Vladimir Nabokov and the Vulgar Aesthetic

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During Part One of *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert retrospectively surveys and catalogues several details of his brief marriage to Charlotte Haze. Cliché incarnate, Charlotte presents an immediate example of Humbert’s paradoxical relationship to the vulgar. As Humbert’s tirade against Charlotte’s superficiality proceeds, a dark image of ultimate vulgarity emerges:

> Of my Lolita [Charlotte] seldom spoke—more seldom, in fact, than she did of the blurred, blond male baby whose photograph to the exclusion of all other adorned our bleak bedroom. In one of her tasteless reveries, she predicted that the dead infant’s soul would return to earth in the form of the child she would bear in her present wedlock. And although I felt no special urge to supply the Humbert line with a replica of Harold’s production (*Lolita*, with an incestuous thrill, I had grown to regard as *my* child), it occurred to me that a prolonged confinement, with a nice Caesarean operation and other complications in a safe maternity ward sometime next spring, would give me a chance to be alone with my Lolita for weeks, perhaps—and gorge the limp nymphet with sleeping pills. (80)

The “tasteless” image of the dead baby's return resonates throughout the chapter as an artifact of aestheticized vulgarity. These kinds of dense images, constantly in flux throughout *Lolita*, are the result of Humbert’s aesthetic engagement with the vulgar. Humbert’s self-involvement within
these recurring images of vulgarity complicates his relationship to the cliché and reapportions its role within his own unique process of aesthetic creation. Although the image remains but an evanescent interlude between discussions of Charlotte’s love life and disdain for her daughter, its eerie afterglow resonates throughout the entire chapter. These intermittent flourishes of kitsch and vulgarity problematize several pervasive perspectives within Lolita’s critical discourse and elicit a series of fundamental revisions throughout our broader understanding of Nabokov’s aesthetic strategies.

The diverse specialization of critical interests surrounding Lolita has yielded recurring evaluations of Humbert as the ultimate European elitist, highbrow aestheticist, and enemy of all things tainted by the tasteless middle-class. Subordinating Humbert’s nuanced relation to the vulgar as a peripheral concern, these inquiries have left an expansive void in Lolita’s theoretical discourse encompassing both Humbert’s problematic relation to the vulgar and the cliché’s functionality within Nabokov’s art. Rather than interpret the presence of kitsch vulgarity within Lolita as an implicit condemnation of pop-culture/art, I will demonstrate how the aesthetic functionality of these images, as well as Nabokov’s ideological relation to his literary predecessors Edgar Allan Poe and Nikolai Gogol, contextualize Lolita within a post-Romantic tradition that does not condemn or distance, but rather extracts value from the cliché. Following analyses of Humbert’s vulgar propensities and an expansion of the cliché’s aesthetic capabilities, my argument will contextualize Nabokov’s unique position within larger traditions of modernist negativity and explore Lolita as a reconciliation between high art and mass culture through the vulgar.

A brief examination of the cultural discourse surrounding modernist art further elucidates
the paradoxical nature of Humbert’s elitist persona. In his extended survey of modern/post-modern discourse, *After the Great Divide*, Andreas Huyssen identifies the antagonistic relationship between “high” and “low” culture as a central and defining feature of modernist aesthetics; he emphasizes this cultural rift’s significance with the broad claim: “since the mid-19th century, the culture of modernity has been characterized by a volatile relationship between high art and mass culture” (vi). According to Huyssen, Modernism’s self-defining employs “a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture” (vi). Although Huyssen’s compelling claims accurately locate general features of historical forces shaping the culture of modernity and the artistic backlash of twentieth-century movements, his argument is an insufficient substitute for close analyses of specific and individual aesthetic techniques. Though Humbert’s surface hostility toward the vulgar aligns with Huyssen’s conceptions of high art’s volatile relationship with popular culture, we must carefully avoid dismissing *Lolita’s* engagement with this “consuming and engulfing” force as a simple repudiation of its twentieth-century social context. Michael Wood emphasizes the irony of absolutist critical assessments, and considers Humbert “less of a snob than many of his scholarly readers, who have seen in Lolita a condemnation of America’s shallow, mass-managed culture” (115). Examining Nabokov’s problematic attitude toward popular culture, Suellen Stringer-Hye notes: “[Nabokov] seems on the one hand to detest its vulgarity while on the other to celebrate its vigor” (Stringer-Hye 158). Humbert consistently mirrors his creator’s problematic attitude and our interpretation of his vulgar aesthetic must consequently account for this oscillation between abhorrence and awe. Perspectives that identify Humbert as an embodiment of high art’s resistance against encroaching mass culture conflate the
general and specific, and consequently overlook the peculiar mechanics of Lolita’s vulgarity. The foundational tenets underlying Lolita’s application of cliché aesthetics are dispersed throughout the work of Nabokov’s Romantic predecessors Nikolai Gogol and Edgar Allan Poe.

**Excavating the Vulgar through Nikolai Gogol and Poshlust**

Our effort to understand the pervasive presence of cliché and its function within Lolita requires an inceptive comprehension of Nabokov’s conceptualization of vulgarity. Although his references to “vulgarity” are often veiled in synonymous abstractions and variations, Nabokov’s philological understanding of the word returns to one of its oldest definitions, “the quality of being usual, ordinary, or commonplace,” first developed during the seventeenth century and later expanded to include “common and offensively mean character; coarsely commonplace; lacking in refinement or good taste; uncultured” (“Vulgar”). Although these rudimentary definitions adequately provide a foundational and objective understanding of “vulgarity,” they also lack a certain depth and sophistication essential to Nabokov’s aesthetic implementation of this principle. Retracing Nabokov’s vision of vulgarity leads us beyond these basic definitions and into one of the writer’s earliest critical works, Nikolai Gogol.

Nabokov’s first sustained effort to engage with the aesthetic implications of vulgarity predates Lolita’s initial publication by more than ten years. Fulfilling a commission from New Directions Publishing for a contribution to the “Makers of Modern Literature” series, Nabokov published “his brilliant and onesided Nikolai Gogol in 1944” (Fanger 421). As a concise and highly stylized portraiture of Gogol, the work indirectly elucidates several of Nabokov’s technical and aesthetic convictions and vastly surpasses his understated evaluation of the book as an “innocent, and rather superficial, little sketch of his life” (Strong Opinions 156). Several
facets of Nabokov’s personal and professional life qualify his nomination as Gogol’s critical biographer. Donald Fanger’s essay “Nabokov and Gogol” includes a concise summary detailing several affinities between Nikolai Gogol’s subject and author: “Both show a tendency to non-endings in terms of plot . . . feature freakish and/or morally repugnant characters . . . inclined to solipsism, vividly but somehow completely ‘alive,’ many of them surrogate artists. Both writers conflate prose and poetry . . . both exalt art over everyday life . . .” (Fanger 421). Regardless of these commonalities, Fanger suggests “sovereignty” as the driving force behind Nikolai Gogol’s strongest theoretical arguments and qualifies Nabokov’s emancipatory quest with a distinction between influence and imitation:

One major writer’s debt to another is always for help rendered in seeing or solving particular artistic problems, in facilitating his or her self-creation. Only in this sense of a literal “flowing-in,” as a contribution to radical individuality, is “influence” worth noting. (421)

Applying Fanger’s concept of collaborative self-creation creates a new context for understanding the singularity of Nabokov’s vulgar aesthetic. Gogol’s unique treatment and experimentation with vulgar negativity proves to be the most transitive and influential concept active within Nabokov’s self-creation.

Nabokov identifies vulgar images within Gogol’s fiction as manifestations of the amorphous and expansive concept poshlust. Considering the dense collection of theoretical abstractions throughout the work, Nikolai Gogol’s extended explication of poshlust is particularly revealing and alludes to Nabokov’s interest in this negative dimension of Gogol’s aesthetic. It is within Nikolai Gogol’s careful meditation on poshlust that we find the strongest
formal and ideological precursor to \textit{Lolita}'s engagement with the vulgar. Compensating for what he believes to be the English language’s absence of any literal translation, Nabokov intensifies \textit{poshlust}'s mystification with a series of potential synonyms, including: “cheap, sham, common, smutty, pink-and-blue, high falutin’, in bad taste . . . inferior, sorry, trashy, scurvy, tawdry, gimcrack” and “cheapness” (NG 64). The finality and simplicity of the list is both misleading and deliberate. Following \textit{poshlust}'s nascent definition, Nabokov utilizes every slight repose as a valuable space for further amendment and conceptual modification. Because this circuitous and stylized criticism carefully mirrors the prime aesthetic values emphasized within Gogol’s work, locating the essence of Nabokov’s elucidations often becomes a counterintuitive process. His assertion that “the \textit{real} plot” of Gogol’s \textit{The Overcoat} “lies in the style, in the inner structure of this transcendental anecdote,” equally serves as an indicator of the “\textit{real}” argument behind \textit{Nikolai Gogol} (144). Fanger accurately appraises this stylistic substance as the most essential and lasting quality of \textit{Nikolai Gogol}:

Nabokov’s simplification of Gogol is itself a highly complex and fluid thing, its mannered writing—for all its fluctuations between the poles of critical introduction and personal artistic credo—lending it an esthetic value quite irrespective of the relative adequacy, justice, or even truth of the propositions it contains . . . The sustained if quirky elegance of the writing is such as to ensure the lasting value of the book. (422, 426)

Navigating the layered interconnectivity between Gogol and Nabokov, as well as each writer’s respective application of \textit{poshlust}/vulgarity, requires an equally sinuous thought-pattern. However, returning to Fanger’s introductory distinction between artistic influence and self-
creation provides a guiding compass that helps trace vulgarity’s evolution as a literary and aesthetic tradition. As a leading pioneer in eighteenth-century anti-realist literature, Gogol fulfills an important facilitating role in Nabokov’s artistic self-creation, yet fails to fully bridge the gap between vulgarity’s traditional inception and post-Romantic application. Poe’s vision of intensifying art through artificiality unifies this division and marks an unprecedented sophistication of the vulgar’s aesthetic potential.

**Poe and Formula**

Although *Lolita* diffuses several of Gogol’s literary themes and aesthetic concerns throughout Humbert’s love-lust memoir, the novel remains devoid of any direct allusion or reference to Nabokov’s Russian predecessor. This absence attains particular significance when considering *Lolita’s* constant engagement with intertextuality and provides an important distinction between Gogol’s influence and that of Edgar Allan Poe. “Poe is referred to more than twenty times in *Lolita,*” notes Alfred Appel in his *Annotated Lolita,* “It is also in part through Poe that Nabokov manages to suggest some consistently held attitudes toward language and literature” (331-32). Poe’s critical essay “The Philosophy of Composition” structures an essential set of features within *Lolita* and intimates a unique relation between formulaic cliché and the vulgar.

“The Philosophy of Composition” contains striking claims connecting cliché and a formulaic process of artistic creation. Although Poe upholds imagination as a fundamental requisite for inspiration and artistic vision, his execution of an artwork’s realization is both mechanized and highly calculative. Critics widely acknowledge Poe’s reliance on structure as a byproduct of his obsessive concern with aesthetic effect, a pursuit Stephen Mooney characterizes
as “the calculation of the artist to involve the reader in the life of the fiction, so that an experience of reality would be forged in the consciousness, fully and permanently” (Mooney 27). Poe’s envisioning of an ideal poetic subject yields one of the earliest articulations of the cliché’s aesthetic functionality. Maintaining strict pursuit of effect through formula, Poe’s aesthetic stratagem vitalizes artificiality as a supreme force within high art:

“Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the universal understanding of mankind, is the most melancholy?” Death—was the obvious reply. “And when,” I said, “is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?” . . . the answer, here also, is obvious—“When it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world—and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.” (65)

Poe’s “death . . . of a beautiful woman,” fulfills what Mark Neimeyer’s classifies as a consistent “dimension of reality, if not the banal” within Poe’s works, though these representations of reality are also tinged with “an element of the unusual or the extreme or distorted” (Neimeyer 208). Assessing Poe’s chosen subject through the lens of Aristotelian effect, a philosophy emphasizing art’s cathartic potential, we might interpret Poe’s assertion as a faint attempt to evoke an audience’s universal emotions. However, Poe’s second question aims to charge his chosen subject, “death,” with its most poetic, rather than realistic, potential. Critics often reiterate this feature of Poe’s craft, as in Georges Zayed’s recapitulation, “the poet ought to choose his subject, not for its rational content, but for its emotive potential” and William Howarth’s evaluation that Poe’s technique assigns “a high premium on the artifice of literature,
on the fact that it is quite apart from day to day life” (Zayed 73, Howarth 9). Poe’s inquiry into death’s most poetical context obviates Aristotelian interpretations and arguably minimizes art’s value as cathartic device. Poe’s “most poetical topic” is rather an apportionment of poshlost’s principles and a precursory example of the cliché’s exclusionary capacities.

Harold Bloom consolidates Poe’s legacy as a Romantic pioneer of artificiality, labeling the writer “a great fantasist whose thoughts were commonplace and whose metaphors were dead” (Bloom 9). Bloom implicitly locates the origins of a cliché aesthetic within Poe’s stylistic proclivities; “commonplace” directly parallels the essence of vulgarity; “dead metaphors” allude to the reified condition of an aestheticized cliché (Bloom 9). Rather than founding his aesthetics in human emotions, those derived from social reality and exercised through cathartic experiences, Poe moves away from life itself and embraces the artifice of cliché. Artificiality’s aesthetic gravity-well is deepened even further during twentieth-century movements of Pop and Camp art. Susan Sontag’s claims throughout her seminal 1964 essay “Notes On Camp” resemble intensified versions and variations of Poe’s principles. Sontag incorporates the “love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” into her definition of Camp as “one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon . . . not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization” (Sontag 275, 277). The essay further expounds Camp’s stylistic supremacy as a consistent “aesthetic experience of the world . . . [incarnating] a victory of ‘style’ over ‘content,’ ‘aesthetics’ over ‘morality,’ of irony over tragedy” (287). Sontag’s laudatory treatment of Camp echoes Poe’s exposition on “the most poetic topic in the world” and allocates artificiality as the ultimate criterion for pure aesthetic experience. Contrasting Camp’s radicalization of Poe’s poetic principles, Lolita’s engagement with vulgar aesthetics exhibits a
sophisticated fusion of Romantic ideals and modernist intent.

**Vulgar Images in *Lolita***

During an early moment of despondency, Humbert pleads: “Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!” (32). Despite these lamentations over the inadequacy of his memoir’s medium, Humbert voraciously pursues language as a “refuge of art” and his rendering of Lolita as an artistic object remains “only words” (309). Humbert’s poetic proficiency, according to Donald Morton, aligns *Lolita* as “Humbert’s literary creation, a work of art written with such infectious and compelling fervor as to become a sustained verbal conjuring act” (Morton 70). During his memoir’s first lines, Humbert exhibits indications of his immersion within language and the objectifying capacity of his verbal prowess, “Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta” (9). Critics widely acknowledge these opening lines as a synthesis of Humbert’s “dual obsession, the girl and the language that must now serve as a stand-in for her” (Rampton 80). Morton perceives these opening lines as a “rhythmic caress” of Lolita’s nymphet moniker: “Around her name, with its sacred syllables, he weaves the story of his love for her” (71). Additionally, this linguistic “caress” immediately emphasizes “Humbert’s need to turn his own life into a work of art” (Rampton 81). Through this artistic transformation of life, Humbert’s verbal strategy closely patterns Poe’s elevation of artificiality and imbibes Gogol’s palette of *poshlust* vulgarity.

During the account of his “haunting” childhood experience with Annabel Leigh, Humbert creates a singular artifice within his own past and floods this image with vulgar currents and underpinnings. Leland De La Durantaye’s commentary on this “bewildering and bravura mixture of lyricism and merciless *self-parody*” indicates the self-referential and hyper-stylization of
Humbert’s past remembrance (“Eichmann Empathy” 319, my emphases). His formative experience with Annabel also extends into literary allusion as an explicit reference to “Poe’s poem of the same name on the dead child-bride Annabel Lee” (Two Lolitas 28). Lolita’s emergence from Humbert’s internalized memory, “the haze of stars, the tingle, the flame, the honeydew, and the ache,” endows her image with an aura of artificiality (15). The artificial hue of Annabel’s “seaside limbs and ardent tongue,” sustains the memory as a preparatory configuration of Lolita, until Humbert finally divulges: “at last, twenty-four years later I broke her spell by incarnating her in another” (15). His initial descriptions notably indicate the inseparability of idyllic surroundings and young emotional ache, whereas his subsequent statement foreshadows Lolita’s fulfillment of Annabel’s image. Humbert withholds complete elucidation of this transcendent phenomenon, however, until his first encounter with Lolita:

It was the same child—the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair . . . the vacuum of my soul managed to suck in every detail of her bright beauty, and these I checked against the features of my dead bride. (39)

Though Annabel is a prominent and kinetic force motivating Humbert’s subsumption into Lolita, she remains marginalized with “no reality other than literary,” and reduced to an initial focal point for Humbert’s expansionist desire (Annotated Lolita 335). Michael Marr’s articulation of Annabel as “the initial fateful elf” on whom [Humbert] models all his subsequent girls” reinforces Lolita’s identity as a fulfillment of Humbert’s self-forged artifice, as she too “is only a revenant of the original nymph” (Speak Nabokov 132). Humbert excises any details that might solidify Annabel’s presence and thereby detract from Lolita’s destiny “to eclipse completely her
prototype” (40). He enunciates this continuum between the “tortured past” of Annabel and epiphanic awakening of Lolita as “a series of gropings and blunders, and false rudiments of joy” (40). Synthesizing his inheritance of Gogol and Poe’s Romantic vulgarity, Nabokov carefully structures several dimensions of Humbert’s subsequent quest “to fix once and for all the perilous magic of nympha” through the cliché’s aesthetic capacities (134).

*Lolita*’s rendering of The Enchanted Hunters Hotel during Part One demonstrates a vital connection between vulgarity and the perceptual richness of Humbert’s language. Humbert’s decadent prose transforms the mundane and ordinary: “The Park was as black as the sins it concealed—but . . . the travelers became aware of a diamond glow through the mist, then a gleam of lakewater appeared—and there it was, marvelously and inexorably, under the spectral trees, at the top of a graveled drive—the pale palace of the Enchanted Hunters” (117). As the locale of Humbert’s carnal consummation, The Enchanted Hunters is deeply invigorated by Romanticization of the cliché. Humbert’s commentary, “Parody of a hotel corridor. Parody of silence and death” and Lolita’s appraisal, “‘Wow! Looks swank,’ remarked my vulgar darling” indicate the hotel’s eerie aura (117). Their overnight stay also marks a deepening of Lolita’s connection to the materialism of mass-culture through Humbert’s lavish gifts. This commodification eventually burgeons into a grotesque dimension of their dysfunctional relationship, but one of the first and most demonstrative examples of Lolita’s captivation with materialist desire immediately precedes their sexual consummation. Humbert’s emotions climatically swell as he ravishes the slow-motion image of Lolita, lulled into a hypnotic trance by the gleaming garments:

Oh, what a dreamy pet! She walked up to the open suitcase as if stalking it from
afar, at a kind of slow-motion walk, peering at that distant treasure box on the luggage support. (Was there something wrong, I wondered, with those great gray eyes of hers, or were we both plunged in the same enchanted mist?)

Humbert and Lolita are not, in fact, “plunged in the same enchanted mist” but remain in two separate and distinct realms of entrancement. Humbert’s lustful and carnal desire clearly characterizes his orientation during this exchange, but Lolita’s gaze remains fixated on the dress itself with unwavering resolve. Durantaye notes that “for the Humbert of the first part of the novel, the lover and the artist see the world in the same all-enlivening, all-consuming way,” and Humbert’s representations of Lolita’s commodity-trance indicate this blurring of life and art (Style is Matter 87). The dress, apart from Humbert’s hopes of purchasing Lolita’s affections, functions as a catalyst in both realms of love and language. First, its power over Lolita provides an ideal opportunity to linguistically objectify her serene reaction and indicates Humbert’s “careful parallel . . . between the proud creation of great art and the proud pursuit of love” (“Eichmann Empathy” 321). Second, the dress emblematizes Humbert’s “fascination with the erotic potential of the images of popular culture” and invites romanticization of the vulgar (Rampton 83). Humbert derives a degree of genuine satisfaction from successfully aestheticizing such ordinary objects of consumer-culture:

She stepped up to it, lifting her rather high-heeled feet rather high and bending her beautiful boy-knees while she walked through dilating space with the lentor of one walking under water or in a flight dream. Then she raised by the armlets a copper-colored, charming and quite expensive vest, very slowly stretching it between her silent hands as if she were a bemused bird-hunter holding his breath
over the incredible bird he spreads out by the tips of its flaming wings. (120)

Although Lolita embraces his waiting arms “radiant” and “relaxed,” Humbert does not delude his attention from her “tender, mysterious, impure, indifferent, twilight eyes” (120). Lolita’s gratuitous affection toward Humbert is equally superficial and notably tainted with echoes of the vulgar catalyst. Humbert maintains enough distance to recognize the artificiality of this world yet consciously plunges into its superficial allure. As manifestations of poshlust, Lolita’s beloved world of pop-culture and superficial aura exhilarate Humbert’s poeticization of this commodity exchange.

Humbert’s rendering of The Enchanted Hunters maintains a poetic equilibrium between perceptual intensity and the decadence of poshlust. “There is something sleek and plump about poshlust, and this gloss, these smooth curves, attracted the artist in Gogol” (NG 72). The essence of Nabokov’s commentary withstands an exchange of “Gogol” for “Humbert,” as these same glossy curves arguably provide the vulgar core of Lolita’s aesthetic. However, opinions regarding the ultimate purpose underlying Nabokov’s integration of poshlust remain stratified. Sergej Davyдов provides an astute catalogue of poshlust’s versatile forms, ranging “from petty to cosmic . . . the harmless kitsch and make-believe of advertisement, the banality of mass culture, the automatic exchange of platitudes, trends, and fads in social and culture life” (629). His argument, however, fails to discern between poshlust’s social and aesthetic implications, and consequently interprets Nabokov’s vulgar integrations as pure contrivances for inviting social criticism. Poshlust extends beyond social critiques and accounts for the strange relationship between kitsch aesthetics and mass culture. In one particular passage of Nikolai Gogol, Nabokov conjures an ideal demonstration of poshlust’s presence within pop-magazine advertisements.
Magazines repeatedly and covertly inculcate Lolita with poshlust-materialism, and Nabokov’s example perfectly coincides with her submersion into this world. Nabokov’s immediate commentary disavows these ads for their false promises of consumer-happiness: “The rich poshlust of advertisements of this kind is due . . . to suggesting that the acme of human happiness is purchasable and that its purchase somehow ennobles the purchaser” (NG 67). The “amusing part,” as well as the aesthetic, is the creation of “a kind of satellite shadow world in the actual existence of which neither sellers nor buyers really believe in their heart of hearts” (67).

Throughout his critical assertions, Nabokov reserves this kind of descriptive language for art’s mystical capacities; Gogol’s Overcoat is characterized by “shadows linking our state of existence to those other states and modes which we dimly apprehend in our rare moments of irrational perception,” and Lolita’s famous afterword describes “aesthetic bliss” as “a sense of being somehow somewhere, connected with other states of being” (NG 145, Lolita 315). Michael Marr recognizes a larger stylistic pattern during Nabokov’s treatments of these deep concerns: “As soon as [Nabokov] wishes to explain something subtle and urgent that lies close to his heart and to defend it against an obvious charge, his voice takes on an unmistakable tone” (Speak Nabokov 129). The hyperbolic intensity of Nabokov’s defense is a further reflection of poshlust’s aesthetic principles, as both “hyperventilate, as it were, and yet have the deeply personal tone of truth, which manifests itself precisely in the overstatement” (129). Just as Humbert follows Lolita into the depths of poshlust’s shadowy worlds, we too must parallel his descent in our pursuit of the cliché.

Early in his narrative, Humbert forewarns readers: “Only in the tritest of terms . . . can I describe Lo’s features,” but quickly alters these preliminary characterizations and leaves the
allusion to cliché temporarily unfulfilled. His character sketches dismiss realist attempts in favor of emotional effect, as Humbert explicitly acknowledges his captivation with Lolita’s vulgar identity. Consequently, the vulgar mobilizes and transmits Humbert’s desire and his nymphet infatuation blossoms from Lolita’s duality:

What drives me insane is the twofold nature of this nymphet—of dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity, stemming from the snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures, from the blurry pinkness of adolescent maidservants in the Old Country (smelling of crushed daisies and sweat); and from very young harlots disguised as children in provincial brothels (44)

Humbert’s condition is inevitably a closed circuit, as any attempt to insulate Lolita from this “eerie vulgarity” risks destroying the very same “twofold nature” that defines and propels his love. As Humbert acknowledges both modern and traditional representations of the vulgar, his poetic impulses transform and charge these images with a new and unique aesthetic quality.

During the entry’s resolution, Humbert’s inability to capture Lolita’s physical essence in descriptive language devolves into a poetic flash demonstrating this quality:

and then again, all this gets mixed up with the exquisite stainless tenderness seeping through the musk and the mud, through the dirt and the death, oh God, oh God. And what is most singular is that she, this Lolita, my Lolita, has individualized the writer’s ancient lust, so that above and over everything there is—Lolita. (44-45)

Ultimately, the linguistic limitations imposed upon transmitting perceptual experience sways Humbert’s aesthetic expression toward artificiality’s allure, emanating from the realm of the
vulgar. Distinct from the rest of the novel, Humbert’s diary contains some of his most impassioned and unfiltered poetic moments. His expressions/articulations of desire, however, are not always reserved for such recognizably poetic treatments; in fact some of Humbert’s most novel and unconventional moments are those that synthesize poetic vision with pop-culture.

We find a notable example of this poetic phenomenon in Humbert’s imagery expressing entrapment within desire: “I wonder what my academic publishers would say if I were to quote in my textbook Ronsard’s “la vermeillette fente” or Remy Bellau’s “un petit mont feutre de mousse delicate, trace sur le milieu d’un fillet escarlatte” and so forth” (Lolita 47). Humbert deliberately employs his French lexicon during the entry’s introduction and thereby suspends reader-awareness regarding the poetic significance of Pierre Ronsard, “the greatest poet of the French Renaissance,” and the introductory lines to his poem L.M.F. provocatively praising female genitalia, translates, “I salute [or hail] you, oh little red slit” (Annotated Lolita 359). The allusion to Bellau, another notable French poet, is thematically akin and sexually suggestive: “the hillcock velveted with delicate moss / traced in the middle with a little scarlet thread” (359). Following this initial construct, Humbert digresses from literary allusions and returns to his well-trodden theme of insatiable desire. Offering a coexistent sentiment of Humbert’s emotional state but hardly validating the apparent non-sequitur leap from literature to love-lust, he writes, “I shall probably have another breakdown if I stay any longer in this house, under the strain of this intolerable temptation” (47). The rationale behind this juxtaposition is finally revealed when Humbert creates a poetic collage of sexual desire, literary allusion, and anatomical guides on feminine pubescence. A brief allusion to Poe suggests the artistic significance of this unique technique (“my darling—my life life and my bride”) and precedes a series of euphemisms
referencing female menstruation: “Has she already been initiated by mother nature to the
Grandma is visiting” (47). The collision between love-poetry, Humbert’s desire, and popular
vernacular vulgarizing feminine anatomy is manifest in the passage’s final lines: “‘Mr. Uterus (I
quote from a girls’ magazine) starts to build a thick soft wall on the chance a possible baby may
have to be bedded down there.’ The tiny madman in his padded cell” (47). Humbert’s concluding
remark collapses the boundaries between pop references of 1950s “teen-culture” and the
crippling effects of his own unbearable desire, resulting in a self-depiction of imprisonment
within the womb. While the image’s first sentence provides a citation of the historical moment’s
teeming vulgarity, its unexpectedly grotesque fulfillment renders any potential reader-
identification near impossible. During his memoir’s later ruminations, Humbert employs similar
tactics of filtering romantic desire through anatomical de-familiarization, declaring: “My only
grudge against nature was that I could not turn my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips to
her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely
twin kidneys” (165). Rampton notes the “mix of goofy comedy, weirdly inappropriate specificity,
startling metaphors, and splendid excess” within these vulgarized descriptions, and classifies
Humbert’s imagery as “a bizarre yet curiously compelling substitute” for “the lover’s orthodox
discourse” (Rampton 81). Although these images superficially masquerade as authentic
expressions of Humbert’s anguish, they are ultimately reified through a vulgar aesthetic that
negates and repels any search for parallels in “real life.” This proves to be the essential aspiration
and dark force of Lolita’s engagement with the cliché.

*Lolita* embeds cliché within two essential and recurring motifs: Humbert’s infatuated and
love-lust quest for Lolita and 1950s American pop-culture. Critical interpretations are often quick to identify both motifs as essential and important within the novel, yet rarely do these interpretations reconcile the paradoxical essence of the assertion that Humbert simultaneously adores the former and loathes the latter. This paradox is further emphasized when we consider Humbert’s crippling captivation with Lolita, a character who lives in poshlust’s shadowy domain and “swims in an ambience” of American 1950s pop-culture (Rothstein 29). Stringer-Hye argues for a reconsideration of readings that condemn “Lolita’s shallowness, her taste for fudge, pop music, and gooey sundaes,” and validates this reassessment with a reminder that “it is the eerie vulgarity of her charms that seduces Humbert first, and the reader next, into her enchanted sphere” (Stringer-Hye 154). Eric Rothstein’s essay “Nymphet At Normal School” further explicates this close union between Lolita’s surrounding culture and internalized character:

Dolores styles herself with the detail and generality of mass culture . . . Her New-World ideals fix only on a synchrony of movie stars, jukeboxes, and the right sneakers, san-dals, and loafers . . . Dolores’s America, like little Dolores herself, nestles in assorted cliches. (28)

Lolita’s status as “the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster” reinforces Rothstein’s argument and further suggests the cliché’s integral role in Humbert’s poeticization of his “vulgar darling” (Lolita 148). Rampton recognizes Humbert’s obsession with the vulgar duality of nymphets as an implicit critique on capitalist mass-culture, and argues that Humbert’s “linking their vulgarity with advertising . . . [invites] us to take seriously the proposition that advanced capitalism is in part responsible” for shaping Lolita’s essential character (84). Humbert’s natural inclination to filter emotional intensity through vulgarity directly appeals to
Lolita’s essential character, and his impassioned pursuits are consequently woven amidst a tapestry of mass-culture. This tapestry, however, is by no means innocuous. Consumer capitalism “actively works at creating the sort of vacuum into which the Humberts of the world and their casuistical defences naturally rush” whereby declaring “war on tradition, on ideology, on the stability of reality itself” (Rampton 84). Lolita’s apportionment of poshlust exceeds implicit critiques of capitalist culture’s various dimensions and ultimately pursues a particular mode of aesthetic detachment.

**Lolita and Adorno’s “Culture Industry”**

*Lolita*’s depiction of 1950s mass culture and the novel’s subsequent pursuit of aesthetic detachment through the cliché are intimately connected to the twentieth-century philosopher Theodor Adorno and his vision of the totalizing power of the Culture Industry. His collaborative essay with Max Horkheimer “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” published in 1947, is a profound meditation on the structure of mass-culture, its mutual production of pop-products/pop-consumers, and its volatile orientation towards high art aesthetics.

The essay’s vision of American mass-culture as a totalizing and degrading force coincides with several features of *Lolita*’s pop-culture backdrop and further elucidates the negative capacities of high art and aesthetic detachment. As “one of a very few critics guided by the conviction that a theory of modern culture must address both mass culture and high art,” Adorno validates the cliché as a viable strategy within *Lolita*’s aesthetics (Huyssen 19). Adorno’s lens of the Culture Industry not only indicates Humbert’s motivation for distancing/negating reader connectivity but also suggests broader implications underlying Nabokov’s pursuit of art’s
shadowy and detached realms.

Adorno’s disdain towards “the absolute power of capitalism” and its production of mass-culture is frequently reiterated throughout “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” For Adorno, American pop-culture presents a bleak and undifferentiated picture of human life. “Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part . . . Under monopoly all mass culture is identical, and the lines of its artificial framework begin to show through” (“The Culture Industry” 1255-56). Adorno offers a variety of pop-art forms that reflect this uniformity:

Not only are the hit songs, stars, and soap operas cyclically recurrent and rigidly invariable types, but the specific content of the entertainment itself is derived from them and only appears to change. The details are interchangeable . . . ready-made clichés to be slotted anywhere; they never do anything more than fulfill the purpose allotted them in the overall plan. (1258)

These contrived and formulaic products are only one half of the Culture Industry’s creation. Utilizing human labor, Capitalism equally eviscerates any potential for meaningful aesthetic experience by means of isolating and exhausting working-class individuals. Consequently, the Culture Industry complements its creation of ideal products by molding and shaping ideal consumers.

Adorno posits mimetic reinforcement as pop-art’s primary function within this superficial production of culture: “The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry,” and, subsequently, mass-art functions as a mimetic reproduction of this social reality (1259). This phenomenon of pop-culture/pop-art mimesis is manifest in the conformist technique
of popular-film; as producers refine strategies that aim to “duplicate empirical objects, the easier it is . . . for the illusion to prevail that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen” (1259). Each of these indistinguishable works of contrived pop-art are microcosmic examples of the Culture Industry’s “huge economic machinery which has always sustained the masses, whether at work or at leisure” (1259). The machinery of the Culture Industry strives to completely subsume individuals “by occupying men’s senses from the time they leave the factory in the evening to the time they clock in again the next morning with matter that bears the impress of the labor process they themselves have to sustain throughout the day” (1261). The Culture Industry’s uniform production of products and consumers is diametric to high art’s liberating negativity.

The distinctive features of mimetic pop-art, those that “force its victims to equate it directly with reality,” are rejected through the style and form of high art (1259). Adorno views this redemptive quality of style as a negation of social reality surrounding artworks and praises the great artists throughout history “who used style as a way of hardening themselves against the chaotic expression of suffering, as a negative truth” (1260). In his masterwork Aesthetic Theory, Adorno further articulates this principle of negation:

[Artworks] kill what they objectify by tearing it away from the immediacy of its life. Their own life preys on death. This defines the qualitative threshold to modern art. Modern works relinquish themselves mimaetically to reification, their principle of death . . . (133)

Adorno’s insights into modern art’s negative reification highlight a synecdochic relationship between Humbert and Nabokov. Their mutual applications of the cliché are beautifully
synchronous; Humbert encrypts and immortalizes Lolita’s image within a detached realm of poetic cliché, and through his protagonist’s immersion into artificiality Nabokov endows *Lolita* with detached pulsations of aesthetic bliss.

**Modernism and Lolita**

Adorno’s vision of The Culture Industry profoundly shaped the twentieth-century dichotomization of life and art. Julian Moynahan catalogues several fundamentals of modernist aesthetics, including “purity of style . . . impersonality, objectivity, and aesthetic distance” (434). Moynahan’s strongest characterizations, however, allude to modernism’s emancipatory motivations, “a shared ambition to face down the many horrors of the twentieth century by creating new worlds of fiction” (444). Accordingly, critics have often viewed Nabokov as a modernist, but the peculiarity of Nabokov’s modernism is thrown into stark relief when compared with two canonical exemplars of modernism, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. A cursory glance at the linguistic strategies of Joyce and Beckett immediately distinguishes *Lolita’s* unique aesthetic and unparalleled design. Reshaping the fundamental structure of language itself, Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Beckett’s *Molloy* closely adhere to Adorno’s guiding principle of aesthetic negativity. This pursuit of linguistic sovereignty, however, fails to account for Adorno’s careful understanding of mass-culture and high art’s inevitable interplay: “Whereas art opposes society, it is nevertheless unable to take up a position beyond it; it achieves opposition only through identification with that against which it remonstrates” (*Aesthetic Theory* 133). Huyssen further provides a lucid translation of Adorno’s central assertion: “high art is always already permeated by the textures of that mass culture from which it seeks autonomy” (35). Through an absolute commitment to linguistic sovereignty, *Ulysses* and *Molloy* resist identification with the opposing
force of mass-culture. Alternately, *Lolita’s* implementation of the vulgar aesthetic permits self-identification “with that against which it remonstrates” and acknowledges the complexity of art’s struggle for autonomy against the Culture Industry.

Joyce’s infinite manipulations of language within *Ulysses* establish a coherent harmony distinct and detached from the rhythms of reality. In his essay, “What Is Minor Literature?” Gilles Deleuze identifies Joyce’s and Beckett’s linguistic intensities as byproducts of their mutual identities as social/cultural outliers. He writes: “As Irishmen, both of them live within the genial conditions of minor literature,” and consequently utilize language as a mode of “intense expression” (Deleuze 1780). The internal and unfiltered monologue of Stephen Dedalus in “Proteus” sharply contrasts mass-culture vernacular and exemplifies *Ulysses’s* linguistic exhilaration:

> His boots trod again a damp crackling mast, razorshells, squeaking pebbles, that on the unnumbered pebbles beats, wood sieved by the shipworm, lost Armada. Unwholesome sandflats waited to suck his trading soles, breathing upward sewage breath, a pocket of seaweed smouldered in seafire under a midden of man’s ashes. (34)

Joyce invites a deep immersion into *Ulysses’s* aesthetic form and speaks through a style utterly distinct from the language of life. Beckett’s *Molloy* offers a similar experience of absorption into the protagonist’s lyrical consciousness and defamiliarized perception of reality. Molloy’s inability to conceptualize firm identity, as well as his constant transmission of individually explicit perceptions lacking normative coherence, results in a dramatic example of artistic negativity:
And once again I am I will not say alone, no, that’s not like me, but, how shall I say, I don’t know, restored to myself, no, I never left myself, free, yes, I don’t know what that means but it’s the word I mean to use, free to do what, to do nothing, to know, but what, the laws of the mind perhaps, of my mind, that for example water rises in proportion as it drowns you and that you would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery. (16)

The dense language of both texts is deliberately difficult and alien to the “immediacy of life.” Language’s antagonistic texture within Ulysses and Molloy sharply contrasts the signature fluidity of Humbert’s prose.

During his journey “across the crazy quilt of forty-eight states,” Humbert’s reflections initially align with generic representations of American landscapes, “rustic green views . . . opaque curly trees, a barn, a cattle, a brook, the dull white of vague orchards in bloom, and perhaps a stone fence or hills of greenish gouache” (Lolita 152). Following this vulgar evocation, Humbert manipulates cultural clichés and demonstrates Lolita’s singular aesthetic:

Voraciously we consumed those long highways, in rapt silence we glided over their glossy black dance floors . . . Beyond the tilled plain, beyond the toy roofs, there would be a slow suffusion of inutile loveliness, a low sun in a platinum haze with a warm, peeled-peach tinge pervading the upper edge of a two-dimensional, dove-gray cloud fusing with the distant amorous mist. (152)

Humbert’s poeticizing of the cliché substantiates Huyssen’s claim that “the working of Kitsch
into art can indeed result in high-quality works” (ix). Although all three writers share a commitment to various strategies of negation, the pursuit of autonomous language in Joyce and Beckett devotes an exhausting amount of energy in suppressing leaks of mass-culture influence.

As a substitution for linguistic negativity and similar strategies of modernist liberation, Lolita’s vulgarity subverts a binary separation between high art and mass-culture and authenticates Nabokov’s vision of an aesthetic “able to throw light upon an image supplied by a base life and to turn it into an exquisite masterpiece” (NG 106). Nabokov’s aestheticization of the vulgar/cliché repudiates exhausting models of absolute autonomy and synthesizes post-Romantic ideals with modernist aspirations. Moreover, Nabokov’s inheritance of Gogol and Poe’s post-Romantic tradition distinguishes Lolita as a refulgent work of high aestheticism. Embracing the vulgar flourishes of aesthetics within popular clichés, and transforming these images with negative potential, Nabokov opens a valid space for popular-culture within the pursuit of high art.
Works Cited


