

Discursive Killings: Intertextuality, Aestheticization, and Death in Nabokov's *Lolita*

PHILIPP SCHWEIGHAUSER

ABSTRACT

This essay argues that Nabokov's *Lolita* is suffused with a rhetoric of death. Humbert Humbert's discursive constructions of Lolita trap her in a semantic web of death that conjures up her literal death in childbed at the age of seventeen. My reading of *Lolita* traces the fibres of that web in the more sinister implications of Humbert's intertextual references, his persistent gestures of aestheticization and his reflections on the nature of nymphets.

In Adrian Lyne's recent adaptation of *Lolita* to the screen, the *doppelgänger* motif informing the Humbert-Quilty relationship is effaced as the differences separating the two are emphasized while their similarities are minimized.¹ Frank Langella plays Clare Quilty as an unscrupulous and thoroughly evil pedophile, while Jeremy Irons's Humbert comes across as a melancholic Englishman who deeply suffers for his somewhat unconventional desires. By demonizing Quilty, Lyne invites spectators to temper their judgments on the comparably harmless Humbert. The novel's suggestion that Quilty is in fact Humbert's alter ego, his "brother,"² is lost in the translation from printed page to silver screen. A similar pattern can be discerned in Lyne's handling of the Annabel Leigh theme. The film reproduces Humbert's self-serving suggestion that "in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel" (*L* 14). But—in contrast to Nabokov's text—the cinematic version does not suggest that Annabel and Lolita are in fact "the same child" (*L* 39). Again, Lyne's film fails to capture the underlying double theme and thus reduces the novel's complexity. I would argue that the costs of this reduction are too high because the *doppelgänger* motif fundamentally contributes to some of the more sinister undertones of Nabokov's *Lolita*.

My reading of the novel will focus less on the more obvious themes of obsession, murder, incest, and pedophilia than on the narrator's way of speaking. Humbert's discourse, my argument goes, is a discourse that traps and engulfs Lolita in a semantic web of death. It is this discourse of death which defies any univocal reading of *Lolita* as a comic novel, and which works against the reader's identification with a murderer, pedophile, and incestuous father.

¹ For a discussion of the *doppelgänger* motif, see Alfred Appel, Jr., introduction, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. with a preface, introduction and notes by Alfred Appel, Jr., 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1995) xv-lxxvi; lx-lxviii, and 349 n. 31/9.

² Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr., 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1995) 247. Further references to Nabokov's *Lolita* will be designated as "*L*."

The dark undercurrents of *Lolita* are perhaps most prominent in the Annabel-Lolita theme with its allusions to Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabel Lee," but they are by no means confined to this aspect of the novel. Humbert's intertextual references, his constant aestheticization of Lolita and his reflections on the nature of nymphets are likewise suffused with a discourse of death that anticipates and conjures up Lolita's literal death at the age of seventeen.

In the novel's very first chapter, Humbert muses that "there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child. In a principedom by the sea" (*L* 9). The "initial girl-child" is Annabel Leigh, and Humbert's remark is quite obviously an attempt on his part to vindicate his crimes as the result of a childhood fixation, as an event beyond his control. But if we decide to read Humbert's assertion literally, then we must reckon with the possibility that Lolita's very existence depends on the pre-existence of Annabel. Indeed, for Humbert, Lolita is a reincarnation of Annabel, whose "spell" he manages to break only "by incarnating her in another" (*L* 15). Humbert's discourse thus denies Lolita an independent existence and, in Humbert's solipsistic universe, the signifier 'Lolita' attains its meaning only by virtue of its reference to the other signifier 'Annabel.' But this is not the whole story. According to Saussurean linguistics and post-Saussurean French thought, meaning arises precisely out of a play of differential signifiers: ". . . in language there are only differences without positive terms."³ So the fact that the signifier 'Lolita' does not carry meaning in and of itself is, paradoxically, an essential precondition for it to acquire meaning at all. What Humbert's rhetoric of reincarnation does, however, is to obliterate difference, to collapse 'Annabel' and 'Lolita' into one. For him, "[e]verything they shared made one of them" (*L* 40).

Humbert's insistence on the two girls' fundamental sameness assumes an uncanny quality for two interrelated reasons. In a more abstract sense, as Elisabeth Bronfen's discussion of repetition in the context of E. A. Poe's "Ligeia" implies, sameness and death are of a kind:

[A] repetition that succeeds perfectly may be fatal because the space of difference between model and copy has been eliminated, collapsing both terms into one entity and abolishing the singularity of each separate term.⁴

Humbert's eradication of difference denies both Annabel and Lolita an existence of their own; it drains them of meaning, hollows them out, kills them. As a repetition of another woman, Lolita is, like Poe's Ligeia, "denied her own body and is thus only a figure for a meaning other than herself, prematurely turned into a ghost."⁵ Alfred Appel makes a similar point concerning the photograph Humbert possesses of Annabel: "He cherishes his worn old snapshot of Annabel Leigh, his lost nymphet, and in a

³ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (London: Peter Owen, 1974) 120.

⁴ Elisabeth Bronfen, "Risky Resemblances: On Repetition, Mourning, and Representation," *Death and Representation*, ed. Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993) 103-29; 104.

⁵ Bronfen, "Risky Resemblances" 108.

sense lives and dies by that 'nebulous picture.' By trying to make Lolita conform to it, he reduces her to an image that is dead in every sense of the word."⁶

More specifically, Humbert's lingering fascination with Annabel derives from their unconsummated love due to Annabel's premature death "of typhus in Corfu" (*L* 13). Lolita is therefore the double of a dead woman. If Lolita is an exact replica of Annabel—and this is what Humbert's discourse suggests—then she must be dead just like her precursor. This is one of the central insights of Bronfen's discussion of Poe's "Ligeia," a tale of revenants:

In the act of repeating a first dead woman in the figure of a second one . . . the surviving lover desires death even as he attempts to deny it. . . . To make them the same means structurally eradicating all difference and division between the two women, a move from doubleness to oneness. This is possible only when the body double is exactly what it signifies, when the space between copy and model is unambivalently obliterated, when it is dead like the model it repeats.⁷

Bronfen here stresses the role of the agent in the mortifying process of equation ("In the act of repeating," "the surviving lover desires," "[t]o make them the same") and thus reminds us that the two women in Poe's tale are not simply the same by nature but that they are *made* the same by a third party. In Nabokov's *Lolita*, this third other is Humbert Humbert, who rejoices at Lolita's tennis play primarily because it allows him to "relive the days when in a hot gale, a daze of dust, and queer lassitude, I fed ball after ball to gay, innocent, elegant Annabel" (*L* 162).

As a first-person narrator, Humbert is in complete control of a discourse which constructs Lolita as a perfect and lifeless copy of a dead other.⁸ So when Humbert chances upon Lolita sunbathing in the garden of the Haze house and exclaims: ". . . there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses" (*L* 39), Lolita is not equated with Annabel primarily by virtue of her looks but through Humbert's death-dealing discourse.

In his meticulous notes appended to *The Annotated Lolita*, Alfred Appel points out that "[Edgar Allan] Poe is referred to more than twenty times in *Lolita*, . . . far more than any other writer" (*L* 330 n. 9/2). The name of Lolita's double in fact straightforwardly alludes to Poe's poem "Annabel Lee."⁹ Humbert's recollections of his former love "[i]n a principedom by the sea" (*L* 9) in *Lolita*'s initial chapter echo verses 2, 8, 14, 20, and 24 of Poe's poem: "In a kingdom by the sea." Humbert's dissection of Lolita's name in the novel's very first paragraph ("Lo-lee-ta . . . Lo. Lee. Ta.") establishes a further link between Lolita and Poe's Annabel Lee.

The poetic speaker of "Annabel Lee" mourns his dead childhood love in a way that recalls Humbert's predilection for solipsism: ". . . this maiden she lived with no other

⁶ Alfred Appel, *Nabokov's Dark Cinema* (New York: Oxford UP, 1974) 69.

⁷ Bronfen, "Risky Resemblances" 113.

⁸ Wayne C. Booth speaks of Humbert as *Lolita*'s "vicious center of consciousness" having "full and unlimited control of the rhetorical resources" (*The Rhetoric of Fiction* [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961] 390). Nomi Tamir-Ghez likewise asserts that Nabokov gives "an unreliable narrator full control over the whole discourse" ("The Art of Persuasion in Nabokov's *Lolita*," *Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Phyllis A. Roth [Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984] 157-76; 159).

⁹ Appel provides a summary of allusions to Poe in *The Annotated Lolita* 328-32 n. 9/2.

thought / Than to love and be loved by me” (vv. 5-6). Annabel’s whole existence, the poetic ‘I’ implies, acquires meaning only in relation to him. She is absorbed into his universe just as Lolita is absorbed into Humbert’s solipsistic “umber and black Hum-berland” (L 166), where she acts as a stand-in for a dead woman (Annabel Leigh) and as the vehicle for a literary allusion to yet another dead woman (Annabel Lee). When Humbert punningly names Lolita “My Frigid Princess” (L 166), his quip is of course of a sexual nature, but not exclusively so. Poe’s Annabel Lee dies in a cold wind: “. . . the wind came out of the cloud, chilling / And killing my Annabel Lee” (vv. 25-26).¹⁰ Hence, Humbert’s frigid princess is also a dead princess. Lolita, Humbert says, does “not see the wistful joke” (L 166), and she remains the passive object of Humbert’s macabre jest.

Nabokov detested Freud and was always outspoken on the subject: “I think he’s crude, I think he’s medieval, and I don’t want an elderly gentleman from Vienna with an umbrella inflicting his dreams upon me.”¹¹ In a *Wisconsin Studies* interview, Nabokov passes what can be considered his final verdict on Freud: “Let the credulous and the vulgar continue to believe that all mental woes can be cured by a daily application of old Greek myths to their private parts.”¹² Intentional fallacy apart, it seems safe to assume that the pseudo-psychoanalytic explanations and references dispersed throughout *Lolita* are not to be taken at face value. When Humbert tells the reader of his plans to repeat and complete with Lolita his and Annabel’s aborted attempt at lovemaking by the sea, Humbert and, behind him, Nabokov parody the Freudian concept of childhood fixation:

The able psychiatrist who studies my case—and whom by now Dr. Humbert has plunged, I trust, into a state of leporine fascination—is no doubt anxious to have me take my Lolita to the seaside and have me find there, at last, the “gratification” of a lifetime urge, and release from the “subconscious” obsession of an incomplete childhood romance with the initial little Miss Lee. (L 166-67)

The Freudian parody is, however, suspended as it becomes clear that Humbert’s actions do conform to the iterative patterns of a childhood fixation. He not only intends to take Lolita to the beach (“Well, comrade, let me tell you that I *did* look for a beach” [L 167]), but the fact that he refers to Annabel Leigh as “Miss Lee” in the above passage also testifies to the inextricable conflation of the two Annabels. Hence, Humbert’s “search for a Kingdom by the Sea, a Sublimated Riviera, or whatnot” (L 167) involves them both as well as Lolita, whom he refers to as “Annabel Haze, alias Dolores Lee, alias Loleeta” (L 167). Humbert’s desire to repeat the original scene with Lolita takes on a grim quality in the light of both Humbert’s corresponding experience with Annabel Leigh and Poe’s “Annabel Lee.” Humbert’s narration of his and Annabel’s “final attempt to thwart fate” (L 13) ends in the following words:

I was on my knees, and on the point of possessing my darling, when two bearded bathers, the old man of the sea and his brother, came out of the sea with exclamations of ribald encouragement, and four months later she died of typhus in Corfu. (L 13)

¹⁰ Cf. Appel, *The Annotated Lolita* 395 n. 166/2.

¹¹ Qtd. in Appel, *The Annotated Lolita* 325 n. 5/6.

¹² Qtd. in Appel, *The Annotated Lolita* 325 n. 5/6.

There is, of course, no causal connection between the two events, but the narrative sequence and the logic of fate suggest that death follows intimacies on the beach. This might seem far-fetched, but Nabokov's *Lolita* in fact abounds in such correspondences.¹³ In his introduction to *The Annotated Lolita*, Alfred Appel links the frequent fortuities in *Lolita* with Humbert's persistent preoccupation with the workings of fate:

Humbert goes to live in Charlotte Haze's house at 342 Lawn Street; he and Lolita inaugurate their illicit cross-country tour in room 342 of The Enchanted Hunters hotel; and in one year on the road they register in 342 motels and hotels. Given the endless mathematical combinations possible, the numbers seem to signal his entrapment by McFate (to use Humbert's personification). (*L* xxviii)

Even if the reader is familiar with this type of patterning (and, it must be admitted, with Appel's formidable annotations and introduction), he or she should be wary of Humbert's attempt to repeat the past. The allusion to "Annabel Lee" corroborates this interpretation: in Poe's poem, the initial "kingdom by the sea" (v. 2) turns into "the sepulchre by the sea" and "her tomb by the sounding sea" in the poem's two final verses.¹⁴

The more sinister implications of Humbert's references to Poe's "Annabel Lee" are paralleled and reinforced by his recurrent allusions to Prosper Mérimée's novella *Carmen*.¹⁵ Humbert frequently calls Lolita "my little Carmen" (*L* 59, 61), "Carmencita" (*L* 242, 280), "*ma Carmen*" (*L* 243, 278), "my Carmen" (*L* 251, 256), and thus identifies her with that other literary character who is killed by her jealous lover José Izarrabengoa. To the reader—who knows from the very beginning that Humbert is a murderer ("You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style" [*L* 9]) but not who the victim is—the *Carmen* allusions may very well suggest that it is Lolita who will eventually be killed by her jealous lover Humbert. As he takes his last farewell from Lolita, Humbert explicitly evokes this possibility but then hastens to declare that nothing has been further from his mind: "Then I pulled out my automatic—I mean, this is the kind of fool thing a reader might suppose I did. It never even occurred to me" (*L* 280). Such passages certainly lend support to Appel's assertion that the "*Carmen* allusions also serve as a trap for the sophisticated reader who is misled into believing that H.H., like José, will murder his treacherous Carmen" (*L* 358 n. 45/3).¹⁶ Elisabeth Bronfen's discussion of *Lolita*, however, suggests a different inter-

¹³ John Haegert, "Artist in Exile: The Americanization of Humbert Humbert," *ELH* 52.3 (1985): 777-94, explicitly links the Annabel-Lolita theme with a structural principle informing the novel as a whole: "[I]t underscores a tendency toward narrative repetition and reconstruction which is entirely characteristic of Humbert and which, in its own way, is premonitory of that wider pattern of Nabokovian parody and coincidence for which the novel itself has been alternately celebrated and condemned" (781-82).

¹⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, "Annabel Lee," *The Portable Poe*, ed. Philip van Doren Stern (New York: Penguin, 1973) 632-34.

¹⁵ For a summary of allusions to *Carmen*, see Appel, *The Annotated Lolita* 358 n. 45/3.

¹⁶ Rüdiger Imhof argues in a similar vein that both the allusions to "Annabel Lee" and *Carmen* must be interpreted as "blind motifs" (*Contemporary Metafiction: A Poetological Study of Metafiction in English since 1939* [Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1986] 91). While there is certainly reason to suggest that this is the case for the *Carmen* allusions (although I am suggesting a different interpretation), Imhof's approach is—as my above discussion implies—misguided with respect to Nabokov's manifold references to Poe's "Annabel Lee."

pretation: “[T]hese allusions duplicitously point to the real effacement of the feminine subject that grounds this representation and are used to veil the figural murder of Dolores Haze that does occur in the text.”¹⁷

The allusions signal “the real effacement of the feminine subject” insofar as the fictional Carmen dies at the hands of her jealous lover, and they “veil the figural murder of Dolores Haze” insofar as they are foregrounded only to be exposed as parodic, as false leads. The real “figural murder” occurs, Bronfen suggests, as a result of “an excessively figural rendition of the beloved ‘killed’ into the trope of a muse.”¹⁸ Bronfen’s reading concentrates on the topos of the dead beloved as muse.¹⁹ It is in this context that Humbert’s assertion that Lolita “is dead and immortal if you are reading this” (*L* 280), his frequent apostrophes of her as “my Lolita”²⁰ and the web of literary allusions surrounding her ‘kill’ Lolita into the poetic trope of a muse.

Bronfen’s discussion focuses solely on allusions to dead literary women. Humbert’s allusiveness, however, is not confined to these more obviously portentous citations. Lolita is quite right when she says to Humbert: “You talk like a book, *Dad*” (*L* 114). The literary character Lolita is in fact a pastiche of bits and pieces of other fictional characters. When Humbert asks her: “And do you remember, Miranda, that other ‘ultrasmart’ robbers’ den . . . ?” (*L* 147), the allusion is to the addressee of “Tarantella,” a poem by Hilaire Belloc:

Do you remember an Inn,
Miranda?
Do you remember an Inn?²¹

Humbert’s evocation of her as “Lola” (*L* 9) refers to Marlene Dietrich’s role in *The Blue Angel*, an allusion that is later taken up in Humbert’s description of Lolita’s mother Charlotte as “a weak solution of Marlene Dietrich” (*L* 37). As “Lilith” (*L* 20), she is Adam’s first wife in Jewish legend, and when Humbert styles himself a “poor Catullus” (*L* 65–66), Lolita becomes his Lesbia.²² Lolita’s body is thus turned into a body of allusions, into a fragmented and incoherent *assemblage* of references which she herself would not understand. It is Humbert who assimilates her to his own cultural knowledge; he does not only deny her the life of an ordinary twelve-year-old, but he completely obliterates *this* Lolita in order to reinstate *his* Lolita in her place.

In the novel’s very last paragraph, Humbert discloses that the nature and purpose of his text is “to make [Lolita] live in the minds of later generations”: “I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita” (*L* 309). Humbert’s wish to immortalize Lolita through art pays tribute, of course, to an ancient

¹⁷ Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992) 380.

¹⁸ Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body* 371.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the changing trope of the muse, see Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body* 362–66.

²⁰ Cf. Appel, *The Annotated Lolita* 402 n. 192/2 for a list of occurrences.

²¹ Hilaire Belloc, “Tarantella,” *Complete Verse: Including Sonnets and Verse, Cautionary Verses, The Modern Traveller, etc.* (London: Duckworth, 1970) 64–66, vv. 1–3.

²² Cf. Appel, *The Annotated Lolita* 386 n. 147/1, 332 n. 9/4, 342 n. 20/2, 367 n. 66/1.

topos: art immortalizes the artist as well as his or her privileged object of representation. For unwary readers, the text of *Lolita* as a whole may simply represent an artistic monument commemorating Humbert's and Lolita's (albeit fictional and fictitious) love. But Humbert's discourse aims further. His project is not only to represent Lolita by the means of artistic expression but to turn her into a work of art. Humbert's primary device in this endeavor is intertextuality. His allusions to other fictional characters (Annabel Lee, Carmen, Miranda, Lilith, Lola, Lesbia) in his descriptions of Lolita are the most prominent instances of this tendency. Of course, Lolita herself—and particularly the Lolita Humbert describes—is a fictional construct. But by turning her into a site of multiple references to other fictional characters, Humbert aestheticizes her and thus removes her one step further into the sphere of art. This transposition, I would argue, occurs *inside* the reality of the fictive world: Humbert is a scholar of considerable sophistication, and we need not attribute these allusions to an authorial intervention on Nabokov's part.

Humbert's allusiveness is not confined to literary texts but extends into the sphere of pictorial art. The most frequent references are to the Italian Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus."²³ Humbert's allusions to Botticelli during his final meeting with Lolita at first seem strangely at odds with the chapter's prevailing imagery of decay and death. Humbert himself notices this: "Curious: although actually her looks had faded, I definitely realized, so hopelessly late in the day, how much she looked—had always looked—like Botticelli's russet Venus—the same soft nose, the same blurred beauty" (*L* 270). Lolita's body, which Humbert describes as "hollow-cheeked" on the same page and as "hopelessly worn at seventeen" a couple of pages later (*L* 277), is likened to that of Botticelli's Venus, an emblem of beauty, vitality and youth. The very next sentence, however, continues in a more sinister vein: "In my pocket my fingers gently let go and repacked a little at the tip, within the handkerchief it was nested in, my unused weapon" (*L* 270). Humbert reminds the reader—who knows he is a murderer—that he is carrying a gun which has not been used (yet) and thus resumes the *Carmen* motif with all its morbid implications. Amidst this rhetoric of death, the reference to Botticelli's Venus seems out of place. But the mystery is solved as we turn our attention to Humbert's first reference to the Italian painter:

That Tuesday, Lo had her dinner in her room. She had been crying after a routine row with her mother and, as had happened on former occasions, had not wished me to see her swollen eyes: she had one of those tender complexions that after a good cry get all blurred and inflamed, and morbidly alluring. I regretted keenly her mistake about my private aesthetics, for I simply love that tinge of Botticellian pink, that raw rose about the lips, those wet, matted eyelashes; and, naturally, her bashful whim deprived me of many opportunities of specious consolation. (*L* 64-65)

Lolita's "blurred" complexion echoes the "blurred beauty" (*L* 270) of Botticelli's Venus and is, Humbert ominously suggests, "morbidly alluring." More crucially, her Botticellian "wet, matted eyelashes" not only refer to "The Birth of Venus" but also to the "black lashes still wet, matted like yours, Lolita" (*L* 105) of Charlotte Haze's

²³ References to Botticelli are noted in Appel, *The Annotated Lolita* 366 n. 64/3, 439 n. 270/2, 440 n. 274/1.

face in death. The references to Botticelli are thus from the very beginning inscribed by death, so that Humbert's second allusion to the painter in his final meeting with Lolita ("Florentine breasts" [L 274]) is perfectly appropriate in this chapter suffused with Humbert's rhetoric of death. An earlier reference to a different Venus confirms the pattern. In the moments leading up to the masturbation scene, Lolita shows Humbert a picture in one of her magazines: "Dimly there came into view: a surrealist painter relaxing, supine, on a beach, and near him, likewise supine, a plaster replica of the Venus di Milo, half-buried in sand. Picture of the Week, said the legend. I whisked the whole obscene thing away" (L 58). Humbert's brisk reaction not only testifies to his immense dislike for trashy art but maybe also to a realization on his part that Lolita is unwittingly holding a mirror up to his face.²⁴

Other references to pictorial art occur in similarly sinister contexts. Anticipating his first sexual encounter with the drugged Lolita, the "morbidly sensitive" (L 129) Humbert lies awake and is greatly irritated by Lolita's erratic sleep: "She was again fast asleep, my nymphet, but still I did not dare to launch upon my enchanted voyage. *La Petite Dormeuse ou l'Amant Ridicule*" (L 129). The fictitious title, Alfred Appel points out, parodies "eighteenth-century genre engravings" (L 381 n. 129/2). Humbert's gesture of aestheticization arrests the moment into a stasis. As such, it goes hand in hand with his determination to drug Lolita again, thereby risking to reduce her to the final stagnation of death: "Tomorrow I would stuff her with those earlier pills that had so completely numbed her mummy" (L 129).

Indeed, one could argue that art as representation is always already inscribed by death. All representation of living matter involves a transformation of animate matter into inanimate matter (paint, paper, celluloid).²⁵ In pictorial art (as opposed to the cinema, for instance), this process is reinforced by the art form's essentially static nature; pictorial art attempts to arrest life into an immutable image. This is why "a translation of body into image may kill."²⁶ Humbert's fancy to repaint the dining room of the Enchanted Hunters hotel "with murals of my own making" (L 134) in the wake of his first sexual union with Lolita is thus doubly inscribed by death, both on account of the death imagery he uses (hidden behind his parody of Freudian symbolism) and by virtue of the very act of representation:

There would have been nature studies—a tiger pursuing a bird of paradise, a choking snake sheathing whole the flayed trunk of a shoat. . . . There would have been a fire opal dissolving within a ripple-ringed pool, a last throb, a last dab of color, stinging red, smarting pink, a sigh, a wincing child. (L 134-35)

²⁴ Appel argues in a similar vein that "the magazine picture of a surrealistic 'plaster replica of the Venus di Milo, half-buried in sand' metaphorically projects Lolita's life with [Humbert]" (*The Annotated Lolita* 384 n. 137/1).

²⁵ Maurice Blanchot makes a similar point in the context of verbal representation: "In order to say: this woman, it is in one way or another necessary for me to disavow her flesh-and-blood reality, to make her absent, to annihilate her" (*Literatur und das Recht auf den Tod / La littérature et le droit à la mort*. French and German. Trans. Clemens-Carl Härle [Berlin: Merve, 1982] 74; my translation). See also Bronfen's reading of Edgar Allan Poe's tale "The Oval Portrait" as a problematization of "the conventional idea of art as transformation of living matter into inanimate form" (*Over Her Dead Body* 111).

²⁶ Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body* 117.

In her discussion of this passage, Linda Kauffman (1989) suggests that “[a]esthetic form distances us from *Lolita*’s pain, diverting our attention from content.”²⁷ I would argue to the contrary that Humbert’s aestheticization is an aggressive gesture that is clearly visible as such.

More specifically, an appropriation and subsequent elimination of the feminine is seen, in Walter Benjamin’s modernist discourse, as the essential precondition of artistic creation. In his “Denkbilder,” Benjamin explicitly links art with an effacement of the feminine:

One has often thought of the creation of great works of art in the image of birth. This image is dialectic; it circumscribes the process in two directions. One has to do with creative conception [Empfängnis] and its genius concerns femininity. This femininity exhausts itself after the fulfilment [Vollendung]. It gives life to the art work and then dies. What dies in the master artist once creation has been fulfilled is that part in him, in which the creation was conceived. Now, the fulfilment of the art work—and that leads to the other side of the process—is nothing dead . . . here, too, one can speak of birth. For in the process of being fulfilled the creation gives birth once again to the creator. Not in this feminine mode, in which his creation was conceived, but rather in his masculine element. Reanimated, he exceeds nature . . . he is the masculine first-born of the art work, which he once conceived.²⁸

In Benjamin, the birth of the artist coincides with the death of the feminine and the maternal.²⁹ The artist appropriates the female principles of creativity and conception to give birth to his work of art. Once this is accomplished, the maternal principle must be renounced, the feminine obliterated. Only then is the artist truly an artist.

This complex of maternity, aesthetics and death should enable us to conceptualize Humbert Humbert’s persistent use of defective birth imagery. Humbert frequently declares himself an artist. Speaking of his nympholepsy, he states that “[y]ou have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of great melancholy . . . in order to discern at once . . . the little deadly demon among the wholesome children” (*L* 17). Humbert composes several poems (*L* 16, 245, 255-57, 263, 299-300), in increasing frequency as his narrative approaches his concluding evocation of the sphere of “aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art” (*L* 309). Indeed, Humbert conceives of his sexual perversion as a form of art: “Emphatically, no killers are we. Poets never kill” (*L* 88). In another passage, he argues to the same effect that “[t]he gentle and dreamy regions through which I crept were the patrimonies of poets—not crime’s prowling ground” (*L* 131). As he ponders on his descriptions of Charlotte Haze and asserts that “the artist in me has been given the upper hand over the gentleman” (*L* 71), we may catch a first glimpse of the intimate relation between Humbert’s artistic stance and his abhorrence of the maternal body. Humbert privately calls Charlotte “the big bitch, the old cat, the obnoxious mamma” (*L* 95) and on sev-

²⁷ Linda Kauffman, “Framing *Lolita*: Is There a Woman in the Text?” *Refiguring the Father: New Feminist Readings of Patriarchy*, ed. Patricia Yaeger and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1989) 131-52; 142.

²⁸ Trans. in Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body* 124-25.

²⁹ Maurice Blanchot uses a similar metaphor of conception in the context of literature: “Let us suppose that the work is written: the writer is born alongside of it. Before, there was no one to write it; with the book, an author exists, who becomes one with his book” (20; my translation).

eral occasions even considers killing her: “The natural solution was to destroy Mrs. Humbert” (L 84). An unexpected car accident will eventually preclude Humbert’s murderous ambitions, and *this* murder remains a figment of his imagination. Nevertheless, Humbert’s plans to kill Charlotte entirely accord with his constant association of maternity with death. Against Lolita’s juvenile body, he sets her mother’s “undergrowth of dark decaying forests” (L 77). In coeds, he only sees “the coffin of coarse female flesh within which my nymphets are buried alive” (L 175) and thus equates the womb with the grave. An embryo is to Humbert “the tiny madman in his padded cell” (L 47), and his rendition of his own mother’s death is—appropriately and cynically—short: “My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three” (L 10). As he meets Lolita for the last time, Humbert does not feel remorse for the pain he has inflicted on her, for his “sterile and selfish vice” (L 278). But his death-dealing rhetoric continues even throughout this chapter and undermines his talk of repentance as he explicitly equates her pregnancy with death: “How simple! The moment, the death I had kept conjuring up for three years was as simple as a bit of dry wood. She was frankly and hugely pregnant” (L 269). Lolita, who is pregnant by her husband Dick Schiller, is to Humbert only “pale and polluted, and big with another’s child” (L 278). In this context, Lolita’s death “in childbed, giving birth to a stillborn girl” (L 4) is merely a literalization of Humbert’s persistent perversions of the imagery of procreation. To recall Benjamin, Humbert’s birth as a self-made artist takes place over the dead maternal body of his privileged love object.

By the time Humbert’s narrative has reached the point where the reader learns that Lolita is married to Dick Schiller, Humbert’s morbid constructions of Lolita have been made flesh, and “Dolly Schiller” is truly “dying in Gray Star” (L 316), as Nabokov puts it in his afterword. One of the principal reasons why Humbert’s constructions ‘succeed’ so well is of a narratological nature. Humbert is the novel’s first-person narrator and as such in total control of the narrative. Hence, the image the reader gets of Lolita is always filtered through Humbert’s perception, and we can never know for sure the way Lolita ‘really’ is. Reality is of course a tricky concept and, according to Nabokov, “one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes” (L 312). In a constructionist age, where Clifford Geertz’s assertion that “what man is may be so entangled with where he is, who he is, and what he believes that it is inseparable from them”³⁰ has become an anthropologist’s commonplace, the closest we could probably get at Lolita’s reality would be to hear her tell her own story. This would be yet another construction, to be sure, but a self-authored one. Lolita’s own story would be devoid of Humbert’s high-brow allusions and its tone more akin to Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* than to Humbert’s highly sophisticated diction. Lolita’s description of her classmates and her first homosexual experience (“They are pretty bad, some of that school bunch, but not that bad. If you have to know, her name was Elizabeth Talbot, she goes to a swanky private school, her father is an executive” [L 136]) is worlds (and words) apart from Humbert’s portrayal of Lolita (playing tennis in this scene):

³⁰ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1978) 35.

My Lolita had a way of raising her bent left knee at the ample and springy start of the service cycle when there would develop and hang in the sun for a second a vital web of balance between toed foot, pristine armpit, burnished arm and far back-flung racket, as she smiled up with gleaming teeth at the small globe suspended so high in the zenith of the powerful and graceful cosmos she had created for the express purpose of falling upon it with a clean resounding crack of her golden whip. (*L* 231-32)

Humbert's phrasing is obviously a great deal more intricate and elaborate than Lolita's. A grammatical analysis confirms this: While Lolita's two sentences are simple paratactic constructions characterized by two co-ordinate clauses in the first sentence and asyndetic co-ordination in the second, Humbert's sentence (the whole quote consists of a single sentence) contains both parataxis and hypotaxis. More importantly, while Lolita's vocabulary is that of informal talk ("pretty bad," "school bunch," "swanky"), Humbert's is metaphorical and poetical ("web of balance," "pristine armpit," "the small globe suspended so high in the zenith," "graceful cosmos," "golden whip"). Moreover, Humbert's use of alliteration ("springy start of the service cycle," "small globe suspended so high in the zenith") reinforces the passage's poetic qualities. Humbert aestheticizes Lolita throughout his rendering of her tennis play; he describes her like a work of art, which he eagerly absorbs in "an almost painful convulsion of beauty assimilation" (*L* 231). Again, the word 'assimilation' suggests that Lolita is sucked into Humbert's world of aesthetics, where her tennis ball "would strike vibrantly the harp-cord of the net" (*L* 233), where she may display her "ballet attitude" (*L* 233), and where "[h]er overhead volley [is] related to her service as the envoy is to the ballade" (*L* 232).

Humbert does realize that he creates a Lolita which has very little in common with the flesh-and-blood daughter of Charlotte Haze. This becomes particularly obvious in the notorious masturbation scene, which is prefaced by Humbert's stage directions and thus turned into the equivalent of a play-within-a-play: "Main character: Humbert the Hummer. Time: Sunday morning in June. Place: sunlit living room. Props: old, candy-striped davenport, magazines, phonograph, Mexican knickknacks . . ." (*L* 57). Lolita, although transposed into the aesthetic realm of theatre (or film) is, interestingly enough, not mentioned among the characters. Again, she is made to disappear into Humbert's solipsistic world. In his afterthoughts on the masturbation scene, Humbert explains that by creating another (imaginary) Lolita, he has actually managed to preserve the child's chastity:

I felt proud of myself. I had stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor. Absolutely no harm done. The conjurer had poured milk, molasses, foaming champagne into a young lady's new white purse; and lo, the purse was intact. Thus had I delicately constructed my ignoble, ardent, sinful dream; and still Lolita was safe—and I was safe. (*L* 62)

But as Humbert goes on he, or, rather, Nabokov, discloses the more sinister ramifications of Humbert's aestheticization of Lolita: "What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own" (*L* 62).

While this passage testifies to an awareness on Humbert's part that his constructions of Lolita are an act of imposition, his rhetoric nevertheless fits in seamlessly with

his overall discourse of death. Unlike in the Annabel-Lolita passages, Humbert here stresses difference rather than sameness (“What I had madly possessed was not she”). But the excerpt still maintains a very uncanny quality due to the fact that for Humbert, the imaginary Lolita, his “own creation,” is, “perhaps, more real than Lolita” (*L* 62). If Humbert’s own creation is indeed more real than Lolita Haze, then there is nothing to stop Humbert from letting the former usurp the latter’s place, “encasing her,” as Humbert himself puts it. This is precisely the point where sameness creeps in again: if the imaginary Lolita completely encases Lolita Haze, the latter is suffocated and obliterated, made lifeless just like her fantasized counterpart. Moreover, Humbert is deluded if he thinks that “she had noticed nothing” (*L* 61). Humbert’s perception of “a sudden shrill note in her voice” (*L* 61) as he climaxes testifies to Lolita’s awareness of what is going on. Hence, Humbert’s violation of Lolita’s body in this scene is of a twofold nature, both physical and rhetorical.

Humbert’s aesthetic project must be seen in the context of his nympholepsy. Indeed, it may be regarded as an offshoot of his “greater endeavour . . . to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (*L* 135). The magic of nymphets is perilous in a twofold sense. For Humbert, every nymphet is a “little deadly demon” (*L* 17) and as such perilous in the sense of ‘very dangerous.’ More importantly, the magic of nymphets is perilous in the sense of ‘precarious’ because they will eventually and invariably outgrow their nymphet status, which Humbert situates somewhere “[b]etween the age limits of nine and fourteen” (*L* 16). It is this awareness which underlies his sad recognition that he “had fallen in love with Lolita forever,” while “she would not be forever Lolita” (*L* 65). Humbert’s obsession with the transitoriness of nymphhood is what informs his wish that they may never reach maturity: “Ah, leave me alone in my pubescent park, in my mossy garden. Let them play around me forever. Never grow up” (*L* 21). His aesthetic project of immortalizing Lolita is thus deeply embedded in a discourse which denies nymphets a human life and reduces them to a stasis (“Never grow up”) that is more akin to death than to life.

Lucy Maddox in a different context speaks of Humbert’s “love for a female who is immune to change and who therefore cannot be lost.”³¹ In her discussion of Humbert’s final instruction that the text of *Lolita* “be published only when Lolita is no longer alive” (*L* 309), Maddox talks about Humbert’s “need to verify a lover’s death before he can speak without irony of his erotic desire for that lover” and comments that “Nabokov exploits the psychological implications of necrophilia, but without taking any of them literally.”³² This admittedly extreme interpretation of the nature of Humbert’s desire is supported by *Lolita*’s constant allusions to Poe’s “Annabel Lee,” in which necrophilia is an overt element of the poetic speaker’s love:

And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride,
In the sepulchre by the sea—
In her tomb by the sounding sea. (vv. 38-41)

³¹ Lucy Maddox, “Necrophilia in *Lolita*,” *The Centennial Review* 26.4 (1982): 361-74; 366.

³² Maddox 366.

The uncannily sexualized imagery Humbert uses as he speaks about his “anxiety, passion and pain” at one of Lolita’s temporary absences points in the same direction: “. . . it would have been instrumental in wrenching open the zipper of her nylon shroud had she been dead” (*L* 236).

Humbert’s fascination with the juvenile bodies of nymphets and his desire to fix their magic also informs his repugnance for “the heavy low-slung pelvis, thick calves and deplorable complexion of the average coed,” in whom he sees “the coffin of coarse female flesh within which my nymphets are buried alive” (*L* 175). Humbert here implies that nymphets outgrowing their “magic nymphage” (*L* 176) simply die—Lolita’s eventual death in childbed confirms this morbid logic. What comes to the fore here is the paradox and impasse of Humbert’s thinking: in order to keep the human beings he perceives as nymphets alive as nymphets, he turns them into lifeless figments of his imagination. Maddox comments that “[Humbert] is attracted to the *idea* of death . . . as a saving stasis, a way of preventing the loss of the beautiful.”³³ Humbert’s desire to immortalize Lolita and her beauty through his work of art is thus inscribed by death from the very beginning. The “very local palliative of articulate art” (*L* 283) may be a solace to Humbert, who feels remorse for “the foul lust” he has “inflicted upon her” (*L* 283), but in the end it works towards the destruction of its objects of representation. It is this complex of aesthetics, beauty, death, and immortality which provides the strongest link between Nabokov’s and Poe’s aesthetics. Poe’s famous statement from “The Philosophy of Composition” is also the basis of Humbert’s aesthetic project: “. . . the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.”³⁴

³³ Maddox 368.

³⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition,” *The Portable Poe*, ed. Stern 557.