

PHILIPP SCHWEIGHAUSER (Basel)

Metafiction, Transcendence, and Death in Nabokov's *Lolita*

Alfred Appel's "*Lolita: The Springboard of Parody*" (1967) and his introduction to *The Annotated Lolita* (first published in 1970) have set the tone for many aspiring critics of the novel. Appel highlights *Lolita*'s metafictional elements and labels it an "involved work":¹

An involved work turns in upon itself, is self-referential, conscious of its status as a fiction, and "*allégorique de lui-même*"—allegorical of itself, to use Mallarmé's description of one of his poems. An ideally involved sentence would simply read, "I am a sentence" [...] (*The Annotated Lolita*, xxiiif.)

Both John Ray Jr.'s fictional foreword and Nabokov's afterword "On a book entitled *Lolita*" strongly discourage a referential reading and lend support to Appel's proposals. While John Ray mocks the "old-fashioned readers who wish to follow the destinies of the "real" people beyond the "true" story" (4), Nabokov declares that "*Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss" (134).

Later critics who wished to stress the novel's referential aspects (e.g. *Lolita*'s suffering as a human being) often had to define themselves explicitly against Appel's readings.² Feminist critic Linda Kauffman (1989) attempts to steer a middle course:

I should like to propose a dialogic reading, one that is both feminist and intertextual; one that releases the female body both from its anesthesia and from Humbert's solipsism while simultaneously highlighting textual artifice. (137f.)

Kauffman then makes an interesting assertion concerning the relationship between the novel's intertextual references and the violence done to *Lolita*: "That the novel is an exercise in intertextuality [...] does not mitigate the

1. "Involution" is also the term used by John Fletcher in his chapter on metafiction in *Novel and Reader* (1980: 33-50).

2. Cf. Merrill 1979, Alexandrov 1991.

horror of Lolita's treatment. Instead, it reinforces it" (138). Unfortunately, though, Kauffman abandons this line of inquiry after a few references to Poe, Dickens and James in favour of a straightforwardly referential reading: "In *Lolita*, the incestuous father's jealousy, tyranny, voracity, and possessiveness are both verisimilar and clinically verifiable" (149).

I would indeed argue that there is an intimate relationship between Lolita's suffering, and the novel's status as metafiction. Now this is a paradoxical statement. If *Lolita* is a metafictional novel that severs all links with reality and comments on the process of fiction-making instead,³ then it seems highly irrelevant and maybe even somewhat naïve to inquire into the suffering one of its characters inflicts on another. In metafiction, "death" may be "but a question of style" (*Bend Sinister*, 220), as the narrator of Nabokov's *Bend Sinister* suggests in the face of the main protagonist's demise.⁴ In the case of *Lolita*, however, I would argue with Alfred Appel that the novel is "a parody of death with real suffering in it" (*The Annotated Lolita*, 378 n. 119/1).

In one sense, *Lolita*'s parodic, intertextual, self-reflexive, anti-realist and anti-representational stance diverts from and to a certain extent even negates the ethical dimension a reading of the novel as realist fiction might focus on. On the other hand, my discussion will suggest, it is precisely these metafictional elements which contribute to and reinforce the sinister implications of Humbert's discourse.

Take Humbert's solipsism for instance. The self-reflexiveness and self-consciousness of the text reproduces the fictional character Humbert's almost exclusive concern with himself on the extradiegetic level of narration.⁵ At first

3. For Raymond Federman (1975), the primary purpose of metafiction (his term is surfiction) is "to unmask its own fictionality, to expose the metaphor of its own fraudulence, and not to pretend any longer to pass for reality, for truth, or for beauty" (8). Rüdiger Imhof (1986) argues in a similar vein that "[a] metafiction is a kind of self-reflexive narrative that narrates about narrating" (9) and that "metafiction thematises only its own mechanisms and does not aspire to represent anything other than itself" (20).

4. I am here drawing on Rüdiger Imhof's interpretation of the passage in *Bend Sinister*: "One way of interpreting this ambiguous statement is to suggest that death, the death of a character in fiction, is merely a matter of delineation, a matter of using words in a particular way, and nothing else" (1986: 39).

5. In Gérard Genette's terminology, "any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed. [...] The narrating instance of a first narrative is [...] extradiegetic by definition, as the narrating instance of a (metadiegetic) narrative is diegetic by definition" (1980: 228f.). Humbert Humbert as (homodiegetic) narrator/writer of his memoirs thus belongs to a

sight, this seems a truism. As Humbert is both the narrator of *Lolita* and one of its main protagonists, it seems obvious that his act of narration displays Humbert the character's predilection for solipsism. Humbert's comment on his killing of Quilty is a case in point: "This, I said to myself, was the end of the ingenious play staged for me by Quilty" (305). This sentence communicates Humbert the character's feelings upon leaving Quilty's house. The ambiguity surrounding his conviction that the foregoing events were a play staged for him casts Humbert in the role of both main character and sole spectator of the preceding events. As such, Humbert's assertion bears witness to the self-contained and solipsistic nature of his mind and to his concomitant indifference to other people's suffering. But the metaliterary quality of Humbert's comment is further enhanced by the intertextual references of the scene. It is Humbert the narrator who duly notes that the final confrontation is staged like a Hollywood Western:

In its published form, this book is being read, I assume, in the first years of 2000 A.D. (1935 plus eighty or ninety, live long, my love); and elderly readers will surely recall at this point the obligatory scene in the Westerns of their childhood. (299)

The metaliterary quality of the scene therefore also points to Humbert the narrator and fictional author of *Lolita* and, finally, also to Nabokov, who knows that, as *doppelgänger*, Humbert Humbert and the playwright Clare Quilty are in a sense one and the same person.⁶

Nabokov's use of the play-within-a-play tradition frequently indicates a convergence of metafictional devices and what one might call the novel's ethical concerns. Quilty's play *The Enchanted Hunters* is a metafiction in its own right: in the course of the action one of the characters, a poet, claims that all the other character's are actually "his, the Poet's, invention" (201). Humbert's frequent equations of *Lolita* with a host of fictional characters—among them "Lola" (9), "Lilith" (20), "Carmen" (59, 61, 242, 243, 251, 256, 278, 280), "Miranda" (147) and "Lenore" (207)⁷—are here literalized, and *Lolita* temporarily becomes what Humbert's discourse is trying to turn her into: a fictional character in someone else's—this time it is Quilty's—game. *Lolita* voluntarily enters the sphere of art, the province of "aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art" (309) Humbert has all along been trying to push her into. The independence *Lolita*'s

different (extradiegetic) level of narration than the Humbert Humbert who is a fictional character on the diegetic level.

6. For a discussion of the *doppelgänger* motif, see Appel, *The Annotated Lolita*, lx-lxviii and 349 n. 31/9.

7. For intertextual references, see Appel, *The Annotated Lolita*, 332 n. 9/4, 342 n. 20/2, 358 n. 45/3, 386 n. 147/, 408 n. 207/5.

theatrical work promises is therefore only illusory: Clare Quilty turns out to be not only a pornographer but Humbert's *doppelgänger* as well. Moreover, the role Lolita is assigned testifies to the similarity of Quilty's and Humbert's constructions of the twelve-year-old girl. Lolita's part is that of "a farmer's daughter who imagines herself to be a woodland witch, or Diana, or something" (200) and thus resembles the role of demoniac nymphet Humbert has reserved for her in *his* narration. Headmistress Pratt's judgement of Lolita's acting therefore seems appropriate enough: "She was such a perfect little nymph in the try-out" (196). Lolita plays the role she has been assigned by Humbert all along.

Nabokov's allusions to the genre of the confessional novel cast Lolita in yet another role. Humbert repeatedly refers to the whole text as a "memoir" (308, 309) and John Ray discloses that the full title of the narrative is "Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male" (3). Alfred Appel notes that

the entire subtitle parodies the titillating confessional novel, such as John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1749), and the expectations of the reader who hopes *Lolita* will provide the pleasures of pornography. (*The Annotated Lolita*, 319 n. 3/1)

I would agree with Appel that *Lolita* is a parody rather than a straightforward reworking of the confessional novel. Parody is generally regarded as a ludic form which consists of a comic and distorted imitation of narrative conventions. As such, parody is prone to foreground linguistic playfulness at the expense of more serious concerns. Gérard Genette (1982), for instance, discusses parody as a ludic genre and distinguishes it from both satiric and serious [*sérieux*] reworkings of earlier texts. Similarly, *The Bloomsbury Guide to English Literature* (1989) situates parody in opposition to serious literary works in its definition of the term as "[a] literary form which constitutes a comic imitation of a serious work, or of a serious literary form" (783). But parody is never a total negation of a previous text and always retains some of the model's thematic concerns. Parody, as Malcolm Bradbury (1985) puts it, "insists on the force *and* the emptiness of a prior object" (221; my italics).⁸ Nabokov's parodic treatment of the confessional novel conforms to this

8. The relative 'seriousness' of parody is also acknowledged by Fredric Jameson, who clearly distinguishes it from the postmodern phenomenon of pastiche: "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs [...]" (1991: 17).

pattern as it reproduces some of the more sinister implications of the genre.

In her discussion of Prévost d'Exiles' confessional novel *Histoire du Chevalier des Grioux et de Manon Lescaut*, Naomi Segal (1986) focuses on the symptomatic absence of women from the confessional narrative: "the woman on whom the whole text depends is dead or at least very much out of the way, and the man has lived specifically to tell the tale" (xii). Humbert's tale satisfies both of these conditions. Towards the end of his narrative, Humbert makes Lolita's death a prerequisite for the novel's publication: "The following decision I make with all the legal impact of a signed testament: I wish this memoir to be published only when Lolita is no longer alive" (309). John Ray is able to refer in his foreword to the death of "Mrs. 'Richard F. Schiller'" (4), Lolita's marital name, and hence acts in conformity with Humbert's wish. Addressing Lolita in an apostrophe as he refers to his killing of Clare Quilty, Humbert Humbert implies that his function as the narrator of Lolita's life is his real (and perhaps only) *raison d'être*:

And do not pity C. Q. One had to choose between him and H. H., and one wanted H. H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to make you live in the minds of later generations. (309)

The chronology of Humbert's last days lends support to this late self-assessment. Humbert receives a letter from Lolita on "22 September [1952]" (267) and traces her to Coalmont, where she lives with her husband Dick Schiller (hence John Ray's reference to Lolita as "Mrs. 'Richard F. Schiller'"). Shortly after, Humbert seeks out Quilty at Pavor Manor and kills him. He is speedily arrested and starts writing his memoir in prison during "fifty-six days" (308). He dies "in legal captivity, of coronary thrombosis, on November 16, 1952" (3).⁹ The chronology of events suggests that Humbert dies immediately after completing his textual monument to the memory of Lolita, that he "has lived specifically to tell the tale" (Segal 1986: xii).

As a memoir and self-begetting novel,¹⁰ Humbert's narrative paradoxically both presupposes and works towards Lolita's death: Only towards the end of the novel does the reader realize that Lolita is identical with the deceased Mrs.

9. The reader will notice that there are only 55 days in between 22 September and 16 November, which calls into question Humbert's reliability as narrator. Christina Tekiner (1979) bases her ingenious if highly idiosyncratic reading of *Lolita* (she maintains that Humbert has actually neither met Lolita after her marriage to Dick Schiller nor killed Clare Quilty) on chronological inexactitudes of this kind.

10. Steven G. Kellman (1980) defines the self-begetting novel as "an account, usually first-person, of the development of a character leading up to the point at which he is able to take up his pen and compose the novel we have just finished reading" (3).

Richard F. Schiller John Ray refers to in his foreword. In retrospect, John Ray's disclosure of the novel's full title acquires something of the force of a self-fulfilling prophecy: Lolita must die so that *Lolita* may conform to the rules of the genre. Nabokov's versatile play with the conventions of the confessional novel assumes a grim quality because the genre demands the premature death of its heroine. She must die while she is still young and beautiful. In his foreword to *Manon Lescaut*, Alexandre Dumas assumes the author's voice as he speaks to Manon:

[I]f we are to adore you, hymn you, worship and immortalize you, you must die young, in your full beauty and passion, as we who hymned you made you die. If you persist in living, you become an ignoble incumbrance. (trans. in Segal 1986: 283)

Dumas's remarks recall Humbert's concern that "around 1950 I would have to get rid somehow of a difficult adolescent whose magic nymphage had evaporated" (174). They also spell out the fatal consequences of Humbert's obsession with the young bodies of nymphets, his attendant wish that they may "[n]ever grow up" (21), and his desire to immortalize Lolita. Nabokov's novel, however, puts a new twist on the theme. Humbert does actually see Lolita when she is no longer beautiful to him, when she is "pale and polluted, and big with another's child" (278). But the rhetoric he uses in describing her suggests that she *is* dead or dying: "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" (269). Her "cheeks" are "hollowed" (269), her lips "parched" (271), she has a "dear wan face" (278), "rope-veined narrow hands and [...] gooseflesh white arms" (277) and what remains of her is "only the faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo of the nymphet" Humbert had "rolled [himself] upon with such cries in the past" (277). Lolita is no longer a nymphet, and her body—to put it in Humbert's words—has changed into "the coffin of coarse female flesh" (175) of an adult woman.

Very often, metafictional devices in Nabokov's *Lolita* take on a significance that goes beyond self-reflexive (and maybe also self-indulgent) play. Humbert's self-consciousness as narrator in the context of his solipsism and the darker ramifications of his allusions to the confessional novel are two prominent instances of this tendency. *Lolita*'s constant references to the world of fairy tales are of course only one aspect of the greater phenomenon of intertextuality, but they repeat a different yet equally well-established pattern of metafiction. Rüdiger Imhof (1986) suggests that metafiction's frequent use of myths, fairy tales, and familiar stories may be traced to a fundamental affinity between metafiction and myths: "myths are the appropriate material for a kind of fiction that continually reveals its own nature as artefact, or 'fiction' because myths are total fictions" (146). Moreover, the resurgence of myths in contemporary metafiction may bear witness to a desire to give order

and shape to a present perceived as meaningless and chaotic.¹¹ This is what T. S. Eliot suggests in his discussion of James Joyce's modernist use of myth in *Ulysses*:

In using myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. [...] It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. (qtd. in Imhof 1986: 147)

If this statement applies, as Imhof indicates, to metafiction in general, then it is, paradoxically, myth—that most fictional of all fictions—which allows metafiction to refer beyond itself, to transcend an exclusive concern with the nature of literary art and make a statement about contemporary reality. This should help to explain why myths occupy a special place in self-reflexive fiction. Referring to his earlier discussion of metafiction's parodic approach to narrative conventions, Imhof notices a peculiarity in the genre's use of mythology (which, in Imhof's account, includes myths, fairy tales, and familiar stories):

Myths are received stories; hence they may be applied, theoretically, for the same reasons as all other 'received' phenomena. It is only the more surprising, therefore, that [...] the use of mythology, by and large, seems devoid of parodic goals. (1986: 145f.)

Nabokov's frequent allusions to fairy tales in *Lolita* both follow this pattern and modify it. Fairy tales are not treated in as parodic a manner as, for instance, the confessional novel, the psychoanalytic case history, or the *doppelgänger* tradition.¹² But their significance in the novel's overall design in many ways corresponds to that of the more overtly parodied literary forms. Similar to the suspension of parody in the context of the more ominous implications of the genre of the confessional novel, Nabokov's allusions to fairy tales reveal dark aspects which subvert the reader's assumptions about the 'ideal world' of fairy tales.

The masturbation scene is a case in point. In his description of the events

11. Inger Christensen's attempt to explain the resurgence of metafiction in twentieth century fiction strikes a more critical tone that comes closer to Humbert's conception of the aesthetic sphere as "the refuge of art" (*Lolita*, 309): "It may be that metafiction for the 20th century writers represents a way of escape, but it generally does not work so well for them as it did for Sterne" (1981: 155).

12. The parodic dimension of Nabokov's *Lolita* is most conclusively discussed in Alfred Appel's "*Lolita: The Springboard of Parody*" (1967).

leading up to the novel's first erotic scene, Humbert alludes to both the Biblical myth of the Edenic apple and the fairy tale "Sneewittchen":

She wore that day a pretty pink dress that I had seen on her once before, ample in the skirt, tight in the bodice, short-sleeved, pink, checkered with darker pink, and, to complete the color scheme, she had painted her lips and was holding in her hollowed hands a beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple. She was not shod, however, for church [...] She tossed it up into the sun-dusted air, and caught it—it made a cupped polished *plop*. Humbert Humbert intercepted the apple. "Give it back," she pleaded, showing the marbled flush of her palms. I produced Delicious. She grasped it and bit into it, and my heart was like snow under thin crimson skin. (57f.)

Nabokov skillfully orchestrates the handing back and forth of the apple. As the Edenic apple, it passes from Lolita to Humbert and thus alludes to Eve's offering of the fruit in Genesis III:6. In this context, Humbert's initial description of Lolita's painted lips and pretty dress as well as his remark that she was "not [...] shod for church" allude to a tendency in Biblical exegesis to portray Eve as a seductress and allocate guilt in her alone. Humbert thus situates himself in a tradition which informs, for instance, the folk etymology woman = woe-man¹³ and which reaches a literary apex in Book IX of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The main thrust of the Biblical allusion is therefore in perfect keeping with other passages in which Humbert insinuates that "it was she who seduced me" (132).

As Humbert hands the "immemorial fruit" (59) back to Lolita, the frame of reference changes. Watching Lolita bite into the apple, Humbert alludes to "Sneewittchen" (Snow White) as he describes his feelings: "my heart was like snow under thin crimson skin." Of course, Humbert's treatment of the fairy tale distorts and parodies the original version: Humbert is a ridiculously virile wicked stepmother and the attribute 'snow white' properly belongs to Lolita's skin and not to Humbert's heart. But the serious implications of the fairy tale are preserved in the transformation. While Sneewittchen falls dead as she tastes from the apple, Humbert in retrospect admits that the Lolita he possessed during masturbation had "no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own" (62).

The frequent allusions to fairy tales serve a twofold function. In some passages, Humbert evokes the world of elves, fairies and princesses to suggest that his behaviour is essentially innocent and harmless. He pursues this strategy, for instance, when he reverently calls Lolita "a fairy princess" (52), when he casts himself in the role of a "fairy tale nurse of some little princess" (39) or when he innocently protests his inexperience in love matters: "What a comic, clumsy, wavering Prince Charming I was!" (109). In other passages,

13. Cf. OED 'woman'.

however, Humbert's allusions to fairy tales have the opposite effect of revealing the unpleasant aspects of his behaviour. When he jokingly refers to his room in the Haze house as "my lair" (64) or calls Lolita "my prey" (111), the reader is reminded of the beastliness of his obsession, a beastliness he shares with his sinister *alter ego* Quilty, whose house on "Grimm Road" (292) Humbert terms "the beast's lair" (274).

At times, Humbert's desire even exhibits vampiresque traits. After his first night with Lolita, Humbert perceives on her neck what he describes as "the purplish spot on her naked neck where a fairytale vampire had feasted" (139). Viewed in isolation, this is only a metaphorical way of referring to a so-called love bite. But the metaphor gains strength as we read on:

A forest in Arkansas and, on her brown shoulder, a raised purple-pink swelling (the work of some gnat) which I eased of its beautiful transparent poison between my long thumbnails and then sucked till I was gorged on her spicy blood. (156)

The suggestion of bloodsucking is obvious enough and the long thumbnails possibly refer to the long crooked fingernails of vampires in early horror films like *Nosferatu* (1922). The undead are also evoked when Humbert calls Lolita "Lenore" (207) and thus alludes not only to Poe's poem of the same title, but also to the vampire-beloved title character of Gottfried August Bürger's famous ballad.¹⁴

The vampire theme highlights two aspects of the incestuous couple's relationship. First, it traces the way Humbert's obsession drains the twelve-year-old girl of life, eventually leaving her dead at an early age (which is also Lenore's fate as she enters her lover's vault). Second, it reduplicates Humbert's project of immortalising his love object, for immortality is what a vampire's kiss ultimately aims to achieve.

Nabokov's use of the fairy tale tradition ensures that the reader is not seduced by Humbert's attempts to use the same tradition in order to protest his innocence and harmlessness. Even when Humbert deems himself a "fairy tale nurse of some little princess" (39), the context and the sexualized imagery he uses undermine potentially pleasant associations:

And as if I was the fairy tale nurse of some little princess (lost, kidnapped, discovered in gypsy rags through which her nakedness smiled at the king and his hounds), I recognized the tiny dark-brown mole on her side. (39)

Humbert utters these words as his eyes meet Lolita for the first time and immediately identify her as a reincarnation of Annabel. Humbert's insistence on the two girls' fundamental sameness assumes an uncanny quality for two interrelated reasons. In a more abstract sense, Elisabeth Bronfen's discussion of

14. Cf. Appel, *The Annotated Lolita*, 408 n. 207/5.

repetition 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. (1993: 104)

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 denied her own body and is thus only a figure for a meaning other than herself, prematurely turned into a ghost" (Bronfen 1993: 108). 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 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" (1974: 69)

More specifically, Humbert's lingering fascination with Annabel derives from their unconsummated love due to Annabel's premature death "of typhus in Corfu" (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 E. A. 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. (1993: 113)

Bronfen here stresses the role of the agent in the mortifying process of equation ("In the act of repeating," "the surviving lover desires," "To 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" (162).

Humbert's compulsion to repeat can in fact be read as a variation on a fairy tale theme. As he enters Quilty's house, whose door swings open "as in a medieval fairy tale" (294), it is no coincidence that Humbert finds Quilty in the third bathroom he inspects: "Speaking of bathrooms—I was about to visit

a third one when master came out of it" (294).¹⁵ The number three features prominently and also informs Humbert's visits to the Enchanted Hunters hotel. It was Charlotte who first proposed that she and Humbert should spend a vacation there: "There is a hotel I remember, Enchanted Hunters, quaint isn't it? And the food is a dream. And nobody bothers anybody" (93). Humbert's choice of the very same hotel for his first sexual encounter with Lolita is not only tasteless but also turns Lolita into a stand-in for her dead mother, just as Charlotte had previously served Humbert as a stand-in for Lolita: "We had highballs before turning in, and with their help, I would manage to evoke the child while caressing the mother" (76). The repetition pattern is sustained as Humbert meets Rita after Lolita's disappearance: "A curious urge to relive my stay there with Lolita had got hold of me" (261). Humbert eventually abandons his plans to visit that fairy tale hotel again and we may guess that this is not to Rita's detriment: she is one of the very few female characters who do not die in the course of the action delimited by the novel's time frame.

Probably the most flagrant perversion of a fairy tale convention also involves the number three. In one of his darker moods, Humbert imagines that "with patience and luck I might have [Lolita] produce eventually a nymphet with my blood in her exquisite veins, a Lolita the Second" (174) and then goes on to visualize the obscenity of "bizarre, tender, salivating Dr. Humbert, practicing on supremely lovely Lolita the Third the art of being a granddad" (174). Considering the more sinister ramifications of Humbert's allusions to fairy tales, his commitment to a fairy tale ending as he sees Lolita for the very last time must seem to her rather like a threat than a promise: "And we shall live happily ever after" (278). The sentence's promise of immortality holds no better future for Lolita in store and, as the following remarks will demonstrate, the otherworldliness of fairy tales provides no safe haven.

In his study on *Nabokov's Otherworld* (1991), Vladimir E. Alexandrov argues against "the widespread critical view" that Nabokov is "first and foremost a metaliterary writer" (3) and advances his belief that "an aesthetic rooted in his intuition of a transcendent realm is the basis of his art" (3). Alexandrov's—and, according to Alexandrov, Nabokov's—central theme is that of *potustoronnost'*, a concept which translates as "the otherworld" and which conflates notions of the "other side," "the hereafter," and "the beyond" (3). Alexandrov's discussion of *Lolita* suggests that there is an "overlap between Nabokov's aesthetic concepts and Humbert's erotically charged speculations about nymphets" (162). Humbert's discourse, Alexandrov argues, resembles in many ways Nabokov's own aesthetics as put forward in his autobiography *Speak, Memory* (1966) and the posthumously published lecture on "The Art of Literature and Commonsense" (1980). Humbert's concepts and ideas frequently parody Nabokov's and thus exemplify Nabokov's assertion

15. Cf. Appel, *The Annotated Lolita*, 447 n. 294/1.

that his characters' ideas are often "deliberately flawed" (qtd. in Alexandrov 1991: 163). In other instances, the fictional character and his creator "simply agree" (168).

Alexandrov attributes a plethora of phenomena to the workings of the 'otherworld,' among them the striking coincidences that pervade the whole novel, Humbert's epiphanic moments, and the haunting presence of dead Charlotte Haze throughout the narrative.¹⁶ I do not intend to argue that transcendence is *not* the central theme in Nabokov (although I would argue that obsession is a more likely candidate); my reservations about Alexandrov's book are of a different nature. Whereas Alexandrov argues for the centrality of a transcendental discourse in Nabokov and against the novel's status as metafiction, I believe that both aspects not only co-exist but also mutually reinforce each other. Humbert's construction of Lolita as a nymphet removes her to a transcendental sphere and denies her lived reality in a manner reminiscent of his intertextual constructions of her as the heroine of a confessional novel, as Eve, as Sneewittchen, as Carmen, Lola, Lilith or Miranda. This approach to Humbert's transcendental discourse allows a critical assessment of Humbert's rhetoric, which is forestalled in Alexandrov because of his constant equation of Humbert's aesthetics with Nabokov's.

In Humbert's discourse, nymphets like Lolita are not simply a special species of humankind, they are in fact no human beings at all. Humbert explains in pseudo-scientific parlance:

Now I wish to introduce the following idea. Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as "nymphets." (16)

Lolita is to him an "immortal daemon disguised as a female child" (139) and, the reader may infer, deserves to be treated as such. Indeed, Humbert justifies his violations of Lolita's body by denying nymphets the "purity and vulnerability" of "ordinary children":

But let us be prim and civilized. Humbert Humbert tried hard to be good. Really and truly, he did. He had the utmost respect for ordinary children, with their purity and vulnerability, and under no circumstances would he have interfered with the innocence of a child, if there was the least risk of a row. But how his heart beat when, among the innocent throng, he espied a demon child [...] (19f.)

In contrast to 'normal' children, nymphets are not innocent but in some un-

16. Cf. Alexandrov 1991: 170ff., 163, 179ff.

specified way guilty. Humbert, on the other hand, is innocent for he is "in the possession and thralldom of a nymphet" (166). In a grotesque inversion of the actual state of affairs, Humbert styles himself as the victim who is threatened by "the nymphean evil breathing through every pore of the fey child" (125).¹⁷

To avoid any awareness of Lolita as a human being (and of course also the punitive gaze of the law), Humbert refuses to visit Lolita's birthplace "despite little Lo's strident remonstrations" (154). Humbert attempts to completely wipe out Lolita's past and succeeds so well that he is genuinely surprised when, on their way West, she speaks of her "pre-Humbertian childhood" (219) for the first time:

"Perhaps he is Trapp. If I were you—Oh look, all the nines are changing into the next thousand. When I was a little kid," she continued unexpectedly "I used to think they'd stop and go back to nines, if only mother agreed to put the car in reverse." (219)

Humbert's cynical comment speaks volumes: "perhaps, the theatre had taught her that trick" (219). To him, his own construction of Lolita possesses more reality than her actual personal history and life, which he relegates to the world of make-believe. Humbert's reference to the theatre also recalls his comment on the killing of Quilty with its implications for Humbert's solipsism. To Humbert's solipsistic mind, the world is a stage built for himself while Lolita

17. Equally grotesque is the way in which some critics simply adopt Humbert Humbert's viewpoint. An excerpt from Leslie A. Fiedler's influential *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1975) may serve as an example: "Into Lolita and her mummy, the bitch-girl and the semi-preserved suburban predator, the pure American female has been split and degraded; but the European confronts her in both her latter-day avatars as helplessly as when she was still whole and dazzling in her purity. Like Prince Amerigo in *The Golden Bowl*, Nabokov's Humbert Humbert is still engaged in the discovery of America through Poe and the American woman; but unlike the Prince he is not redeemed, merely fascinated, raped [sic!], driven to murder and left to die of a heart attack" (335). A similar criticism may be leveled against John Fletcher (1980), who convincingly exposes the self-serving rhetoric of Mersault in Camus' *The Stranger* in his third chapter and is—ironically enough—nevertheless taken in by Humbert's equally manipulative rhetorics in the seventh chapter: "Humbert is seduced by a knowing Lolita, and not the other way round. But America having, in the person of its young people, ravished the staid Europeans eventually abandons them" (161). The question is not whether it was, as Humbert asserts, really Lolita who seduced him at the Enchanted Hunters hotel. My objection against Fletcher's approach is that he unreservedly accepts Humbert's version of the story, which totally misrepresents Humbert's exploitative and incestuous relationship with Lolita.

is absorbed into his “umber and black Humberland” (166). Humbert later demonstrates that he is perfectly aware of his own indifference to Lolita’s reality, but has no inclination to let that knowledge affect his future behaviour. Admiring her tennis play he notes:

Her tennis was the highest point to which I can imagine a young creature bringing the art of make-believe, although, I daresay, for her it was the very geometry of basic reality. (231)

Instead of acknowledging the human reality and suffering of the twelve-year-old child, Humbert denies that Lolita is human and constructs her as a nymphet. As nymphet, Lolita is a demon who inhabits a world different from ours, a world that is somehow less contingent on the human limitations of space and time.

When he tries to explain the nymphets’ otherness, Humbert evokes a transcendental world of “that intangible island of entranced time where Lolita plays with her likes” (17). The average female child is for Humbert no nymphet as she is “incomparably more dependent on the spatial world of synchronous phenomena” (17). Nymphets exist in a world that is separate from ours, “an entranced island [...] surrounded by a vast misty sea” (16). Humbert’s descriptions of “the eternal Lolita” (67) repeatedly emphasize that she is not of this world. In his account of her tennis play, for instance, he observes an “unearthly order and splendor” (230). Minutes before a heated argument, he notices Lolita’s eyes, which “rose to meet mine with a kind of celestial vapidty” (203). When he perceives Lolita playing tennis with Quilty and another couple, he states that she “moved like a fair angel among three horrible Boschian cripples” (235). When he describes her face, he finds it “hard to reduce such sweetness to but a magic gene automatically lighting up her face in atavistic token of some ancient rite of welcome” (285). Nymphet love affords Humbert an “incomparably more poignant bliss” (18) than “so-called normal relationships with [...] terrestrial women having pumpkins or pears for breasts” (18) and he loves Lolita more than anything he “had ever seen or imagined on earth” (277).

Moreover, Humbert imagines that his love for Lolita transports him into alternative states of being. When Humbert masturbates using the proximity of an unknowing Lolita, Humbert’s wording in describing his orgasm is still fairly conventional: “I entered a plane of being where nothing mattered” (60). But the—for Humbert—transcendental dimension of their relationship is made more explicit as he directly addresses the reader:

Oh, do not scowl at me, reader, I do not intend to convey the impression that I did not manage to be happy. Reader must understand that in the possession and thralldom of a nymphet the enchanted traveler stands, as it were, *beyond happiness*. For there is no other bliss on earth comparable to that of fondling a

nymphet. It is *hors concours*, that bliss, it belongs to another class, another plane of sensitivity. (166)

At times Humbert's discourse even assumes religious proportions, for instance when he dwells on the "strange slow paradisaal philters" (184) Lolita has in store for him, or when he speaks of their first cross-country trip as their "first circle of paradise" (283)—ominously alluding to Dante's *Inferno*¹⁸ and anticipating Aleksandr Solzenicyn's extended use of the metaphor in *The First Circle* (1968)—or when he blasphemously compares himself to Jesus Christ: "Look at this tangle of thorns" (9).

Humbert's constant idealization of Lolita can of course be attributed to a lover's propensity to exaggerate his love's appealing qualities but there is also a more menacing side to Humbert's 'transcendentalism.' Elevating Lolita to a transcendental stratum also means removing her from the sphere of living beings. In a religious sense, death is the liminal stage between this life and another, transcendent sphere. This aspect of Humbert's transcendental discourse is hinted at in his wintery impressions of Lolita, where his imagery corresponds to the way we speak of death in spatial metaphors ('depart,' 'go to one's final resting place,' 'pass through the pearly gates,' 'pass away'): "at a ski lodge, I would see her floating away from me, celestial and solitary, in an ethereal chairlift, up and up to a glimmering summit [...]" (160).¹⁹ What awaits Lolita at the summit is not a supreme being but, Humbert imagines, "laughing athletes stripped to the waist [...] waiting for her, for her" (160). Humbert's fantasy of course bears witness to his jealousy and fear of losing Lolita, but the vocabulary he employs to describe her ascension suggests a loss of a different order, a passing through death into a transcendental world.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Annabel Leigh occupies in Humbert's imagination "that same enchanted island of time" (18) which is the nymphets' natural habitat, although she herself is no nymphet: "When I was a child and she was a child, my little Annabel was no nymphet to me" (17). What links Annabel with nymphets is first of all Humbert's assertion that she was "the initial fateful elf in my life" (18). But there exists a more fateful affinity between the two. It is appropriate that the dead Annabel Leigh occupies the same space as nymphets with their death-in-life existence: After the masturbation scene, Humbert refers to his favourite nymphet Lolita as "my own creation" with "no life of her own" (62).

The figure of Annabel Leigh is also the site where the more sinister im-

18. This was pointed out to me by Timothy Grundy.

19. Cf. also Bronfen (1990) about "the various ways in which anthropological discourses conceive of death in spatial terms: most notably as that of a passage across a threshold towards the Beyond or towards Nothingness, as the translation from one state of being into another, as the site at which one form of life is exchanged for another form of life" (591).

plications of Humbert's transcendental project converge most clearly with the novel's status as metafiction. Annabel Leigh is not only Lolita's double and shares the same transcendental space, but her name also alludes to Poe's poem "Annabel Lee,"²⁰ in which the initial "kingdom by the sea" turns into "the sepulchre by the sea" and "her tomb by the sounding sea" in the two final lines.

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20. For a summary of allusions to Poe, see Appel, *The Annotated Lolita*, 328-332 n. 9/2.

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