead of just Dolores. A close reading of "the pictures decorating the stylized garret of Gaston Godin" exemplifies Nabokov's efforts to illustrate Godin's illicit desires for young boys (316):

...large photographs of pensive André Gide, Tchaikovsky, Norman Douglas...Nijinsky (all thighs and fig leaves), Harold D. Doublename...and Marcel Proust. All these poor people seemed about to fall on you from their inclined plane. He had also an album with snapshots of all the Jackies and Dickies of the neighborhood (182).

Gide, Tchaikovsky, Douglas, Nijinsky, and Proust were all prominent homosexual artists, which suggests Godin's own homosexuality, and "Harold D. Doublename" further hints at Godin's doubling of Humbert. Most poignant, however, is Godin's album of neighborhood children, which emphasizes his methodical predatory nature, accumulating children much like a butterfly hunter would add to his collection. Although *Lolita* focuses on the emotional and sexual violence between Humbert and Dolores, Nabokov includes Godin to offer a disturbing look at the extensive violence inflicted upon children in a quiet American town such as Beardsley. As

Humbert and Dolores' relationship begins to collapse in Beardsley and during their second road-trip, Nabokov features more captured, fixed, and even dead children.

Nabokov includes many brief passages or details to indicate the violence between adults and children. The Kasbeam barber babbles "of a baseball-playing son of his," but once he points "to an eased photograph among the ancient gray lotions," Humbert realizes "that the mustached young ball player had been dead for the last thirty years" (213). Although this passage is very brief and seemingly inconsequential in the whole scope of the novel, it reinforces the tension between children and adults that Nabokov explores in *Lolita*. The image of the "mustached young ball player" dead among the "ancient gray lotions" impresses both Humbert and the reader with the sense of being haunted. "The hospital at Elphinstone" also implies children being taken and fixed, since the town "Elphinstone," sounded out, reads "elf-in-stone." Elves are typically seen as small, child-like creatures with playful dispositions, and sometimes even magical powers. However, the town name echoes an earlier scene in the novel, when Humbert and Dolores are caught in the woods; Humbert writes: "...I met the unblinking dark eyes of two strange and beautiful children...They stood crouching and gaping at us, both in blue play-suits...lovely carved bluestone children" (169). Instead of playing, the children are made stone-like by witnessing Humbert and Dolores together, recalling the myth of the monster Medusa who was so hideous that she turned onlookers to stone. Humbert and Dolores' relationship is thus depicted as a kind of monster, or at least monstrous, that has the power to take away the innocence of other children just by being seen. "The hospital at Elphinstone," where Dolores is taken by the equally violent Clare Quincy, and her caretaker "Dr. Blue" recall the earlier scene in the woods; Nabokov seems to join the passages together to emphasize the ways that children are abused, fixed, and robbed of not only their agencies, but of their childhoods entirely.

Having revisited a few of these “subliminal co-ordinates” of the novel, Nabokov’s affection for “pale, pregnant, beloved, irretrievable Dolly Schiller dying in Gray Star” and “the tinkling sounds from the valley town coming up from the mountain trail” is now better understood. The two scenes almost sandwich the entire novel, for “Dolly Schiller dying in Gray Star” occurs in John Ray’s opening letter on page 4: “Mrs. ‘Richard F. Schiller’ died in childbed, giving birth to a stillborn girl, on Christmas 1952, in Gray Star, a settlement in the remote Northwest.” Dolores’ “stillborn girl” foregrounds the recurring images of dead children to come, and the name “Gray Star” further implies ambiguity, fading, and death. The image of the star points not only to power and light, but the principle performer, Lolita herself. “Pale, pregnant, beloved, irretrievable Dolly Schiller” is forever tainted by Humbert’s actions, to the point that even her own daughter is born dead. Nabokov’s final “secret point” is almost at the very end of the novel, and it is “the tinkling sounds of the valley town coming up the mountain trail (on which I caught the first known female of *Lycaeides sublivens* Nabokov)” (316):

...with the women at home and men away. Reader! What I heard was but the melody of children at play...one could hear now and then, as if released, an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter, or the crack of a bat, or the clatter of a toy wagon...I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope...and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord (308).

In this heartrending passage, children are happily at play “with the women at home and men away,” with the adults absent (308). Humbert is fully aware, without regret, that he has taken Lolita from her world of innocent child-dom and instead forced her into his world of perversion. *Lolita* itself is proof of this action, as Humbert ends the novel stating, “this is the only

immortality you and I may share, my Lolita,” effectively immortalizing her in the book (309). Just as Nabokov captured lively, beautiful butterflies and fixed them into his collection, Humbert has captured lively, beautiful Dolly Schiller and fixed her into his novel. With “no moral in tow” whatsoever, both actions merely point to the overwhelming desires of these two hunters to capture beauty and force it into their worlds, no matter the petrification and loss of life that consequently occurs.

In his essay, Nabokov writes, “For me, a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (315). It seems that for Nabokov, *Lolita* is less interested in narratively exploiting the sexual relationship between an adult male and a pubescent girl, and is instead concerned with the tragic and piteous consequences of the seemingly endless tendency for adults to take advantage of children. Throughout *Lolita*, parents, teachers, neighbors, and even strangers are seen entrapping, abusing, and fixing children into their worlds, forcing them to conform to their own lives or desires. Nabokov works to showcase this phenomenon and bathe the reader in its emotional and artistic impact. Humbert is aware of his cruel and illegal actions for the entirety of the novel, but the real tension does not lie merely in his illicit relationship with Dolores; The real tension of the novel lies between the impenetrable wall of Humbert’s (and Godin’s, and Quincey’s) perverted desires and exceptional control over the lives of children, and the potential for child’s play, for innocence and life, for the irretrievable “melody of children at play...majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic” coming from the mountain valley, always in ear shot, always out of reach.