

Fetishism, Obsolescence, and Disillusionment—Humbert Humbert’s Decorated Philistinism in *Lolita*

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Vladimir Nabokov once criticized the “smug philistinism”, or poshlust, that emanated from the art of advertisement. For Nabokov, poshlust is phony depth, cheap imitation, and aesthetic falseness disguised as virtue, beauty, or sophistication that may lead to moral indictment. Such a pretense and brandishing of one’s “higher aesthetic taste” echoes the meticulous descriptions of the elements of consumerism in *Lolita*. Building on Nabokov’s definition of poshlust as a fusion of the falsely refined and the vulgarly sentimental, this article discovers that Humbert is inherently an “adman”, or a bourgeois philistine whose construction of the “nymphet” is not merely a personal aesthetic imagination and delusion, but a product of a broader cultural aesthetic—one shaped by advertising, popular media, and mass-market taste. This aesthetic imagination of Humbert experiences stages of fetishism, the realization of obsolescence, and ultimately results in Humbert’s disillusionment in finding the irreconcilability between “true art” and the décor of the desire of obsession and possession. *Lolita* thus parallels Humbert’s advocacy of art’s distance from real life and exposes the tragic consequences of commodifying beauty, reducing identity to style, and mistaking obsession for love.

Keywords: *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov, poshlust, fetish, obsolescence, disillusionment

Introduction

One of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*’s noteworthy features is the meticulous portrayal of American consumerism during that time: advertisements, catalogues, motels, guidance for almost everything, etc. While this feature, as in Nabokov’s own words, derives from his attempt to transform himself into an American writer—“I was immediately exposed to the very best of America[...] I am one-third American—good American flesh keeping me warm and safe” (Nabokov, 1990, p. 27), it represents itself as “anti-American” for some scholars when compounding with the moral disputes of *Lolita*’s pedophilia issue. Nabokov finds this charge “considerably more than the idiotic accusation of immorality... I needed a certain exhilarating milieu. Nothing is more exhilarating than philistine vulgarity” (Nabokov, 1991, p. 315). Nevertheless, although Nabokov emphatically asserts that *Lolita*’s American landscape is merely an “exhilarating function”, and Appel claims it to serve a “functional thematic purpose” (p. xlix), some scholars have still developed different interpretations regarding such meticulous parody of consumerism, particularly *Lolita*’s advertisement.

One can assume that those analyses are derived from Nabokov’s “strong opinions” about philistine, philistinism, and advertisement, and Humbert’s depiction of *Lolita* as of “tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity, stemming from the snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures” (Nabokov, 1991, p.

44). For Nabokov, a certain “smug philistinism”, which the Russians call “poshlust (пошлость)”, emanates from advertisements, as ads suggest that the acme of human happiness is purchasable. This acme’s purchase, meanwhile, can somehow “ennoble the purchaser”. To conclude, such a poshlism is mainly the “the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive” (Nabokov & Bowers, 1983, p. 313).

Therefore, this acclamation of Nabokov and Humbert’s portrayal of Lolita as “the subject and object of every foul poster” (Nabokov, 1991, p. 148) might, to some extent, surpass his assertion that the American landscape, which contains advertisements, is functionally utilized. For instance, Brand (1987) believes that Humbert parallels with Nabokov as being a “foreigner” in America. However, when Nabokov offers a theory of aesthetic morality by intentionally distancing himself from the American social and commercial environment, Humbert transgresses this morality by degenerating his aestheticism into consumerism, and building the former as a shield for the latter pedophilic one (pp. 14-15). Meanwhile, to Byrne (2015), the association between the femininity of Lolita and the materialism extolled by the consumer culture not only signifies Lolita’s “inherent inferiority”, but also alludes that a woman’s maternal role could be judged by “the products she kept in her cupboards” during that era (p. 51). Bowlby (2003) focuses on the narratives of *Lolita*, and discovers that the language of advertisement seems capable of “taking over the poetic force of the novel as though against the grain of the narrator’s intentions” (p. 172), yet Emery (2019) claims that Bowlby has ignored the fact that *Lolita* is “the sexual confession of an ‘adman’”, and the intermingle between Humbert’s literary occupation and his “desultory and pseudoliterary” career of editing perfume ads in New York (Nabokov, 1991, p. 32), is to “cover up the stink of his misdeeds by patheticizing their representation” (Emery, 2019, p. 551).

On the whole, the analyses mentioned above echo Nabokov’s idea that modern advertising and mass media are among the chief producers of smug philistinism, or poshlust, flooding the cultural imagination with seductive illusions, prepackaged aesthetics, and standardized fantasies. Those grown-ups who take such constructed, mass-imposed cultural illusions are criticized by Nabokov as “philistines”:

A philistine is a full-grown person whose interests are of a material and commonplace nature, and whose mentality is formed of the stock ideas and conventional ideals of his or her group and time [...] “Vulgarian” is more or less synonymous with “philistine”: the stress in a vulgarian is not so much on the conventionalism of a philistine as on the vulgarity of some of his conventional notions. I may also use the terms genteel and bourgeois. Genteel implies the lace-curtain refined vulgarity which is worse than simple coarseness. [...] A bourgeois is a smug philistine, a dignified vulgarian. (Nabokov & Bowers, 1983, p. 309)

Regarding this declaration, one can discover that Humbert’s nuanced description of Mrs. Haze’s house, decorations, catalogues, etc., closely associates with Nabokov’s criticism of a bourgeois, namely a philistine, or a dignified vulgarian. Humbert’s repetitive emphasis on Lolita being surrounded by those similar elements also sarcastically aligns with Nabokov’s definition of the adolescent philistines—“a small philistine is only a small parrot mimicking the ways of confirmed vulgarians” (Nabokov & Bowers, 1983, p. 309). The foreword of *Lolita*, written by John Ray Jr., further strengthens Nabokov’s “arrogant” critique on “the robust philistine who is conditioned by modern conventions”: The obscene theme of the novel allows those philistines to take for granted the presence of “a lavish array of four-letter words in a banal novel” (Nabokov, 1991, p. 4). Furthermore, given that Nabokov insists on his “authorial dictatorship” over his characters, that the design of his novel is “fixed in his imagination”, and that all characters should “follow the course he imagines for them” (Nabokov, as cited in Appel, 1967, p. 133), one can assume that this unreliable narrator of *Lolita* articulates, rather than determines, some of Nabokov’s aesthetic principles. Serving as a “galley slave” (Nabokov, 1990, p. 95) for Nabokov,

Humbert's particular recordings of American landscape are hardly "functional"—his sincere contempt toward such "vulgarity" cannot be shielded by his Latinate and elegant euphemism.

Yet Humbert's stance as either a literary aristocrat from Europe or an already bourgeois philistine soaked with literary classics remains disputable. This article, therefore, is based on a stance similar to that of Emery (2019): Humbert is an "adman" and, in Nabokov's aesthetic initiatives, a philistine. This philistine utilizes the orthodoxically beautiful artworks to fulfill his philistine imagination on "nymphet", and composes his repenting confessions of submerging within a consumer-driven culture, in which both desire and beauty are fetishized, quickly replaced, and ultimately discarded. In this regard, Humbert's obsession with *Lolita* is far from being purely psychological, but rather deeply embedded in a visual and ideological economy shaped by commodified images of youth, femininity, and style. Humbert's tragedy is aesthetic: He mistakes the gloss of a fantasy for the substance of a human being. While upholding a guilty indictment for Humbert's heinous pedophile crime and tending "unswervingly to moral apotheosis" (Nabokov, 1991, p. 5), Nabokov warns of the danger of compromising one's aesthetic orientation to the vulgar posh lust of a disciplined, consumerist culture, outwardly brandishing "the badge of culture when does not possess inwardly" (Nyegaard, 2004, p. 347), and utilizing "beauty" as a disguise.

Fetishistic Portrayal: Fulfilling the Imagination of Aesthetic Nymphet

Lolita opens not with a girl but with a name: "Lo-lee-ta" (Nabokov, 1991, p. 9), projected from Humbert's imagination and an enchanting utterance of possession. The opening line does more than establish tone—it frames Dolores Haze at the center of the novel as a linguistic and aesthetic construction, one that has already been filtered, stylized, and fetishized before she even appears.

To trace the archetype of Humbert's obsession with *Lolita*, one digs into his immature life. The first "interesting reactions on the part of his organism" is invoked by the photographs of "pearl and umbra with infinite soft partings" from the book *La Beauté Humaine*, or *The Human Beauty*, and the author's name "Pichon" is a word game of "nichon", the French slang for the female breast. The book is filched from a mountain of "marble-bound *Graphics*", the name of which suggests the seriousness of artwork (Nabokov, 1991, pp. 11, 335). Before that, Humbert has "a solemn, decorous and purely theoretical talk about pubertal surprises" with a kid of an American "motion-picture" actress (p. 11). Such a combination between dynamic motions and static pictures, and between what has been traditionally defined as "obscene" and the academic solemnity, reveals that Humbert's first erotic awakening is not prompted by an actual encounter with beauty or intimacy, but by a pornographic stylization of the human body, disguised in the form of artistic culture.

His description of his tragic, romantic love with Annabel further indicates that Humbert's 13-year-old innocent sexual curiosity becomes tainted by the convergence of crude slang and faux-elevated presentation of the voyeuristic depiction of the female body. Just as Nabokov himself has illustrated, such decorated philistinism is worse than that blunt one—"To burp in company may be rude, but to say 'excuse me' after a burp is genteel and thus worse than vulgar" (Nabokov & Bowers, 1983, p. 309). Humbert's obsession with Annabel, parallel with the "reactions upon soft partings", is with an imagined image triggered by the societal gaze toward a teenage girl: "'honey-colored skin,' 'thin arms,' 'brown bobbed hair,' 'long lashes,' 'big bright mouth'", and Annabel is the "absolutely optical replica of a beloved face", or "a little ghost in natural colors" (Nabokov, 1991, p. 11), but neither form is an actual human girl—Humbert's self-righteous love, therefore, is his fetish with the girl image he invokes in his mind, and to trace more deeply, such imaginations are derived from the mass-production culture.

Humbert the philistine is not a man of bad taste, but one who mistakes emotional cliché for genuine depth, and aesthetic form for moral insight. Humbert's first "lover", Annabel, whose name is an invocation of Edgar Allan Poe's *Annabel Lee*—a poem already associated with overwhelming adolescent sentiment, reveals his hypocrisy in utilizing ready-made literary artworks to elevate personal experience. After Annabel's death, instead of questioning the inherent element of such emotional complexity or moral ambiguity of his feelings, Humbert aestheticizes the moment, freezing it in time and transforming Annabel into a timeless icon of lost beauty.

Therefore, compounded with Humbert's later advertising of his ideal lover "nymphet", one can discover that Humbert's foundational confusion between eroticism and cultural disguise resurfaces in his portrayal of Lolita, whom he transforms into a similarly stylized object: a blend of literary muse, movie poster, and teenage catalog model—never a real girl, but always an image tailored to his aesthetic delusion:

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." (Nabokov, 1991, p. 16)

Meanwhile, the distinguishing features of a nymphet among all "girl-children" are a combination of vulgarity and those mysterious characteristics such as "the fey grace, the elusive, shifty, soul-shattering, insidious charm", which will not necessarily be impaired by the vulgarity (Nabokov, 1991, p. 17). Such a posh lust fusion of art, which etherizes the girl-children as some supernatural, unreal figures, and vulgarity, again indicates Humbert's hypocritical fetish for his own imagination—Humbert never "loves" a nymphet, but "possesses" one advertisement of nymphet in flesh (p. 21). This fetishism even turns into a beastly appetite—"My only grudge against nature was that I could not turn my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips..." (p. 165). Humbert nuancedly and repetitively portrays Lolita's vulgarity, "A full-page ad ripped out of a slick magazine was affixed to the wall", "[...]told her to buy herself a magazine in the lobby", "she studied the photographic results of head-on collisions" (pp. 69, 138, 165), etc. Yet these signs of vulgarity confirm Lolita's perceived impurity, her accessibility, and thus her desirability as an object of fetish rather than a subject of affection for Humbert—instead of undermining his ideal, the vulgarity becomes part of the appeal. In Humbert's world, a nymphet cannot age, cannot dissent, cannot suffer—she can only remain in the way an advertisement remains fixed and static in print, endlessly alluring and never real. Through this fusion of kitsch vulgarity and poetic stylization, Humbert enacts the very structure of fetishistic consumption: He buys Lolita's sex, body, "loyalty", and the vessel of his imagination of aesthetic nymphet.

Style Obsolescence: Despising the Representations of Standardized America

While Lolita in flesh satisfies Humbert's aesthetic imagination of nymphet, Humbert realizes his fetish for nymphets will soon fade due to their "obsolescence" in their non-nymphet appearance:

I knew I had fallen in love with Lolita forever; but I also knew she would not be forever Lolita. [...] In two years or so she would cease being a nymphet and would turn into a "young girl," and then, into a "college girl"—that horror of horrors. The word "forever" referred only to my own passion, to the eternal Lolita as reflected in my blood. (Nabokov, 1991, p. 65)

This mentality, when being implanted into a broader societal landscape, emerges from a consumer culture that defines identity through stylized visual codes, and echoes a byproduct of this philistine consumerism, namely the style obsolescence. This obsolescence is deliberately engineered to stimulate continuous consumption in a society with saturated levels of goods, and follows the logic of disposing artefacts or products before one needs

to buy a “more up-to-date or desirable version” (Whiteley, 1987, pp. 3-4). The commonplace of style obsolescence in post-WWII America was strengthened by the affluence of the American bourgeois, so that the logic of change became natural and desirable:

The American consumer expects new and better products every year. He has become accustomed to the yearly automobile show, to national advertising announcing new models. His acceptance of change toward better living is indeed America's greatest asset. It is the prime mover of our national wealth. It should be realized that change has momentum, and it has mass. It takes a long time to get mass acceptance of change in motion, but once in motion, as it most assuredly is now, it will keep rolling for the foreseeable future. (Lippincott, 1947, p. 10)

While Lippincott upholds a positive attitude, Nabokov pinpoints his concerns over such appeals for obsolescence through Humbert's despise for Mrs. Haze's house. The aesthetic of posh lust is vividly embodied in the decor of Mrs. Haze's home, a space assembled with the language of catalogues, reproducible art, and middle-class aspirations. The house brims with mass-produced reproductions, “...that banal darling of the arty middle class, van Gogh's *Arlésienne*”, ornamental clutter, “... some more Mexican trash in a corner cabinet”, and color schemes that strive for sophistication but sink into tacky artificiality (Nabokov, 1991, p. 36). This environment is not merely tasteless—it also represents posh lust. The seemingly artful decorations, for Humbert, function as a “sunny cellophane” covering the inner emptiness of the genteel Mrs. Haze, “She was, obviously, one of those women whose polished words may reflect a book club or bridge club, or any other deadly conventionality, but never her soul” (p. 37). The wall of the assigned bedroom for Humbert is adorned with René Prinet's *Kreutzer Sonata*, an “unappetizing and clammy” reproduction of Prinet's painting, which has long illustrated the “Tabu perfume advertisement” found in *The New Yorker* and chic ladies' magazines (pp. 355-356), suggesting not an art appreciation but an anxious desire to brandish one's elegant culture taste.

Such décor, marketed through postwar advertisements and lifestyle magazines, promises domestic charm and social respectability, yet it renders aesthetic hollowness. Humbert's self-alleged condescension toward this space is, from his tone, a gesture of class or personal superiority. Yet being an adman who pursues for nymphets to fulfill his societal-imposed aesthetic imaginations, Humbert's contempt is another sarcasm from Nabokov. Meanwhile, such permeation of philistine pretense of higher taste reflects a deeper recognition—American consumer culture floods daily life with aesthetic substitutes: images of elegance that are prepackaged, standardized, and will instantly become obsolescence to represent an affluent, tasteful American life, while no one truly cares to explore the significance behind such rapid renewal.

Humbert further records the guidance for a “standardized American bourgeois life” that surrounds Mrs. Haze—“household treatise, *Your Home Is You*, an example of the masculine type of room, illustrated catalogues and homemaking guides, *A Guide to Your Child's Development*, etc.” (Nabokov, 1991, pp. 78-81). To deceive Mrs. Haze about his former sexual life, Humbert even has to offer “an illustrated catalogue of them, all nicely differentiated, according to the rules of those American ads” (p. 80). These cynical observations have changed Mrs. Haze's home into a shrine to style obsolescence, where every object anticipates its irrelevance and reveals the stagnation of the owner's artistic and aesthetic preferences. As Nabokov shows, the culture of advertising does not merely sell things—it manufactures a landscape of philistine taste and false values, in which identity and intimacy are filtered through shallow visual codes, “it (advertisement) is a kind of satellite shadow world in the actual existence of which neither sellers nor buyers really believe in their heart of hearts” (Nabokov & Bowers, 1983, p. 313). The posh lust of Mrs. Haze's home thus mirrors the philistinism of Humbert's vision of *Lolita*: Both are artificial constructions, hollow at the core, and destined to rot under the weight of their pretense.

Ultimate Disillusionment: Repenting the Irreconcilability Between Aestheticism and Philistinism

Before Humbert's realization of obsolescence forces him to discard his representation of nymphet, Lolita's proactive disappearance, and their reunion in Lolita's poverty, marriage, visibly aging, and pregnancy result in Humbert's disillusionment with his aesthetic imaginations, "How simple! The moment, the death I had kept conjuring up for three years was as simple as a bit of dry wood" (Nabokov, 1991, p. 269). This culture of stylized disposability, embodied in Mrs. Haze's home, ultimately extends far beyond interior decoration—it structures the very perception of identity and desire in *Lolita*. Advertising, in Nabokov's world, is a producer of posh lust ideology: It aestheticizes the inauthentic, sells emotion in formulated packaging, and unconsciously imposes on individuals to confuse surface with depth, "Ads may be very good ads—some of them are very artistic—that is not the point. The point is that they tend to appeal to the philistine's pride in possessing things whether silverware or underwear" (Nabokov & Bowers, 1983, p. 312).

In this regard, Humbert's confrontation with Dolores, not only shatters his imagination, but his self-righteous and pathetic love, that Quilty and Dick are of some importance, and Humbert is trivial and insignificant, "And I had never counted, of course" (Nabokov, 1991, p. 272)? Thus, such a disillusionment reveals the fundamental incompatibility between Humbert's aestheticism and real human experience. The poetic language, the stylized metaphors, the artistic detachment—all dissolve in the face of a woman who has suffered, endured, and moved on. In this sense, Nabokov dismantles the cultural ideology of posh lust that permitted it. Humbert's earlier aestheticizing of nymphets functions as an advertisement: designed to be persuasive, seductive, and morally ambiguous. In the end, it is unmasked as a fabrication; what remains is the damage that fantasy has inflicted. This "pathetic ending" of the philistine Humbert can be juxtaposed with Nabokov's advocacy for the truth of art, that art should "have no relation to life" but should "truthfully represent an artist's inspiration" (Jung, 2022, p. 327). Humbert, therefore, a man of "moral leprosy", who conjures up his aesthetic imagination of nymphet with a combination of stereotypically high and vulgar arts, represents his inspiration as a "ponderously capricious" artist (Nabokov, 1991, p. 5). What he betrays from Nabokov's initiative is his obsession with infusing his imagination into the real life of the stagnate philistinism, and finding and possessing an archetype in flesh, "But how magically his singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author" (p. 5)! Associating with Nabokov's bleak and changeless political creed that of a "old gray rock", in detail, his advocacy for "freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of art" (Nabokov, 1990, pp. 34-35), Nabokov's persisting criticism toward advertisement, the source of smug philistinism, becomes understandable—in an art form which the number of freckles should be regulated, his ideal freedom is inconceivable.

Such an association thus changes Humbert's abrupt confession of loving Lolita forever and ever into an ironic allegory. Humbert recites as though his love could retroactively absolve obsession: "I could not kill her, of course, as some have thought. You see, I loved her. It was love at first sight, at last sight, at ever and ever sight" (Nabokov, 1991, p. 270). Yet this deliberate imitation of the language of fairy tale and eternal devotion comes after the irrevocable damage Dolores has suffered, and after Humbert has destroyed any possibility of love rooted in reciprocity. The sentence's performative style hints that Humbert still narrates for aesthetic effect. His love may now be sincere, or partly so, but it remains tainted by the same rhetorical excess that once masked his exploitation for his philistine aestheticism.

Nabokov's conclusion of Humbert's arc of disillusionment with a chaotic and humorous murder rather than quiet grief further penetrates this irony. Quilty, from the perspective of law, is the more heinous Humbert, who embraces his philistinism and utilizes it. Quilty represents the caricature of fantasy itself: a figure who exposes and exaggerates Humbert's obsessions. As a playwright, child pornographer, and satirist, Quilty embodies a world where "art" and perversity are indistinguishable, where stereotypically high culture and vulgar, philistine entertainment are fused into one surreal, meaningless show. Or more blankly, Quilty and his house mark the climax of poshlust in *Lolita*. Humbert's revenge and the murder scene, thus serve as a parody of one of the poshlust artworks, namely the movie, with the ridiculous drunken stupor and indifference downstairs, Quilty's miraculous tenacity of being shot with seven bullets but keeping rhetoric and agility until the last bullet, and Humbert's strange calmness: "Quilty of all people had managed to crawl out onto the landing, and there we could see him, flapping and heaving, and then subsiding, forever this time, in a purple heap" (Nabokov, 1991, p. 305). Ultimately, the scene does not redeem Humbert; it merely exposes the final grotesque contours of the ideology he has lived by. By the novel's end, Humbert has lost his nymphet, murdered the blank-philistine mirror of himself, and abandoned the poetic voice that once carried him. What remains is a man who has been disillusioned, yet must finally confess what he refused to see: that his desire was always shaped by a culture that fuses beauty with possession, high art with poshlust, and love with aestheticized control:

I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, 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. (Nabokov, 1991, p. 308)

Conclusion

This article argues that across the trajectory of *Lolita*, Nabokov's criticism of poshlust, or smug philistinism, reveals the peculiar aesthetic falseness in which vulgarity is disguised as beauty, and surface is mistaken for substance in a culture of philistinism. Humbert's "tragedy" begins with his portrayal of Lolita as a "nymphet", which is less an act of love than a projection of his aesthetic imagination, shaped by the "serious literature" which he used to self-confirm the reasonableness of pedophile, stylized language of advertising, and mass media. Expanding this logic outward, the "adman" Humbert's philistinism reveals that the same aesthetic principles—especially the byproduct style obsolescence—govern the domestic world of Mrs. Haze, where catalogues and visual trends script identity and value. Humbert's mockery toward this cultural hollowness, compounded with his hypocritical possession of nymphet, strengthens Nabokov's criticism of poshlust. Ultimately, Humbert arrives the threshold of disillusionment, finding the irreconcilability between his aestheticism and philistinism. His fantasy collapses in the face of Dolores Haze's unadorned reality, and where his confrontation with Clare Quilty grotesquely parodies his own failed aesthetics. The novel ends not with redemption, but with an admission of defeat—an attempt to claim love in the aftermath of irreparable harm.

Through this arc, Nabokov's critique becomes clear: In a culture where beauty is commodified, identity is constructed from images, and desire is governed by planned obsolescence, the indistinguishability between art and real life will definitely lead to a tragedy; art should be composed in an environment of "democratic freedom", and remains only the representation of one's inspirations. *Lolita* is, conclusively, not merely the story of a man's obsession—it is a meditation on the ethical cost of aestheticizing life, and a warning against the cultural machinery that makes such illusions seductive, consumable, and ultimately destructive.

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