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Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*: A Case of Postmodernized Gothicism

Abstract: Postmodern literary fiction relies heavily on intertextual connections between works and genres. Vladimir Nabokov, one of the most prominent representatives of postmodernism in American literature, identified with the so-called “literature of exhaustion,” makes such references his trademark, creating labyrinths of erudite allusions, puns and wordplays, challenging the reader to detect the intricate traps. In *Lolita* (1955), one of the significant intertextual elements is the recurring reference to the Gothic mode, even though not all instances are immediately recognizable or particularly salient. Nabokov “gothicizes” his novel not only by introducing the figure of Edgar Allan Poe into the storyline or constructing certain elements of the setting in the Gothic fashion, but also by employing typically Gothic motifs, such as madness, eroticism, the presence of demonic powers or the figure of the motherless child. Some of these elements undergo modification in accordance with the rules of postmodern genre transformations (for instance, it is a child who is described as a demonic creature in Nabokov’s text). The purpose of the following article is to demonstrate how elements of the Gothic mode are made fit for and present in Nabokov’s novel and a movie script based on the novel (*Lolita: A Screenplay* 1974) in the form of intertextual connections and hints at either classic Gothic works or at motifs typical of that particular convention.

The vast repository of contemporary cultural references often features elements whose prototypes are to be sought in literary fiction. Words which originated as proper names with time become general terms which can be found in dictionaries. For instance, *quixotic* is owed to Cervantes, *Don Juan* to a number of writers (beginning with Tirso de Molina through José Zorrilla and Lord Byron, among others), *lilliputian* to Swift, and *Lolita* to Nabokov. Whereas in the case of the first three examples the meaning of a given word is relatively fixed and comes to denote a particular quality or a set thereof, the latter term — *Lolita* — has not only lost its original connotation and come to signify “a young girl who is regarded as sexually desirable or who shows interest in or enjoyment of sex” (Crowther 1999: 315), but it has also undergone further alterations. For instance, it was transferred into the Japanese pop culture and resulted in a fashion trend called “Lolita Gothic.” Vickers briefly describes the phenomenon:

Lolita Fashion in general connotes a frilly fantasy in which Japanese teen or preteen girls dress in a wildly stylized approximation of Western Victorian or Edwardian girls, often complete with lacy parasol, teddy bear, and Little Bo Peep hat or frilly headdress — Alice Liddell on LSD. More famous still is the Lolita Fashion subcategory Elegant Lolita Gothic, usually shortened to Lolita Gothic, ELG, Loligoth or GothLoli ... Lolita Gothic has been adopted by young Japanese women whose slight physiques tend to evoke childlike or even doll-like associations — although these associations tend to exist mainly in the minds of Westerners. (2008: 156–158)

This seemingly unusual combination of the Lolita character with Gothic elements may perplex the readers of Nabokov's prose, provoking the following question: what could possibly be Gothic about little Dolores Haze and her story? Yet, on closer inspection the novel reveals numerous connections with the aesthetics of the Gothic, among others through frequent allusions to the life and works of Edgar Allan Poe, but also through the theme of eroticism, the treatment of the female protagonist, or the motif of madness and instability. Both the novel and Nabokov's screenplay written for Stanley Kubrick's film (published in 1974 as *Lolita: A Screenplay*) contain references which can be read as Gothic. Even though Nabokov's novel cannot be interpreted as a typically Gothic literary work, certain elements of Gothic aesthetics can be traced within the story. The purpose of this article is to bring to light those features of Nabokov's writing which link *Lolita* (and *Lolita: A Screenplay*) to the Gothic mode. The connection is made through the application of typically postmodern strategies, such as often misleading intertextual references, the transformation of traditional genre conventions and motifs, or making the reader an active participant in deciphering and interpreting the numerous clues within the story.

One of the most salient features of postmodern literature is its intertextuality, although its purposes may differ depending on a given work, ranging from purposefully misleading the reader through flaunting the author's erudition to rebellion against artificially imposed genre conventions.¹ Nabokov's prose shows a consciousness of those conventions, and of its own literariness (Budrecki 1983: 114–115), which is also true about his *Lolita*. The novel poses a challenge to the reader, being an artful labyrinth of references and allusions, some more obvious than others. When Stanley Kubrick convinced the novelist to supply the screenplay for his 1962 film, Nabokov did not abandon the novel's ready-made intertextual web and included most of the references in his script, published in 1974 as *Lolita: A Screenplay*. Clearly, not all allusions could be preserved in the script, and some had to be purposefully exposed and made clearer to the

¹ The latter concept is mentioned, among others, by Allan and Turner, who observe: "For example, postmodernism in the literary world may be understood as a reaction against the unity of narrative. Indeed, this reaction was so strong that in the 1960s Susan Sontag (1990) pronounced the modern novel dead" (2000: 364).

audience (those, it may be assumed, are vital to a fuller understanding and appreciation of the story). As Tweedie points out, since none of the many genres intertwined within the story is complete with all its features, but merely hinted at, the resulting combination of genres serves to further mislead readers, who might interpret elements of a given genre as a clue, but eventually arrive at a dead end (2000: 152).²

As a postmodernist, Nabokov deftly manipulates various elements pertaining to the Gothic mode, with the most distinct intertextual link between the Gothic aesthetics and *Lolita* being the almost tangible presence of Edgar Allan Poe and his work within the story. "When I was young, I liked Poe," admitted Nabokov in an interview with Appel (1967a: 129). While later in his career, Nabokov often dismissed his close kinship with Poe "whenever interviewers pressed [him] too hard or too crudely for admissions on influence" (Peterson 2000: 203), the impact of the American romanticist on his writing and especially on *Lolita* is indisputable. The reference to the work and life of Poe is one of the most pronounced literary allusions in the novel. It is essential enough to be included in both the novel and the script, and partly in Kubrick's film (although the director ultimately did not use Nabokov's original script). Peeples lists Nabokov among the modernist and postmodernist artists who were influenced by Poe's themes and techniques (2004: 144–145). In *Lolita*, the writer repeatedly alludes to either the figure of Poe himself, or to his writings; some of the references are overt, while others require clues to be deciphered.³

Nabokov uses Poe's "Annabel Lee" as a starting point for Humbert's story of his infatuation with girl-children. His first love is Annabel Leigh, her last name being a near homophone for Poe's "Lee." Humbert's Annabel becomes an avatar of a perfect girl and the man seeks this fictive ideal in *Lolita*, trying to superimpose

² What is more, Tweedie draws a parallel between the motif of travel in the novel and the strategy of switching from genre to genre, stating: "Humbert's approach to genres is similarly eclectic, and he dabbles in them without surrendering his story to the narrative logic and trajectory implied by their conventions; bouncing from town to town to evade legal responsibility for his actions, he likewise eludes the less rigid but still present rules of generic structures" (2000: 153).

³ Appel, for instance, elaborates on a thematic similarity between *Lolita* and the works of Poe, which consists in inserting fragments of poetry into prose and approaching the topic of "the death of a beautiful woman": "Like Poe's first-person narrators who incorporate poems into their tales ('The Assignation,' 'Ligeia,' 'The Fall of the House of Usher'), Humbert interpolates liberal amounts of his own verse, and its comically blatant rhymes suggest an overly zealous application of Poe's ideas on rhyme in 'The Poetic Principle.' Nabokov's choice of both subject matter and narrator parody Poe's designation in 'The Philosophy of Composition,' of the 'most poetical topic in the world': 'the death of a beautiful woman ...' Both Annabel Lee and *Lolita* 'die,' the latter in terms of her fading nymphic qualities and escape from Humbert, who invokes yet another of Poe's lost ladies when he calls *Lolita* 'Lenore' (the subject of 'Lenore' and 'The Raven'), a reference which also points to 'The Philosophy of Composition,' since that essay concerns 'The Raven'" (1967b: 236).

Annabel's image onto his "new" love.⁴ Sova notes that the speaker in Poe's poem relates the events as having happened "many and many years ago," and that all he can rely on now is memories. "The considerable distance," Sova writes, "between the events described and the current relation of these events suggests that more of the memories are based upon idealized versions of reality rather than accurate recall" (2001: 25). Humbert's vision of Dolores is also utter idealization, at least up to the point where he eventually recognizes the inevitable changes in Lolita, the teenager. Not only does this scheme mirror the story of Poe's Annabel Lee, but also, as Coviello notes, the story of Morella, the protagonist of one of Poe's short stories. He attempts to explain Poe's preference for eroticizing young girls using the example of Morella and Annabel Lee:

Such is the unenviable fate of femininity in Poe's gothic fictive world. Within this world, only very young girls, who are not yet encumbered by the revulsions of adult femininity, seem capable of providing a site for stable heterosexual male desire in Poe, since only they do not appear liable at any moment to mutate into some quasi-animate monstrosity. This transitoriness Poe finds so very poignant in his women-about-to-be-monsters is replaced in his pedophilic moments by the erotics of a similarly fragile moment of suspension that, in the adolescent girl, precedes the fall into full feminine embodiment, and its repulsions. Morella the child and Annabel Lee inhabit bodies only marginally capable of sexual attachment, but that marginality, it seems, is vastly preferable to the volatile morbidity of which adult women are the unfortunate carriers. (2005: 82–83, emphasis mine)

This is precisely where, following Botting's definition of the Gothic, "passion, excitement and sensation transgress social proprieties and moral laws" (1996: 2); breaking certain social taboos (here: romantic involvement with girl-children and being almost repulsed by adult women) is the price which has to be paid in order to give vent to passion, hidden desires and emotional torments.

While Nabokov's novel is permeated with the atmosphere of Poe's "Annabel Lee," the script introduces one more poem into the dense web of literary allusions: "Ulalume." In one of the scenes, Humbert reads it to the bored and rather critical Lolita, and calls the poem "so much more original and mysterious than the rather trivial romanticism of Annabel Lee" (Nabokov 1997b: 121), thus mocking his own — and Nabokov's — repetitious associations with the Annabel poem. "Ulalume" is somewhat more Gothic than "Annabel Lee," although both poems are concerned with the loss of a beloved woman. The setting of "Ulalume," however, immediately evokes typically Gothic connotations since the I-speaker of the poem wanders

⁴ Peterson compares the character of Lolita to a poetic work, as Humbert attempts to retrieve his lost Annabel through Lolita: "Visually, then, Humbert's Lolita is presented as a kind of found poem, an involuntary composition, 'a little ghost in natural colors' (*Lolita* 11). But Humbert's Lolita is also simultaneously a made poem, a verbal artifact. As the recuperated image of an initial beauty born in a Poe-tic atmosphere, 'a principdom by the sea,' Lolita's derivation is as much verbal as optical. She is *consciously* evoked as a reiteration of the already read, as a warmed-over quotation from a haunting literary echo. This Lolita is made of the stuff from which waking daydreams are made — inaccurate translations from poetry into life" (2000: 204–205).

through a cemetery at night. Nabokov has Humbert quote only the initial and final fragments of the poem, but as he recites it, it becomes obvious that he admires the piece mostly for its melodic, hypnotic quality. He comments: "Marvelous emphasis on 'immemorial.' Makes you step up from one dim rim to a dimmer one," and "Notice how nicely the 'dim' is read back and becomes 'mid' — 'mist mid region'?" (Nabokov 1997b: 120–121). The two poems share one more feature, namely they both symbolize Humbert's eternal return to his first, original love. Just as he compares *Lolita* to Annabel, he unconsciously — like the protagonist of "Ulalume" — goes back to what is long gone and cannot be retrieved. The "over-abundance of imaginative frenzy," to use Botting's words, causes Nabokov's character to relive the romantic fever of his boyhood and to wish for the reincarnation of Annabel in *Lolita*, believing she embodies the essence of his first love.

Another introduction of Gothicism into the contemporary world of *Lolita*, and a somewhat more subtle hint at Poe's work, is the gothic quality of the setting — Quilty's mansion. As Rampton observes, Nabokov's description of Pavor Manor subtly imitates Poe's depiction of the eponymous house in "The Fall of the House of Usher" (Rampton 1984: 111).⁵ Eliminating the explicit descriptions of fear or discomfort present in Poe's story, Nabokov maintains the peculiarly Gothic tone of the fragment through his selection of place names: Grimm Road (which may be both a literary allusion to the Grimm brothers and their disturbing tales, and a homophone for "grim") and Pavor Manor (the word "pavor" being Latin for "terror"); or the heavy alliteration in "dank, dark, dense forest."⁶ Herlands Hornstein et al. comment upon Poe's predilection for creating a particular mood through linguistic and stylistic devices:

A student of prosodic devices, he sought to attain a more felicitous verbal music by use of repetition in the forms of alliteration, assonance, echoes, repetends, refrains, and onomatopoeia. Sound was more important than meaning to him and was used to reinforce his characteristic effects of melancholy, mystery, terror, and horror. (2002: 578)

Nabokov may not necessarily be creating a typically Gothic setting, but his description of the house does evoke similar connotations to those associated with

⁵ Although Nabokov's description of Humbert approaching the mansion and contemplating it from afar seems very condensed and simple in comparison with Poe's lengthy sentences, a certain similarity can be noticed in the following passage from *Lolita*: "At the twelfth mile, as foretold, a curiously hooded bridge sheathed me for a moment and, beyond it, a white-washed rock loomed on the right, and a few car lengths further, on the same side, I turned off the highway up gravelly Grimm Road. For a couple of minutes all was dank, dark, dense forest. Then, Pavor Manor, a wooden house with a turret, arose in a circular clearing. Its windows glowed yellow and red; its drive was cluttered with half a dozen cars. I stopped in the shelter of the trees and abolished my lights to ponder the next move quietly" (291). It should also be noted that while Poe's protagonist concentrates on the feeling of uneasiness and terror that the house of Usher causes him, Humbert merely observes the mansion from a distance, planning his actions.

⁶ In the opening line of Poe's short story, the reader finds "a dull, dark, and soundless day" (1960: 113).

Gothic fiction: a dark forest and a mansion rising ominously in a clearing, with “glowing” windows, create a somewhat disturbing atmosphere, paralleled to a certain extent by Poe’s story. Even if the reader fails to recognize the similarity between the postmodern text and the particular story by Poe, the Gothic connotations remain discernible.

Through the character of Quilty, Nabokov introduces the motif of a doppelganger into the novel, which is another element typical of Gothic fiction. As Appel observes, one of the accessible literary prototypes he uses is Poe’s short story “William Wilson,” in which the protagonist has to escape his double (Appel 1967b: 222). Like Poe’s Wilson, Humbert feels beset by a mysterious man with whom he shares numerous characteristics. As a matter of fact, they are more alike than Humbert would ever have expected. Both Poe and Nabokov often decide to hide the double’s face from the protagonist; in Poe’s “William Wilson,” the doppelganger is usually hidden in the shadow — a trick easy to convey on screen and used by Kubrick in his film. Appel adds:

Wilson’s “shadow” wears the same clothes as he does (Humbert and Quilty share a purple bathrobe), and when, after traveling to Paris, Rome, Vienna, Berlin, and Moscow, Wilson cannot rid himself of his “brother,” he kills him, just as Humbert is “free to destroy my brother.” (1967b: 222)

Poe’s Wilson and his double are virtually indistinguishable from one another, the only differentiating feature being their voices (Wilson’s doppelganger can only imitate his “victim’s” whisper). Not only do they look alike, but they even share the same date of birth. Meanwhile, Nabokov’s Humbert-Quilty pair are not as literal in their resemblance; it is their unhealthy desire for little girls and perhaps their associations with the literary world that constitute the common denominator. Nevertheless, Humbert is shocked to discover the connection between himself and Quilty, and he ultimately calls his nemesis his “brother” (*Lolita*, 245). As a doppelganger is supposed to be “a ghostly counterpart of a living person, a double or alter ego,” who “often represents the evil or unpleasant aspect of a person’s nature” (Webber and Feinsilber 1999: 161), it becomes suitable for Gothic fiction. Dryden defines the genre as “a literature of transformations where identity is unstable and sanity a debatable state of being,” thus classifying the motif of the double as an inherent part of the *fin-the-siècle* Gothic:

Unstable identity became closely linked in this [Gothic] fiction with the labyrinthine metropolis and its teeming population. Issues of duality — split personalities, physical transformations, mistaken identities, doppelgangers — were found to be manifested in the social, geographical and architectural schisms of the modern city. (2003: 19)

In *Lolita*, Nabokov gradually increases the tension instead of revealing the dreadful similarity of Humbert and Quilty right away, although the reader is granted numerous opportunities to notice the parallels between the two characters, having been invited to a postmodern game of competing with the narrator for the riddle’s

solution. It is Humbert who remains oblivious of his double's identity until the dénouement of the plot, although — as Tweedie observes — this oblivion is premeditated and fake, since the novel is allegedly Humbert's diary in which he relates the events years after they happened, yet he feigns unawareness and forces the reader to supply the missing pieces of the puzzle (2000: 166). Here is where, in Botting's words, "ambivalence and uncertainty obscure single meaning" (1996: 2); in one of the novel's final scenes the two men almost become one person as they wrestle on the floor and the reader is just as confused as Humbert struggling with his nemesis:

We rolled all over the floor, in each other's arms, like two huge helpless children. He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us. (*Lolita*, 297)

The blurring of the boundaries between the two characters — the protagonist and the arch-villain — renders their individual traits insignificant and emphasizes their common and most unsettling quality: a socially unacceptable predilection for prepubescent girls.

The treatment of *Lolita* as a person brings us to yet another aspect of Gothic fiction which can be traced in Nabokov's novel, namely the presence of a demon. To Humbert, *Lolita* is a specimen of a peculiar category of girls which he terms "nymphets." He devotes quite a number of passages to the description of this "species" and makes its members appear somewhat inhuman, and recognizable only to "an artist and a madman" consumed by unspeakable passions (*Lolita*, 17). Humbert explicitly calls a nymphet "the little deadly demon among the wholesome children" (*Lolita*, 17), emphasizing her detachment from the world of "normal" girls. This is an interesting twist on one of the common Gothic motifs which consists in coupling a demonic, passionate lover with a subdued, helpless victim. The latter, however, is conventionally a female, while in Nabokov's novel even though Humbert virtually enslaves *Lolita*, he blames it on her "nymphettish" charm and almost considers himself a victim.⁷ Gothic fiction, according to Reed, deals with the motif in a different way:

In Gothic works, aberrant sexuality is often presented hand in hand with terror and pain. Sexual desire on the part of the would-be lover is obsessive and destructive, while the victim is often presented as virginal — a combination that sets up a demon-lover arrangement whereby the lover accosts the victim, renders her will subservient to his, then destroys her purity, her sanity, or her life ... Aberrant sexuality in Gothic literature is often associated with supernatural beings — demons, vampires, witches, or men with an uncanny power to control. (1988: 57)

Humbert and *Lolita*'s relationship is destructive; it involves subjugation and loss of childhood on the part of the girl, yet it is she who is considered "demonic,"

⁷ Humbert verbalizes his confusion as to the nature of nymphets and the impossibility of defining the "ingredients" of their phenomenon: "I am trying to describe these things not to re-live them in my present boundless misery, but to sort out the portion of hell and the portion of heaven in that strange, awful, maddening world — nymphet love. The beastly and beautiful merged at one point, and it is that borderline I would like to fix, and I feel I fail to do so utterly. Why?" (*Lolita*, 134).

often presented as the one in control (precocious, consciously using her charms to get what she wants from Humbert), and — a peculiar modification of the motif of a Gothic victim — she is not innocent when their affair begins. It is still, nonetheless, a relationship between a “demon” (Lolita) and a “madman” possessed by the demon (Humbert), which resembles a Gothic pattern. Coviello writes: “Disturbances in the realm of intimacy are of course a standard feature of the gothic, a genre not noted for its happy marriages, light-hearted couplings, or long and untroubled friendly allegiances” (2005: 63). *Lolita* is definitely not a story of a happy love relationship, even though Humbert expresses his love for Lolita numerous times. According to Budrecki, as a postmodern writer, Nabokov oscillated between stylization and parody, but did not strictly subordinate his themes to a mere imitation of a given prototype, “freeing the anecdote of his prose from the obligation to imitate the fiction schemes proper to the works or forms known from the past” (1983: 167–168, translation mine). The appropriation of the Gothic motif and reversing the predictable victim-oppressor arrangement perfectly illustrates the postmodern predilection for altering and disguising ready-made patterns.

Presenting Lolita as an unworldly temptress is not the only instance in which a female character is treated in a way resembling the Gothic scheme; the position of the mother figure in the text also deserves scrutiny. “The world of the Gothic novel is a dangerous place for women of every station and status,” points out Ruth Bienstock Anolik (2003: 25) in an article focusing on the figure of the mother in Gothic prose. According to the author, the mother is among the most threatened characters, as her disappearance is often the *sine qua non* for the union of her innocent child with an oppressive lover. The scholar writes:

A number of critics note that the figure of the mother exerts social control and order, providing the resistance to deviance that is beneficial to society but detrimental to narrative ... The solution to this narrative problem is to exclude the oppressively suffocating figure of the mother. The absence of the mother from the Gothic text allows for a narratable deviance to flourish in the text, a deviance that allows the text to thrive. (Bienstock Anolik, 27–28)

Interestingly enough, according to Caesar, postmodern narratives are just as unsafe for mother figures, who need to be erased in order to be noticed and to make the story of the father/male more prominent in accordance with the patriarchal scheme (1995: 127–129). In the case of *Lolita*, Charlotte’s erasure literally propels the story in the direction so desired by the male protagonist, for her storyline constitutes a clear threat to Humbert’s seduction of her daughter.

Throughout her brief presence in the novel’s plot,⁸ Charlotte is despised and mocked by Humbert. With Mrs. Haze dead, he can finally rapture his nymphet

⁸ As Tweedie rightly points out, from the very beginning of the story the narrator speaks of women who inevitably perish: “Having just introduced his mother into the background of his childhood in the French Riviera, Humbert dismisses her summarily, recounting her sudden death with one abrupt gesture: ‘picnic, lightning’ (10). She becomes the paradigm for the women in his life, all of whom enter the story in the shadow of their eventual deaths” (2000: 156).

and force her to fulfill his taboo fantasies. The immorality of his conduct and the breaking of social norms bring to mind — once again — Botting's definition: "Passion, excitement and sensation transgress social proprieties and moral laws" (1996: 2). Driven by passion and lust, Humbert disregards what is deemed acceptable by society, his emotions and fantasies taking control over common sense and concern for the well-being of his young lover.

The Gothic's specific rebellion against what is moral and appropriate almost automatically entails the introduction of characters who are either insane or in drug-induced states of consciousness, characters whose madness propels them to behave irrationally, although they perceive their own actions as justified. Picart and Greek point to the connection between the typically Gothic setting and the issue of the mental instabilities of the characters:

Revealing an affinity with postmodernism, its descendant, the Gothic landscape, whether it be an external panorama or an internal landscape, is marked by the assault on clear boundaries and distinctions by haze and darkness, ambivalences and uncertainties, permitting an infinite spectrum of moral and aesthetic possibilities that the classical or Enlightenment traditions of inquiry attempted to exorcise. Thus, there is an affinity in the way mental disorders coexist with settings of ruins in Gothic novels. Insanity may be envisaged as a form of mental deterioration, an internal ruin of the mind, the self, the very concept of what is human. (2007: 23–24)

On many occasions Humbert admits his own insanity, calling himself a madman or otherwise emphasizing his erratic behavior. He refers to his affair with Annabel as "that frenzy of mutual possession" and admits they were "madly, clumsily, agonizingly in love with each other" (*Lolita*, 12). Realizing that his preferences are at least disturbing, he confesses: "The fact that to me the only objects of amorous tremor were sisters of Annabel's, her hand-maids and girl-pages, appeared to me at times as a forerunner of insanity" (*Lolita*, 18–19). He calls the nymphets "maddening" (*Lolita*, 21), and while describing his trip to arctic Canada, where he was free from the sight of girl-children, he relates: "No temptations maddened me" (*Lolita*, 33). "I know it is madness to keep this journal," he confesses in the diary he keeps while staying at Charlotte's house (*Lolita*, 42). In an erotically charged scene which depicts Humbert deriving pleasure from the oblivious Lolita playing on his lap, the man states: "By this time I was in a state of excitement bordering on insanity; but I also had the cunning of the insane" (*Lolita*, 58). As the girl seduces him later on in the story, he is overcome by "the odd sense of living in a brand new, mad new dream world, where everything was permissible" (*Lolita*, 132–133). He emphasizes the instability of his character saying: "I could switch in the course of the same day from one pole of insanity to the other" (*Lolita*, 171). After Lolita's disappearance, a woman named Rita is said to save Humbert "from the madhouse" (*Lolita*, 257). It is specifically in one instance, however, where Humbert's insanity and inability to distinguish between reality and fantasy, between the real Lolita and the figment of his imagination, is especially conspicuous. After the already mentioned sequence in which Humbert takes advantage of Lolita's innocent play

and experiences sexual fulfillment without having the girl notice it, the man reveals that in his mind, it was not Lolita but some indefinable construct that he took advantage of:

Thus had I delicately constructed my ignoble, ardent, sinful dream; and still Lolita was safe — and I was safe. 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. (*Lolita*, 61–62)

The male protagonist's insanity seems to be the drive behind all his immoral actions, but he justifies his crimes with the love and passion he feels for his victim. Both the hints and the explicit references to his erotic life constitute yet another intertextual piece of the Gothic puzzle in Nabokov's novel, because, as Picart and Greek point out,

sexual perversions are key in Gothic literature because they are spawned by severe repression and their imaginative exploration allows for the expansion of the parameters of sexual practice. Homosexuality, sodomy, incest, rape, group copulations, necrophilia, and coprophagy are often part of the plots in order to destabilize the comfortable boundary line between the normal and the perverse. (2007: 25)

Humbert's lust for Lolita is not, of course, the only sexually charged element of the story. Quilty — the villain — is a nympholept and a producer of pornography who organizes orgies at his mansion. Humbert's friend, Gaston Godin, reportedly has a fondness for little boys. Lolita loses her virginity at a summer camp at the age of twelve, in a passionless play with a boy named Charlie and a girl named Barbara. The two female neighbors of Humbert are named Lester and Fabian — tricky word-play on the part of Nabokov to suggest their orientation. Sexual allusions abound in *Lolita*, giving the reader an impression of a world where almost everyone has their deviations and perversions, be they minor or major, and Humbert is but a single, relatively harmless figure in this vast collection of weird characters. Such an approach to eroticism, Bauman claims, is typical of postmodernity which severs the links between the erotic and the romantic (love), and also between the erotic and the immortality-oriented (procreation). "The postmodern eroticism," Bauman writes, "is free to enter and leave any association of convenience" (1998: 21). Just as the Gothic tradition excuses literary deviants precisely because their deviations threaten the safe normality and thus a thrilling Gothic story may be conceived, so does postmodernity excuse those same deviants by making them the norm. Neither does the Gothic convention nor the postmodern one expect romance, fidelity or offspring to be strictly connected to eroticism which is now supposed to be a powerful force *per se*.

Nabokovian literary techniques and the author's conscious application of well-known motifs enrich the storyline of *Lolita* and of the script based on the novel with a distinctly Gothic flavor, even though the whole work is not typically described as pertaining to the domain of Gothic fiction. With his clues, Nabokov initiates a typically postmodern game with the reader who is supposed to detect and interpret the Gothic intertextual references planted in the text. The focus on Humbert's

emotions, his disregard for social norms, his breaking of taboos and blurring of boundaries between what is right and wrong by justifying the protagonist's misconduct, are all strategies and motifs echoed in, among others, Botting's definition of the Gothic. Most significantly, it is the emphasis on the overpowering influence of imagination on Humbert's perception of his life which makes *Lolita* correspond so well with the recipe for Gothic fiction. Nabokov's play on the doppelganger motif and his using the figure of Quilty as Humbert's double occasionally confuse both the reader and the writer's own character — Humbert. If "Gothic signified a trend towards an aesthetics based on feeling and emotion" (Botting 1996: 2), then certain instances in *Lolita* can be read as Gothic not only due to the allusions to Edgar Allan Poe, but to the general overtone of this unconventional and ill-fated love story.

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