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## **Lolita Forever: A Nymphet's Effects on 90s Culture**

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# Lolita Forever: A Nymphet's Effects on 90s Culture

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## Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov's controversial novel *Lolita* is a vibrant story that has kept society enamored about the taboo relationship between a 12-year-old girl and her stepfather. While the unconventional and frankly disturbing relationship is something that has been discussed since the publication of the book, it is not my focus. Instead, I examine the unintentional effects that *Lolita* has had on a whole sub-genre of films as well as its hold on the personalities of young girls, an effect that is the complete opposite of Nabokov's intentions. To investigate the dynamic shift created by *Lolita*, I delved into two movies that were released in the 1990s and a play that are clearly influenced by the novel. I used Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel as a foundational point in my analysis as well as Adriane Lyne's 1997 adaption of *Lolita* as the start of my film analysis. The films *American Beauty* (1999) and *The Crush* (1993) are used to examine how *Lolita* morphed into a film subgenre that took the 1990s by storm. The contents are analyzed through both feminist and reader/audience response lenses. The feminist lens was chosen as *Lolita* proved to have a drastic effect on young girls of the 1990s and the continued sexualization of young girls in the media. Since most of the content contains themes of incest and pedophilia, it is important to look at the films through an ethical lens rather than ignore the negative implications. While the main point of my thesis is not meant to focus on how wrong the content is, one cannot ignore the moral and societal implications that come from the content. The analysis of the selected works offers a deeper understanding of how *Lolita*'s impact has deviated from its author's original intention and how this shift created a lasting impact on the culture of '90s girls.

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## Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i> .....	2
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	3
<i>Chapter 1: More Than Just A Novel</i> .....	5
<i>Chapter 2: Research Overview</i> .....	8
<i>Chapter 3: "Lolita, Light of My Life, Fire of My Loins"</i> .....	19
<i>Chapter 4: "Just a Crush"</i> .....	26
<i>Chapter 5: "An Ordinary Guy with Nothing To Lose"</i> .....	34
<i>Chapter 6: "Girls Turn into Women Long Before Boys Turn into Men"</i> .....	38
<i>Chapter 7: "Come on You Know You Like Little Girls"</i> .....	43

## Chapter 1: More Than Just A Novel

For some *Lolita* evokes the uncomfortable image of an older man leering at a young girl drenched by her sprinklers. For others, her name is nothing more than an inkling of a novel surrounded by controversy, or it is not even a novel at all, and people think of the songs by artists like Lana Del Rey or the countless posts about lusting over older men. Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* holds a lasting impression on society and those who read the novel, much to Nabokov's prior chagrin. The novel's controversial subject matter is one that has drawn in readers since its publication in 1955 and continues to entrance audiences to this day. The novel focuses on the relationship between Humbert Humbert and his adopted stepdaughter Dolores, whom he refers to as Lolita. The story is not one filled with scenes about found family and father's love; instead, the reader is forced to discover a sexual relationship between this man and his 12-year-old stepdaughter. The story is told from Humbert's point of view, and, because of this, the reader is led to believe that this relationship is consensual. While there is so much wrong with the belief that a 12-year-old girl would be completely aware of what she is doing, it



1 (Pathe Films)

becomes much more uncomfortable when one that the audience somehow manages to agree with Humbert. Some readers might have shuddered as they read the lines about how he takes her virginity in a hotel room right after her mother dies, but for others, it becomes another example of a young girl exploring her sexuality. Yet it's not just Humbert's actions that are inexcusable and sickening; it is what came from the novel that leaves a rotten taste in the back of one's mouth.

Nabokov did not write *Lolita* to feed his sick fantasy about sleeping with a young girl, as will be discussed later in this thesis. While Nabokov explained his reasoning behind the controversial novel and even detested those who claimed there was a romantic relationship occurring between the two, many still believe that he intended to promote such relationships. Instead of turning away from the taboo relationship, audiences became infatuated with the younger girl/older man relationship, one that has continued to spiral. To examine this phenomenon one can focus on the film scene of the 1990s and the subsequent culture that resulted. While *Lolita* was first adapted to film in 1962 by the legendary film director Stanley Kubrick, it was not until 1997 that the story reached its peak as a cult classic. Adrian Lyne recreated *Lolita* in 1997 and thrust the sexualized relationship into the face of audiences everywhere. One cannot forget Jeremy Irons' portrayal of Humbert or the iconic scene of Dominique Swain's *Lolita* lying under the sprinklers, allowing audiences to glimpse her soaking wet dress. While the film didn't come out until the late 90's, it still created ripples for girls. Lyne's version paved the way for Sam Mendes's 1999 film, *American Beauty*, which contains similar themes of pedophilia. While Lyne's film influenced the latter half of the 90s, *Lolita* still had its claws in popular culture in the form of *The Crush*. Alan Shapiro's 1993 film takes inspiration from both the novel and Kubrick's original adaptation as it follows the story of a teenage girl's obsession with her middle-aged male neighbor. Yet it wasn't just 90's screenwriters who were impacted by the attraction of *Lolita*'s plot line; playwrights were also taking notes. Paula Vogel's 1997 play *How I Learned to Drive* also delves into the incestuous relationship between an underaged girl and her uncle as she remembers the relationship through the driving lessons her uncle gave her. While these are just a select few pieces of media that were impacted

by *Lolita*, they are some of the most important examples of how *Lolita* played a part in late 90s culture.

While the inherent success of *Lolita* is one that is already questionable, it is the fact that the controversial elements of the novel continue to seep into other media that creates deeper waves. As mentioned earlier, Nabokov's original intention for the novel was never to glorify the taboo relationship or even try to portray it in a good light. Instead, he detested what the novel had become and never intended for others to use *Lolita* as a foundation. If anything, Nabokov hoped that others would detest Humbert's actions and criticize the immoral nature of society. Instead, people like Lyne, Mendes, and even more current artists such as Lana Del Rey decided to focus on the relationship that blossomed from the novel. Instead of critiquing the efforts to make a young girl a sex symbol or force her sexuality at an earlier age, popular culture furthered the sex appeal of innocence. The little girl who dealt with growing pains through her fierce attitude was now the archetype for a generation of female teens. While the novel and subsequent films feature such taboo content as pedophilia and incest, it is not the intention of this thesis to determine or comment on the ethics of it. This thesis works under the assumption that relationships with minors and/or relatives are considered morally and ethically wrong. This is not an argument to say that Humbert and Dolores' relationship was wrong or that Adriane from *The Crush* should have not tried to sleep with an older man. Instead, the argument at hand is to explain how those inspired by *Lolita* have strayed far away from the intended path and, in doing so, harmed a generation of girls in the 90s. What Nabokov originally created and what now is associated with *Lolita* have become so vastly different that it seems impossible to rescue Dolores from a lifetime of abuse that she suffers at the hand of the audience.



## **Chapter 2: Research Overview**

### **Understanding Nabokov's Novel**

Vladimir Nabokov's character Lolita has been an infamous name in literature since the novel was first published in 1955. Yet while it has been considered one of the best works by the Russian author, there is more confusion than excitement when one realizes that it has been adapted into films. Nabokov's novel follows the journey of Humbert Humbert and his relationship with his 12-year-old stepdaughter Dolores, whom he affectionately calls Lolita. The novel is told through Humbert's testimony as he stands on trial for murder. Many scholars have been drawn to the novel due to the taboo nature of the novel and the controversies that have resulted from its publication. In a 2007 article, James Phelan reopens a conversation about the ethics of the novel and the way that Humbert is portrayed. The story is told through Humbert's eyes, which already creates a skewed version of the story, but Phelan thinks that there is a deeper message that one must address. Nabokov's intention was always to create an unreliable narrator, but was his intention to create a morally grey character also? Phelan believes that Nabokov is responsible for the latter interpretation. Phelan theorizes that while it may not have been intentional, Nabokov perpetuated the idea that Humbert might be deserving of the audience's empathy, and it is here that the book itself becomes ethically muddled.

In contrast to questioning the motives behind the publication of the novel, David Gates expresses his views on how the portrayal of the character Lolita is just as unreliable as the rest of Humbert's interpretation. While one wants to believe that Humbert truly loved Dolores, Gates questions whether the character Lolita was as much of a femme fatale as she is portrayed to be. Gates opens the door for why the audience chose to believe Humbert's portrayal of the young girl but questions the rest of the story. It might not be only the novel that has prompted people to

continue to explore *Lolita*; it might also be Nabokov himself who has kept the story alive. In Ewa Mazierska's book *Nabokov's Cinematic Afterlife*, she delves into the reason that the author's work has managed to secure an everlasting life in both literature and cinema. While the book was a smash hit and would have made for a potential box office hit, Mazierska explains that many were reluctant to tackle the story due to its themes and status as a cult classic (Mazierska 14). It was not until Stanley Kubrick decided to take the chance and create a film based on the book with influence from Nabokov himself that the book became a part of mainstream culture. Yet Mazierska explains that there is more than Kubrick's way of interpreting the novel, and it is here that another incentive for replication is created. It is more than just a story with uncomfortable themes; it becomes a psychological and sociological case study (Mazierska 18).

## **Translation of Book to Film**

### **Stanley Kubrick's 1962 Version**

With the growing fascination of turning novels into movies, directors become faced with the struggle of portraying a novel in a way that is both accurate and cinematic. Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* is no different, as it has been adapted twice, once in 1962 by Stanley Kubrick and later in 1997 by Adrian Lyne. It is not due to failure that the novel was adapted to film twice. Kubrick noted the novel as a perfect template for a film. There has been a significant fascination with Kubrick's 1962 adaptation rather than Lyne's more realistic 1997 version. Anna Pilinska's book *Lolita Between Adaptation and Interpretation: From Nabokov's Novel and Screenplay to Kubrick's Film* offers a comprehensive look into how the adaptations vary even though they come from the same source. Even though Nabokov helped with the screenplay, Kubrick took artistic liberties and even shifted the tone of the dramatic novel to a black comedy

(Pilinska 29). One of the most significant changes in the movie is the change of sequence in which specific actions take place. While Nabokov's landmark novel starts with a look into Humbert's life, Kubrick instead begins with the climactic shooting of Clare Quilty. Even with the change of sequence, omission of raunchy scenes, and overall hope to ignore the sexual tensions between the main characters, Kubrick still works to keep verbatim lines in the play. Kubrick's idea was to "allow the viewer to appreciate the intricate plot without being repulsed by the story's underlying theme," which both angered and intrigued Nabokov's fans (Pilinska 47).

With any adaptation of a book, diehard fans of an author will never be satisfied. The fans of *Lolita* were no different and had much to say after the release of Kubrick's already controversial movie. Dan Burns' 1984 expose, "Pistols and Cherry Pies: *Lolita* From Page to Screen", offers a viewer's response to the novel. Addressing the same ideas that were made in Pilinska's book, Burns explains that Kubrick was, in fact, successful in the creation of his film. The shocking opening sequence of Quilty's death was, in fact, Nabokov's idea, not Kubrick's, and helped to create visual references throughout the story (Burns 246). Burns notes that Kubrick's visual references embody the verbal allusions used by Nabokov to create the dramatic theme in the movie. Kubrick uses imagery such as quick shots or objective correlation, which uses common objects for symbolic purposes, to portray the feelings that Nabokov hoped to convey during the more sensual scenes in the novel. Here, Kubrick created a movie that many feared would be "unfaithful" to the story and set the basis for the proper way to turn controversial books into films (Burns 245).

### **Adrian Lyne's 1997 *Lolita* Adaptation**

While Kubrick was able to tackle *Lolita* with his unique style, Hollywood is never satisfied with one remake, thus leading Lyne's 1997 version of *Lolita*. Lyne's version of the

novel was met with more questioning by filmgoers but less research by scholars. There are vast differences between the 1962 and 1997 versions, which have pushed many scholars to argue about which version reflects Nabokov's original intentions. Many note that Lyne's version of the film portrays the sexual relationship between Humbert and Lolita more explicitly than Kubrick's 1962 version. Other scholars struggle to wrap their heads around the appeal of both of *Lolita's* adaptations. One scholar, Fiona Gardner, delves into examining the psychological interest in taboo topics such as pedophilia and incestual relationships. She explains her frustrations with Nabokov hiding any explicit descriptions while Lyne's adaptation jumps right into sexual scenes that make the audience feel as if they are "voyeurs" (Gardner 516). She believes that the film's perverse need for sexual themes overshadows the actual themes of Nabokov's novel (Gardner 516). While films can more easily make scenes come to life, even the most genius filmmakers cannot capture the specifics of a novel. Yet the overly sexual nature of the 1997 adaptation is still rooted in the novel, and Gardner sees this with the theme of restrictions. She claims that both the novel and Lyne's film portrays the pain of feeling trapped within this taboo relationship (Gardner 517). The cages built in the novel are translated into the real world as Gardner sees the layers of the meaning stripped away in the film as a way of trapping the audience into certain feelings (Gardner 518). It is here that Gardner praises the 1997 adaptation yet furthers the idea that *Lolita* will always flourish more in its literary form rather than on the silver screen.

### **Movies Affected by the Adaptations**

#### ***The Crush* (1993)**

Alan Shapiro's 1993 film holds an important place in this thesis due to its relevance in 1990s pop culture. While the film came out before Lyne's 1997 version of *Lolita*, there is no

denying that it alludes to many aspects from the book as well as Kubrick's 1962 version. The film features Alicia Silverstone as 14-year-old Adrian and follows her sick obsession with new neighbor Nick, who is played by Cary Elwes. Instead of the coy schoolgirl that we expect from a *Lolita* offshoot, we are met with a femme fatale in the form of young Adrian. While the film plays a crucial role in this thesis, the film received mixed reviews and feedback from audiences. One movie review, written by Verina Glaessner and published in the film journal *Sight and Sound*, delves into the film and explains how *The Crush* might focus on a teen girl's obsession, yet we see the film through the lens of a male. While Adrian might be the main character in the film, Glaessner explains that we are expected to empathize with Elwes' character, similar to Kubrick and Lyne's expectations of our empathy towards Humbert. While Glaessner critiques the viewpoint of the 1993 film, Hal Hinson of the *Washington Post* critiques the originality of the film in his 1993 review "*The Crush: Low Budget Lolita.*" Both authors mention the similarity to Kubrick's version of *Lolita* and how *The Crush* plays on similar themes, yet Hinson cites the film as "an invitation to child abuse" (Hinson). While both authors are not absolute fans of the film, it is Hinson who critiques the main storyline and portrayal of a "schoolgirl crush" that come from the *Lolitaesque* film.

### ***American Beauty* (1999)**

To examine *Lolita*'s immediate effect on a film that came after Lyne's 1997 version, one can turn to Sam Mendes' *American Beauty*, which was released in 1999. The film focuses on Kevin Spacey's Lester Burnham as he navigates his midlife crisis by directing his affections on to his teenage daughter's best friend, Angela Hayes, played by Mena Suvari. While this film does not portray the incestuous relationship that one sees in the other examples, the themes of pedophilia and the portrayal of its normalcy are seen. Again, we as an audience are tasked with

following along with the perpetrator and empathizing with his actions, rather than critiquing him. Paul Arthur offers a review of the film that examines the yearnings and actions of Lester from a viewpoint of understanding his midlife crisis. Instead of reviewing the movie for its Lolitaesque undertones, Arthur instead focuses on the façade of suburban normalcy that is created within the film (Arthur 51). It is within this film review that one can draw a clear connection between Lester and Humbert, as each man's actions are played off as normal behavior for a middle-aged man. While Arthur makes a conscious choice to ignore the pedophilic tones of the film, Kathleen Karlyn is not shy about exposing the motif found throughout its runtime. In her article "Too Close for Comfort," Karlyn exposes the incestuous undertones that come from the relationships in the film. The proximity of the Lester's lust for his daughter's friend leads one to see an incestuous side to his actions. She explains while the theme of incest is not outwardly intentional, any story that focuses on a middle-aged man and his young love interest will have inherent undertones (Karlyn, 71). It is within this article that she addresses the darker undertones that are more aligned with *Lolita* that are ignored by Arthur's male-focused review.

### ***How I Learned to Drive* by Paula Vogel**

Steering away from traditional films, I have chosen to include a play that premiered in 1997 and focuses on the incestuous relationship between a teenager, Lil' Bit, and her uncle. Paula Vogel published and produced her play *How I Learned to Drive* in March of 1997 and introduced a dynamic plotline to Broadway. The play is seen through the perspective of Lil' Bit, who sees her relationship with her uncle play out in the form of driving lessons. While the play is not as popular as the other films in this thesis, it helps to demonstrate how far *Lolita's* reach has spread. Jill Dolan's 1998 review discusses the sensitive issues as enacted on the stage. She

explains that Vogel's portrayal of the relationship is used to create sympathy for the uncle, similar to the actions of Nabokov and Mendes (Dolan). Again, Vogel creates a work that evokes empathy for all the parties involved, both the victim and the offender. Marilyn Stasio touches upon these same ideas in her review of the play as she notes the sympathetic nature that one feels after viewing it. She questions why this girl views her uncle's actions with such fondness when others shudder at the thought (Stasio). It is here that Stasio draws out a connection between Lil' Bits' experiences and those of Dolores, Angela, and Adrian.

### **Comparing Nabokov with Lyne's, and Kubrick's Adaptations**

With the adaptations and conversation surrounding such a controversial novel, one forgets the ideas presented by Nabokov himself. There has never been a full explanation of why *Lolita* was created; instead, all that was left was a riddle. Trevor McNeely delves into Nabokov's true meaning for the novel in his article "Lo and Behold: Solving the *Lolita* Riddle." McNeely explains that Nabokov's true intentions for the book were to trick the reader. The story is not a romance or meant to create full-fledged characters; instead, *Lolita* leaves the reader in an internal battle (McNeely). He believes that "both character and plot ...being waved in the reader's face as phony from start to finish" was Nabokov's true intention all along (McNeely 194). It was never about creating a story that examines meaningful themes; instead, it was about manipulating the reader into an internal battle under the guise of an aesthetic. Nabokov forced the reader into a "moral/aesthetic dilemma" (McNeely 186). Do you struggle to keep reading the book due to its gruesome nature or keep reading under the guise that Humbert commits all these acts since he truly loves Lolita? McNeely furthers the idea that Nabokov only made *Lolita* an aesthetic piece and that no part of it had a deeper meaning than playing a cruel trick on the reader (McNeely 189). The novel is not meant to expose the treatment of females or man's morality; instead, it was

all an art piece. This is in response to critics' ideas that Nabokov's novel was meant to critique the actions of men and examine the morality of humanity in the face of such actions.

While McNeely might have cracked the riddle of *Lolita*, others feel that there is more at play than a simple trick. For instance, Brian Walter examines the motives of Lyne and Kubrick in their portrayals of *Lolita*. In his article "Only a Child: Spectacles of Innocence in the *Lolita* Films," Walter believes an intense relationship exists between the audience and the film's portrayal of a child. The idea of an "othered child," a child created with an identity that is designed for them by adults, plagues the article and places *Lolita* as its poster child (Walter 54). While Nabokov views a child, both directors have different motives in their portrayal of Dolores Hayes. Kubrick pushes *Lolita* to exist in her childhood for herself, not just for Humbert and the audience's sick desire. He portrays her as the child she is and capitalizes on her innocence while still planting the seed that she is familiar with her sexual nature (Walter 56). On the other hand, Lyne ignores the naivety of Dolores and places her manipulative prowess as a central characteristic. It is *Lolita*'s innocence and the curiosity that comes with it that makes her sexuality appear. Nabokov created and portrayed Dolores for Humbert's and the audience's enjoyment (Walter 61). It is here that both men work to unwrap the riddle of who *Lolita* is in their own ways, as the audience must battle between seeing *Lolita* as both a little girl and as a girl who understands the sexual power that she has over Humbert.

### **The Culture of the '90s**

To understand why the novel is significant, it is important to understand the culture of the 90s as well as how sexuality was portrayed to teens. In her chapter in the book *Sexual Teens, Sexual Media*, Jeanne Steele helps to create an understanding of how adolescent females are



given such a large avenue for sexual expression. Media like movies and television have created an increase in younger girls wanting exploring their sexuality and their feminine wiles. The prevalence of movies and films dealing with sexuality has allowed teens to explore their sexuality without needing to talk to anyone. Instead of going to parents or peers, teens can turn to movies to answer the questions they are too scared to ask. Steele also explores how teens are influenced to change their attitudes and behaviors towards sex as they are exposed to it in movies and television. In an article published in the 1990s before the release of the films and plays that are central focuses of this thesis, Jane Brown, Cynthia Geary, and Kim Walsh-Childers discuss the effects of television on adolescent sexuality. Brown explains that teens were not more or less likely to have sex after being exposed to it in movies or television. Instead, it was found that teens were more likely to replicate what they saw being done in the movies. Teens' attitudes toward sex also changed when they were exposed to it daily (Brown 65). Teens who were exposed to sexual activity in films had a “greater acceptance of promiscuity” than those who stayed away from graphic content (Brown 65). While both authors sought to answer the question regarding the effects of being exposed to explicit content in the films, Henry Giroux sought to answer why teens were so obsessed with sex. His journal article “Teenage Sexuality, Body Politics, and the Pedagogy of Display” found that the need for control pushed teenagers to reclaim their sexuality. In the years that Giroux’s study was conducted, it was believed that society began to place higher pressure on taking away the autonomy of teenagers and made their actions a political statement. In response to the increased efforts of control, teenagers turned to underground culture to create a space that allowed them to embrace their sexuality (Giroux 313). Taking elements from film, television, and other media outlets during the 1990s allowed teens to take back the control that they felt was lost as society continued to treat them like children rather

than support them as they grow up. For every step that authority figures took in trying to police what teens were doing, the generation would find new ways to rebel against the politics of their bodies.

### **Lolita's Backwards Influence**

While *Lolita* has undergone countless adaptations, its overarching glamour will outlast every transformation. Yet as the novel is adapted on screen, the translations create a change in meaning. It is here that Lolita's backward influence might have begun. Patrick Zabalbeascoa's examination "Censoring Lolita's Sense of Humor: When Translation Affects the Audiences' Perception" investigates how language translations affect the audience's perception of the film adaptations. Kubrick's adaptation of the novel has been quoted multiple times as a "black comedy," and it is here that a slight change in translation affects the meaning of the film. With Kubrick's "audiovisual humor," people miss the story's theme (Zabalbeascoa 6). With the mistranslation, people ignore the lack of romance in the novel and instead begin to look at the idea that there is real love within the book.

While people misinterpret portions of the spoken script, they might begin to warp the actual image of Lolita. The most unfavorable outcome of *Lolita* comes from the overtly sexualized image that now plagues young girls. Shari Savage says it best in "The Visual Rhetoric of Innocence: Lolitas in Popular Culture," as she examines how Nabokov's novel has pushed us into an era of sexualizing young women. As the popularity of *Lolita* rose, society moved into an era where we eroticize young girls more reverently than before and turn a blind eye when authority figures push young girls to show more and more skin (Savage 104). Instead of understanding the novel as a portrayal of men preying on young girls, we begin to blame the girls for appearing sexual. If one follows the idea that all young girls in the art are a form of Lolita,

one must question whether minors in suggestive art or photography border on the realm of child pornography (Savage 107). *Lolita* has turned a generation of young models into vulnerable icons where art projects now become a vehicle for sexual fantasy. This was never the intention, yet all actions have consequences.

Yet it's not just models or children in the art world who face the "Lolita effect." She is no longer just a nymphet. Instead, *Lolita* was now an archetype or icon for the girls of the 21st century (Wells 70). In "Forgetting *Lolita*," by Ira Wells, the examination of *Lolita*'s effect on media, music, or lifestyles transcends more than just the use of a name. Even with the sanitization of Kubrick's film, there is no denying the subtext that was added in any of the adaptations (Wells 72). Nabokov's *Lolita* is not a conventionally attractive little girl, yet that is not what we see in the film adaptations. It was Kubrick who gave the world an image of the soft-skinned and effortlessly sensual *Lolita* and, in doing so, killed the textual version of her (Wells 72). Now *Lolita* lives in the space of sexual imagination. Society is now able to engage in "polite pedophilia" and think about girls who border on "legal fuckability" while still claiming such is a myth (Wells 73). Nabokov never wanted to create an aesthetic of girls vying for the sensual touch of an older man. Instead, he wanted us to hear the cries of a child hidden under heart-shaped sunglasses.

### Chapter 3: “Lolita, Light of My Life, Fire of My Loins”<sup>1</sup>

*Lolita* was never just an excuse for Nabokov to publish his sick fantasies or attract an audience that agreed with Humbert’s actions. While one could create countless theories on why the novel was written or read into every word to try to discover some perverse reasoning for its publication, it would be a lost cause. Readers view the novel as a literary classic, and with that, they forget that it was published in 1955 and that Nabokov spoke about the novel on numerous occasions. In fact, he was even heavily involved with the first film adaptation of *Lolita* and worked to ensure that Kubrick did not stray too far away from the story. Yet even with Nabokov’s countless interviews and clear contributions to Kubrick’s film, readers still struggle to unravel what Nabokov intended when he wrote the story.

It is not as if Nabokov published the novel and then decided to never mention the story ever again. In fact, he continued to speak about the story and was never shy about explaining why he wrote it. James Phelan helps to offer an explanation as to why Nabokov wrote the way he did: to explore the reliability of man. Phelan explains that it is obvious that Humbert is an unreliable narrator, but Nabokov opens the door to consider whether he is “metaphorically” unreliable as well. Nabokov writes a narrative that creates confusion and miscommunication for the reader about where they should stand on the relationship issue. By keeping Phelan’s idea in mind, one can see how Nabokov writes Humbert and the story in a way that creates a mutual dependence between the readers and the story, one that creates ethical confusion. By trapping the reader in this relationship, he forces them to confront the moral issues that they seemed to agree with as they read the novel. Up until the reader puts the book down, they are thrust into the role of accomplice as they follow Humbert throughout his seduction of Dolores and the life that the

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<sup>1</sup> This the opening line of Vladimir Nabokov’s 1955 novel *Lolita*

couple leads. Though the reader wishes to condemn Humbert's actions, they are doing the opposite as they continue to read the novel. While Nabokov does not outrightly make the reader appear oblivious, his words are there to evoke the feeling of guilt. Since Humbert is written with an absence of certain morals, he finds no reason to feel guilty for his actions. While he does try to justify his actions throughout the story, Humbert only truly feels remorseful when he realizes that Dolores is slipping away from his grasp and later in the story when he reunites with Dolores and realizes how sad her life has become. Since Humbert is written without the guilt that one would expect, Nabokov has instead placed the guilt on the reader. As one reads the story, they feel the pain and sadness radiating from a little girl who lost out on her innocence and childhood. The reader also feels a sense of disgust and disdain for Humbert and his actions throughout the novel. Yet the feeling of guilt begins to seep in as the reader continues to devour the pages, guilt for reading about such a horrid topic and finding it so interesting. The reader feels guilt for Humbert as well. His unreliability as a narrator makes the reader feel bad for him as he describes his misfortunes in life and paints the young girl as the vixen in his life. The reader begins to agree with his justifications, and thus the guilt creeps up into their minds. How could you agree with a man who is clearly sick in the head and condemn a little girl to suffering? It is exactly what Nabokov wants readers to feel when reading the novel. He wants the guilt to pool in one's stomach, and he wants the reader to question if they are in fact the unreliable characters themselves as they struggle to come to grasp with their stance on the actions portrayed in *Lolita*.

One important feature that makes itself known throughout the scholars who have looked into Nabokov's work is the use of style to cover up the real story. There is a common notion among scholars that *Lolita's* style and aesthetic are more intentional than originally assumed. While one might feel that the constant shifts from past and present scenes to choppy paragraphs

of Humbert's inner monologue strewn throughout were Nabokov's way of creating an unreliability about Humbert, the stylization of the novel acts as the main medium to allow for Nabokov's message to seep through. Scholar Trevor McNeely offers great insight into Nabokov's use of style to hide the ugly plotline of the story. He explains that Nabokov hides the "repellant activity" to such a degree that readers not only enjoy the book but also celebrate Nabokov and condone the actions of Humbert (McNeely 185). McNeely's point stands, as Nabokov's use of language and storytelling creates a dilemma that is not even recognized until the reader has placed the book down. While reading, one gets lost amongst the vivid descriptions and conveniently-placed French phrases and forgets a 12-year-old is being defiled at the hands of someone she is meant to trust. It is with the words that Humbert speaks and the affection he gives to Dolores that Nabokov has convinced the reader that the love is real and the "cult of beauty" that is worshiped outweighs the rest of Humbert's actions (McNeely 187). In the beauty of the novel, Nabokov has managed to hide a nightmare. This intentional deceit was another action of Nabokov's meant to challenge the reader's views, and it seems to have worked, as many do not realize the blanket that has been pulled over their eyes within the story. Audiences have fallen for this trick, and in doing so, changed the future narrative of *Lolita*.

Nabokov did not only write the novel to create a moral dilemma within the minds of the reader but was also intentional in his portrayal of Dolores. For Nabokov, this game of readers trying to determine the meanings or process behind the titular character was something that delighted him until his death. *Lolita* was a riddle that was never meant to be solved. Nabokov might not have set out to create an unsolvable character or even meant for Dolores to turn into such an enigma, but it is hard to ignore how her characterization evolved. Dolores turns into a walking archetype of the nymphet that Humbert seeks out. The reader is introduced to Humbert

explaining what a nymphet is and the different features that he looks for when looking to replicate his lost childhood love. It is within Dolores that Humbert finds these characteristics and seeks to fulfill his desires. Nabokov never created Dolores or the concept of Lolita to be a stand-alone character. Instead, she became a vessel to create support for Humbert even while the rest of the book screams about the falsehood of their attraction. While Nabokov creates a front for Humbert's character, he does not hide his negative attributes toward Dolores. Her childish attitude and stubborn personality are on full display at times, and rather than using them to prove that she is nothing more than a child, both Nabokov and Humbert claim this part of her charm instead. She is not a flirtatious young woman looking for love; she is a broken little girl who has been whisked away from summer camp and forced to deal with the death of her mother. Her only release is to fall into the arms of the man who rented out a room in her house, one who was simply the object of a schoolgirl crush. Yet while readers begin to decipher pieces of Dolores within the story, her true character is lost. Nabokov not only takes away a little girl's childhood and innocence, but he also takes her name away as the audience follows the story of Lolita, and with every new motel or gas station, they forget about little Dolores.

While Nabokov created intricate characters and hid the perverted deeds under the cover of a taboo love affair, it was the silver screen that changed the game. The novel offers the challenge of deciding whether to view the story through Humbert's eyes or to separate the characters and instead admire the novel for its stylized interpretation of reality (Mazierska 15). As mentioned earlier, Stanley Kubrick first brought *Lolita* to the big screen in 1962 and created more of a black comedy rather than sticking to Nabokov's original vision. While Nabokov includes dense blocks of text to portray the grisly feelings of Humbert, Kubrick uses quick visual references and suspenseful camera work to lead the audience through the story (Burns 248).

While Kubrick focuses on visual imagery in place of a monologue, he includes direct quotes from the novel to create a correlation between the love affair that is occurring and the overall bleak theme of the story.

While Kubrick's nearly two-and-a-half-hour-long movie created waves due to its source material, it was not until Adrian Lyne's remake that *Lolita* transformed into the girl she is today. While Nabokov's story focuses on the relationship that blossoms between Humbert and Dolores, there is never a point where he includes explicit sexual material in the narrative. There are no pages upon pages of descriptions of Dolores' young body or paragraphs consisting of



2 *Lolita*

descriptions of the countless times that Humbert took her to bed. One could applaud Nabokov for having the decency to leave that imagery up to the more perverted minds that chose to pick up the novel. Yet Lyne seemingly chose to

ignore the level of decency that comes with omitting scenes of sexual content between a 12-year-old girl and a much older man. While the audience feels like an accomplice while reading the novel, Lyne takes it to the next level with his lack of subtlety and turns the audience into voyeurs of Humbert's crimes. In Fiona Gardner's review of the 1997 film, she expresses her discomfort with Lyne's adaptation of the film and the subsequent reactions of audiences. Although Nabokov masked Humbert's wrongdoings with stylized storytelling, Lyne hid the wrongdoings under a blanket of sexual perversion (Gardner 516). It is with Lyne's take on the story that one sees a clear shift away from the original intention of the story. Nabokov wanted to mock the desire the reader had to see Humbert feel guilty, but Lyne



created a narrative that followed the unwanted obsession with Dolores and created a tragic love story instead. While it is difficult to convey the same emotions or richness of language on the big screen, Lyne's creation wipes away more of the original *Lolita* than Kubrick's version. It is important to never forget that the real Lolita is a twelve-year-old girl named Dolores, nothing more. Yet Lyne manages to expertly portray a character who "yearns for sexual fulfillment and does everything to achieve that goal" (Mazierska 37).

While Lyne creates a character whom one can no longer view as innocent, he plants himself in the middle of a trend that was on the rise in the 90s, returning to the adaptation. While

there are significant

differences between the novel

and film, Lyne still managed

to capture the narrative while

maintaining a 1990's

cinematic trend. Audiences see

an overly sexual young girl;

Lyne's use of Dominique



3 (*Lolita* (1997))

Swain as Dolores conforms to the image of a nymphet. Mazierska explains that the

"ordinariness" of Swaine was intentional as she personified what Humbert believes a nymphet to

be, a plain girl viewed as a temptress in the eyes of a pedophile. Lyne manages to capture the

essence of the characters. He harms Dolores in a way that has left its impact on the 1990s

cinematic trend. Dolores' behavior is portrayed as problematic and her actions are no longer that

of a little girl. The audience sees an unruly girl alongside a well-groomed and dignified older

man and believes that he might be doing what is right by "taming" her. Dolores' sexuality

becomes a large focus as Lyne creates a narrative that she enjoys the pleasure of sex with older men. When the audience is forced to choose between a writer with gentlemanly aspects or a sexually promiscuous young girl, Lyne forces the hand of the audience. Lyne's *Lolita* might have created a stronger meaning of the story, but it did a disservice by creating a whole new *Lolita* for a generation that yearned for icons and personalities that they could replicate as they moved through their teenage years. Instead of finding comfort in the adolescent Dolores, Lyne gave the 90's a template for a personality filled with sexual energy yet hidden behind the schoolgirl aesthetic.

## Chapter 4: “Just a Crush”<sup>2</sup>

After exploring the original intention of the novel, Kubrick’s adaptation, and Lyne’s attempt at a *Lolita* remake, one can turn their attention toward the films that consider *Lolita* as an influence. Alan Shapiro’s 1993 film *The Crush* has been called a “low-budget *Lolita*” by writers (such as Hal Histon in his review of the movie) and audiences alike. There is no shortage of proof that the film is filled with *Lolita* symbolism and adaptation of scenes featured in the novel. Shapiro’s film features one of the first film roles for Alicia Silverstone as Adrian alongside leading man Cary Elwes as Nick. The audience comes to learn of 14-year-old Adrian’s, obsessive crush on the 28-year-old writer Nick. With its classic 90’s fashion and exciting movie score, the film keeps the audiences on their toes as they watch the “relationship” grow between the characters. Adrian, who originally comes off as a forward yet sweet teenager, slowly begins to show her true colors as her crush on Nick grows into an obsession. With little things such as breaking into his house and editing his articles for work or sabotaging her friend’s saddle, causing an accident, or using wasps to attack Nick’s actual love interest, Adrian’s true intentions are shown. While she gets what she wants at times through force and manipulation, she is not successful in the long run and does not get her fantasy with Nick. Instead, she ends up institutionalized and her vicious cycle of obsession starts all over again, now directed at her doctor. Yet how can a movie featuring a troubled 14-year-old and an unwilling older male antagonist be considered in the same field as *Lolita*?

While Shapiro takes some creative liberties in his film, it is still clear to audiences that *Lolita* played a hand in the production. It is not just the focus on the younger female/older male dynamic that makes it appear as if Shapiro took inspiration from an event in his life when

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<sup>2</sup> This a line from Alan Shapiro’s 1993 film *The Crush*

deciding to include the relationship. In the production notes of *The Crush*, Shapiro explains how the story was inspired by a situation where a girl had a crush on him and refused to take no as an answer. It is through the actions of both characters, intense symbolism, and parallels that allow for *Lolita*'s cherry red lipstick to shine through the classic 90's haze. One of the first features that allude to *Lolita* is the original relationship between the characters. While it is clear that Nick has no real attraction to Adrian, he instead allows her to indulge in her teenage fantasies through flirting and clinging onto the writer at all times. Yet Nick is not that innocent, as he does not stop himself from watching the young girl as she lounges in her bikini in the yard or giving into Adrian's pleading and driving the pair up to the lighthouse. He also furthers Adrian's delusion with phrases such as "if only you were 10 years older," as the two sneak away to the lighthouse where Adrian eventually makes a move (*The Crush* 0:18:38). The "cat and mouse" game that the two play is reminiscent of the interactions between Humbert and Dolores in the original adaptations. Both girls show their affection through playful jabs or by invading their crush's space by barging in. While Dolores enjoys listening to Humbert read, Adrian edits Nick's articles before he needed to submit them. It was not only in the way that the characters interact that we saw a connection to *Lolita*, but Shapiro was not shy about throwing in many callbacks to his source material. An interesting point to be made is the addition of a father figure in *The Crush* that is not present in *Lolita*. While Adrian has a father, one who is at work most of the time, it is clear through her infatuation with Nick that it is not her father's love that she craves. In scenes where Nick takes her for a drive or even gets invited to her equestrian competition, he becomes

placed in the same box as Humbert by the audience. In a scene that takes place around 37 minutes into the film, Nick and Adrian's father, Cliff, are speaking in the attic. It is important to note that both men are wearing virtually the same outfit, with Nick wearing a baggy red polo and Cliff in a red sweatshirt, both clad in



4 *The Crush* (1993)

blue jeans. When Adrian comes up into the attic to speak with them, she shouts out the phrase, “Daddy,” and both men turn around (*The Crush* 37:23). While this might seem like a common reaction to someone speaking, the parallel outfits and previous conversation portrays Nick in a new role. In her review of *The Crush*, Verina Glaessner includes a portion critiquing Cliff's sexual possessiveness over his developing daughter, something that Glaessner believes pushes Adrian to lust after Nick. This can be seen in the conversation that the two men had in the attic as Cliff mentions that Adrian has developed early and how he dreads the knock at the door of a “kid standing there with his hard-on sticking out of his pants,” all while Nick has just unintentionally witnessed the young girl disrobe and enter the shower (*The Crush* 0:37:02). While it might seem that this conversation makes Cliff look more like Humbert, it is the opposite. One could view this conversation as a parallel to the conversation that Humbert and Quilty have at the hotel in *Lolita*. Quilty alludes to knowing what is going on between Humbert and Dolores and in the same breath alludes to committing similar acts (Nabokov). In the above-described moment of the film, Cliff becomes Quilty as the audience has the feeling that Adrian is not safe with him and his control is far too much on the young girl. In contrast, Nick becomes Humbert, as he is not

maliciously grooming the young girl and instead has become thrust into this role of lover, whether consensual or not. The audience is now left to decide whether Adrian is better off with her father, who is far too invested in her sexuality, or Nick, who struggles to fight the urge to delve into the young girl's feelings. This parallel is seen in the novel as the reader must struggle to trust Quilty, who claims he is better for Dolores but ultimately wants to have her star in child porn, or Humbert, who continues to have a sexual relationship with the young girl all while playing the role of doting stepfather. With scenes such as Adrian lounging in her bathing suit, reminiscent of the sprinkler scene from *Lolita*, and the fact that each girl had a camp lover, one cannot deny that *Lolita* and *The Crush* run in the same circle.

While the movie pulls from *Lolita*, it is hard to call it a complete knockoff of the story. Ignoring the clear lack of a sexual relationship between the two characters or the more appropriate albeit uncomfortable age gap between the two, *The Crush* is not a *Lolita* knockoff. This is in no way saying that the film was not heavily influenced by the book; one could argue that without *Lolita* the film would never have been made. The difference is in the way the story is told; certain details and the overall portrayal of Adrian are what push the movie away from Nabokov's vision. There is a clear connection between the two pieces, yet Shapiro managed to create a much more twisted version of *Lolita*. One big difference is the portrayal of Nick and his actions. Glaessner brings up an excellent point that while the story focuses on the young girl's crush, it is still told through Nick's perception (Glaessner). This same focus can be seen in *Lolita* as the audience follows Humbert's journey and listens to his inner thoughts rather than Dolores'. Yet with Nick, the audience is never forced to justify his actions and instead is led to believe that he is the true victim of the story. While Nick is a victim in the story as he suffers from Adrian deleting his work, accusing him of rape, and ultimately attacking him, he is not as innocent as

Shapiro would like us to believe. While Shapiro's intention might not have been to criticize human morality, he created a character that seemed faultless in the situation. This deviation from Nabokov's Humbert was deliberately created to force the audience to question just how much blame could be placed on Humbert. Here the audience is not forced to internally criticize themselves by agreeing with the actions of Nick, and instead applaud him for sucker punching a 14-year-old. While Nick is a much more acceptable character than Humbert, it is an injustice to claim that he is not at fault. Shapiro tries to deviate from labeling Nick as a pervert for even entertaining Adrian's advances by introducing an age-appropriate love interest in the form of Amy, Nick's coworker at the magazine. In this way, Shapiro purposely shifts all the blame onto Adrian as he tries to distract the audience from Nick's reciprocation by proving that he is only interested in women his age. While Nabokov has Humbert marry Dolores' mother Charlotte, he makes it very clear that Humbert has no attraction to her and instead sees her as a means of reaching Dolores. While Nick's intentions with Amy are not meant to make Adrian jealous, the emotions still occur and push the young girl further into her obsession.

Nabokov's *Lolita* introduces a hard-headed little girl who is far more in touch with her sexuality than a girl at twelve should be, one who lets her schoolgirl crush lead her into the arms of her new stepfather. While there are scenes in the novel that paint Dolores as the main initiator in the relationship, one can never be too sure, as the story is told from Humbert's perspective. This parallels *The Crush* as the audience is never unsure about Nick's involvement and is acutely aware that Adrian is to blame for the events of the film. Nabokov's portrayal of Dolores allows the audience to decide whether she is participating in the flirting or if it was all a way for Humbert to convince himself that he is not depriving Dolores of her innocence. While Nabokov's Dolores still has the elements of her youth and innocence, Shapiro's Adrian is a

different story. It is here that the original work has been stripped away. The aspect of *Lolita* that portrays a seductive young girl who manipulates her way into the bed of an older man and continues to use her advances to get what she wanted is



5 (Smith, 2019)

amped up in *The Crush*. If one is not careful, one could forget that Adrian is only 14 years old due to her actions and seductive personality. Her manipulative personality is much more prominent and noticeable than Dolores'. While both girls manipulate the men in their stories, Adrian becomes a femme fatale to everyone around her. Dolores' manipulation is seen throughout the latter half of the novel as she and Humbert try to settle down after their road trip. If Dolores does not get her way, she taunts Humbert by explaining that she would tell people what he has been doing to her, thus having the upper hand (Nabokov). Shapiro ran with this manipulative sliver seen in the young girl and applied it to Adrian tenfold. Not only does she manipulate Nick into kissing her by catching him off guard (0:21:38), but she also lies about scratching his car (0:41:31), deletes his entire article (0:48:30), and accuses him of raping her (01:06:22). She also does so much more to other characters throughout the film, more than what Dolores could even think about doing. She causes her friend Cheyanne to have an accident at 0:44:10, and then, after catching Nick and Amy in bed together, she locks Amy in her darkroom and releases a hive of wasps on the woman (0:59:00). All the clues that she would do these things are there, but they are hidden behind her most manipulative act: her innocence. Before many of these incidents, Adrian alludes to her future actions, yet she plays it off as a harmless comment by a bright 14-year-old. Even Amy talks to Nick about the bad

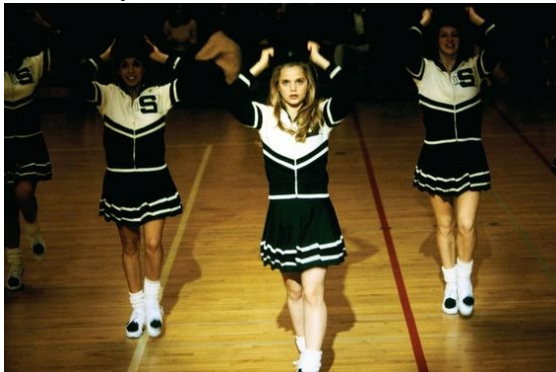


feeling that she gets when the girl is around, yet it is brushed off as a harmless crush. Adrian is not harmless; it is alluded to that she killed her camp counselor after he also rejected her advances. Up until the clear examples of Adrian's wrath, the audience is led to believe that both parties are simply toying with a schoolgirl crush. While one might argue whether Dolores is a willing participant in her story, there is no denying that Adrian wanted these things to happen. It is with this treatment of Adrian's character that we see where Shapiro has decided to cherry-pick from *Lolita*. The parts of Dolores that are bull-headed, short-tempered, and devious are increased in Adrian. In return, the audience pulls away from the fact that she is only 14 years old and, instead, she becomes the main villain. While there is no excuse for Adrian's actions in the film, it is also not fair to demonize her either. At the beginning of the film, her actions towards Nick with the subtle flirting and revealing clothing is something ingrained in her from how women were shown to flirt on TV. In an article published in 1990, three years before the film's release and before the film takes place, Jane Brown, Kim Childers and Cynthia Waszak explain that teens experience a reaction to seeing sex on television and in media. They found that adolescents who chose to watch programs with a large amount of sex in it were more likely to have intercourse within the next year (Brown, Childers, and Waszak 66). While they also explain that an adolescent's sexual values also play a role in the increased chance of having sex, adolescents gain a much higher interest in sex when exposed to it through media. Here one can not only explain but defend both Dolores and Adrian's actions. Throughout *Lolita*, Dolores is explained as having an infatuation with movie stars and magazines while Adrian is explained as being highly intelligent and watching a large amount of TV to try to relate to her peers. Like most girls their age, they are influenced by the media around them and aim to replicate what they see or invoke the same personality as their favorite starlets. While this does not justify Adrian's actions,

her exposure to media might account for her choices. Adrian's crush would inevitably turn into much more than Nick ever expected, but Shapiro played it to a whole new level. The femme fatale aura that surrounded Adrian was not solely because she wished to win the affection of an older man or because she developed early and wanted to use that to her advantage; instead, it was a deadly combination of mental illness and societal expectations. But Shapiro ignored that, whether consciously or not, in favor of portraying the coquettish schoolgirl that audiences associated with a younger girl/older man dynamic. Where Dolores might have flirted with Humbert in the manner of an outlandish child, Shapiro magnified her small attempts to create a femme fatale in the form of 14-year-old Adrian with her soft floral tops and pristine frilly bedroom.

## Chapter 5: “An Ordinary Guy with Nothing To Lose”<sup>3</sup>

While Lyne hides Lolita’s perverse nature under a gingham dress and Shapiro hides Adrian’s under an equestrian uniform, Sam Mendes hides the dark nature of his story under the skirt of a 90’s cheerleading uniform. Sam Mendes’ 1999 Oscar-winning film *American Beauty* follows along a similar route of hiding pervasive actions under brilliantly filmed scenes and a tantalizing plot. While the other films referenced in this thesis follow a central relationship, *American Beauty* offers a change of pace as audiences must experience two different relationships playing out. One is the pedophilic imaginings of Lester (Kevin Spacey) as he fantasizes about his daughter’s best friend Angela (Mena Suvari) while the other follows Lester’s teenage daughter Jane (Thora Birch) as she interacts with her new off putting teenage neighbor Ricky (Wes Bentley). While both relationships are unconventional, and one is even portrayed solely through Lester’s sick imagination, there is no denying the eerie nature of the couplings is due to the personalities of the men. While Jane and Ricky’s relationship is uncomfortable and questionable in its own right, the main focus is that of Lester and Angela. The audience is thrust into Lester Burnham’s painfully dull middle-class life as they follow along with the beginnings of his midlife crisis. As any chance of change seems lost, Lester's life is given a new meaning when he sets his eyes



6 (Rondeau, 2020)

upon Jane’s best friend during their cheerleading routine at halftime during a high school game (*American Beauty* 00:16:10). *American Beauty* is the latest film released being discussed in the thesis, which allows for it to draw from elements of the

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<sup>3</sup> This is a line spoken by Lester in Sam Mendes’ 1999 film *American Beauty*

other movies. While the film has its unique personality and tone, there is no denying that it belongs in the same thematic category as Lyne and Shapiro's films.

Instead of creating a subtle undertone of pedophilia similar to the other films, Mendes does not hold back on Lester's fantasies involving the young girl. While Lyne tries to create stylized sex scenes in his film, Mendes takes on a crude approach when demonstrating Lester's lust for Angela. With multiple shots of Lester pleasuring himself coupled with the iconic scene of underaged Angela

lounging in a bath full of

rose petals,

there is no denying Lester's

attraction to and need for the

young girl. There is no

subtlety or fear in showing

the attraction for the young



7 (*American Beauty*)

girls and this is also translated over to Ricky. While Ricky's sights are set on Jane, who is the same age as he, his perverted actions of videoing her at all hours of the day demonstrate the same level of obsession. While Lester dreams of something that he cannot possess, Ricky videotapes what he cannot touch. Mendes is much bolder and more vocal about the sexual nature of the film and the topic as a whole. Although one can infer that a sexual relationship has taken place between Humbert and Dolores or even infer that Nick has fantasized about Adrian, there is a lack of visual elements that highlight just how depraved they are. In *American Beauty*, the audience is never unsure whether Lester is in the wrong, nor do they worry if Lester knows what he is doing is wrong. It is undoubtedly clear that Lester knows that his attraction is wrong, but similar to

Humbert, he does not feel guilty over the matter. While Humbert's lack of guilt comes from the belief that he is not hurting the young girl, Lester's lack of guilt comes from his lackadaisical attitude brought about by his midlife crisis. Nothing is exciting about his life anymore, so why should he feel bad about wanting to bed a high school girl? The subtlety and mask that Humbert wears are not found in Lester's character; instead, it is his transparency in the matter that draws the audience to find themselves uncomfortable when he appears on the screen.

Even though Humbert's actions are more despicable and frequent than Lester's, there is still an overwhelming number of actions that cause Lester to surpass Humbert on the scale of perversion. Lester does not lay his hands on Angela until the last 15 minutes of the movie, and yet the audience still feels nervous when Lester appears on the screen. Lester's carefree attitude that follows him throughout the film is used as a way to justify his lust for Angela. As he works through his midlife crisis, Lester continuously explains that he just doesn't care anymore. He conveys these thoughts when finds out his wife is cheating on him and when he tells his family that he lost his job. While one might handle a midlife crisis by quitting their job or getting tattoos, Lester decides to lust after a high school cheerleader and buy marijuana from his daughter's boyfriend. His deliberate act of suburban rebellion cannot be used to justify his choice of going after Angela. There is no shame in his actions; instead, he expects the audience to agree with him. Amid the spoken scenes of Lester's internal dialog, the audience is treated to Lester complaining about his suburban life and the impasse he faces. Similarly to Humbert, both men expect a certain level of pity from the audience and sympathy for their situations. It is as if people are expected to ignore the treatment of the young girls and instead place all that emotion on the sick men.

Dolores and Angela play pivotal roles in both of their stories yet are expected to have their feelings and experiences pushed to the background. In fact, without characters like Angela or Dolores, there would be no story. Viewers would not have to sit for hours watching as Lester slowly undresses his daughter's best friend (*American Beauty* 01:46:44) or subject themselves to watching as Humbert rolls around in the sheets with a 12-year-old Dolores. Yet it is not the characters of the girls that tell the story; it is their abusers that play the role of narrator. The viewer does not get to experience Angela's feelings or get to understand why she craves the validation of an older man so much. Instead, they begin to blame the girl for her actions and find that she is the temptress. Mendes leaves the audience no room to suggest that Lester should have left her alone and focused on picking up the pieces of his marriage. Instead, the audience is expected to allow Lester to try to sleep with her due to her short skirts and flirtatious nature. While *American Beauty* contains themes of homosexual relationships and the hidden underbelly of suburban life, it still mimics *Lolita*. This time it is two girls being torn apart due to the actions of Lester, one being Angela as she becomes the object of his affections and the other being his own daughter Jane, as she must battle losing the man she once viewed as a father.

## Chapter 6: “Girls Turn into Women Long Before Boys Turn into Men”<sup>4</sup>

Turning the attention away from traditional films, one can find *Lolita*'s influence in the world of theater as well. *How I Learned To Drive (HILTD)* by Paula Vogel offers an interesting look at the grip that *Lolita* had when it was first produced in 1997. Vogel's play focuses on the sexual relationship that occurs between a 16-year-old girl, Lil' Bit, and her uncle Peck, and is primarily told through flashbacks. The audience can explore the relationship between the two as Lil' Bit uses the driving lessons given to her by her uncle as a way to convey her story. There are only really two roles filled by actual actors, that of Lil' Bit and Peck. All other roles are filled by a male and female Greek chorus, which allows a majority of the focus to remain on the “couple.” While *Lolita* focuses on the relationship between a stepfather and his daughter, *HILTD* focuses on the relationship between a niece and uncle, one who married into the family. Vogel's play creates a whole new take on the *Lolita* epidemic that swept the 90s, one that shows consequences.

In the other films, the story ends the minute the credits start rolling. The audience did not see the aftermath of Adrian's attack on Nick or into how Jane was left to deal with finding her father's body in *American Beauty*. Vogel's play focuses many scenes on the effects of the relationship and the lasting damage that it causes the characters. One scene in the play involves Lil' Bit sleeping with a 17-year-old boy when she is 27. It is here that she begins to understand the allure that drew Peck to her all those years ago. As Lil' Bit lays on her back after the encounter, she gives this monologue, “This is the allure. Being older. Being the first. Being the translator, the teacher, the epicure, the already jaded. This is how the giver gets taken” (Vogel 55). With the other pieces of media discussed in this thesis, audiences are left to decide what

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<sup>4</sup> This is a line spoken by Uncle Peck in Paula Vogel's 1997 play *How I Learned To Drive*

happens to the characters as they move forward with the trauma that they suffered. Vogel forces the audience to come to terms with what has occurred, and in doing so, reshapes their views on the topic. Audiences cannot walk away from the play pretending that everything ended fine and no one was hurt. Instead, they must now sit through scenes where the abused becomes the abuser and witness firsthand the psychological turmoil suffered by both characters. There is no walking away from *How I Learned To Drive* without reliving the events in your head.

While the play itself makes it harder for the audience to ignore the incestuous relationship, it also does something that Nabokov had always wanted to do. The play forces the viewer to come to terms with their own moral values and understanding of the characters as they watch the story unfold. Although the audience can only assume that Dolores feels the same way about Humbert, there is no denying the emotions that come from Lil' Bit and her uncle because of the deep connection that keeps the two intertwined. The love and respect that the two feel for one another is something hard for the audience to swallow, and with that Vogel accomplishes Nabokov's mission. One would rather ignore the countless instances of Peck changing for his niece or Lil' Bit relying on him when her own family becomes too much instead of openly admitting that the incestuous relationship is the healthiest one shown throughout the play. There is an instance when Peck stops drinking as he knew it made Lil' Bit uncomfortable when they would drive together. On one hand, a viewer wants to label this relationship as immoral and illegal, yet in the beginning, it proves to be the healthiest relationship out of the four discussed in this thesis. There is still a level of grooming and manipulation that one should expect in a pedophilic relationship, but it is clear that the uncle and niece care for one another on a deeper level. One must ask themselves if they want to stand for an evil, whether that be the abusive



relationship of *Lolita*, the one-sided scare of *The Crush*, the midlife crisis of *American Beauty*, or the deceitfully healthy relationship of *How I Learned To Drive*.

Nabokov's *Lolita* paints a picture of a twisted love affair and only someone as sick as Humbert would confuse his lust for love. Humbert might have taken Dolores under his wing and cared for her with the hope that she would not run away to another man. He might have called himself her father, yet the love he showed her was nothing more than tainted. *How I Learned to Drive* finds comfort in this negative dynamic as Vogel captures this taboo love in the relationship between Peck and Lil' Bit. It is clear to the audience that Peck "loves" Lil' Bit and, in some way, Lil' Bit loves him too. Their love started as Lil' Bit wanted to be close to her uncle. It wasn't until the first driving lesson that the dynamic changed. It is important to note that as Lil' Bit recounts the relationship with her uncle, she refers to driving lessons, yet the scenarios detail his advances on her. When Lil' Bit explains her first driving lesson at 11 years old, it was more than just her uncle teaching her how to handle a car. Instead, it is the first time that he gropes her and makes his attraction known. *HILTD* is not in chronological order, and the countless driving lessons are written in a scattered time frame with Lil' Bit recounting instances from when she was 15 and then from when she was 13. Throughout these "driving lessons," Peck always reminds Lil' Bit that he loves her. In one instance, he explains that he loves her as they struggle through family issues; yet another "driving lesson" sees Peck telling Lil' Bit he loves her as a way to persuade the 13-year-old to let him submit scandalous pictures of her to *Playboy* once she turns 18. As Lil' Bit recalls more and more stories, it becomes harder to see the line between love and possession. Peck's love culminates when he proposes to her on her 18th birthday after claiming he has loved her since she was born. His reasoning behind the proposal comes from the fact that they are not blood-related, yet this man held Lil' Bit in the palm of his hand when she

was born. As she breaks the relationship off, Peck shuts down and it is the last time that they ever see each other. Lil' Bit claims that as she remembers Uncle Peck, she sees him "looking for a young girl, who, of her own free will, will love him. Release him" (Vogel 107). Vogel's final scenes of the play force the reader to question what kind of love occurred between the two. Peck clearly loved Lil' Bit, whether it was real love or simply the fact that she could soothe his heart. She became his justification for his actions and became the monster in other people's eyes. One could claim that Humbert also loved Dolores but his internal monologue made him the monster and Lester never hid his sexual desire for Angela. Peck might have loved Lil' Bit for her overdeveloped body or for the fact she never judged him, yet she was not his to love. He had a wife, one who knew what was going on between the uncle and niece, yet he sought out Lil' Bit's affection. Peck's wife, Mary, delivers a monologue about whether to blame Lil' Bit for her husband's actions as he suffers from PTSD and other psychological issues from his time in WWII. Many of the characters know what is occurring between the pair yet do not place the blame on 40-year-old Peck. While Peck might have used Lil' Bit to calm his racing mind, other characters saw her as the temptress. The love, whether real or manipulative, that Peck gave to Lil' Bit is something that leaves audiences wondering if there was more than one victim.

In the final scenes, Lil' Bit explains that Peck drank himself to death seven years after that night and she asks the question, "Who did it to you, Uncle Peck? How old were you? Were you eleven?" (Vogel 107). This line of questioning and the inclusion of the scene about Peck and Cousin BB's fishing trip lead to the assumption that Peck was also taken advantage of as a child. While Peck's past does not excuse his actions, it opens up a door to the cycle of abuse that was ignored by Nabokov. Humbert's background is explained to the reader in *Lolita*: he uses his dead childhood love as a way to excuse his actions. While audiences know better than to excuse

Humbert's actions, that line becomes much blurrier with Uncle Peck's character. During the lesson "Idling in the Neutral Gear," Lil' Bit explains how Peck took her male cousin BB on a fishing trip and alludes to the fact that Peck also tried something on the young boy with phrases such as "something special just between you and me" (Vogel 49). Although it is not clear if something happened between the pair, one cannot ignore the fact attention that he gave to his younger relatives might have had a dark underside. With Lil' Bits' final questions and the fact that Peck suffered so much in his life, the audience's heartstrings are pulled in a way that makes them shiver. With characters like Humbert and Lester, it is easy to demonize their characters and hate them for what they did. There is nothing in their background or lives that can excuse what they did to the girls, and instead, the audience only sees the negative intentions of their actions. But with Peck, it is harder to hate him. While it is no excuse for his relationship with Lil' Bit, it still leaves the audience questioning whether he could control himself. The cycle of abuse that might have occurred in his life caused him to be a victim in his own right. Nabokov wrote *Lolita* with the hope of questioning the morals of humanity by causing them to root for a taboo relationship, but it was Vogel who succeeded in causing the audience to forgive the abuser. In films such as *The Crush* and *American Beauty*, the humanity of the male character was never questioned, but *HILTD* both questions Peck's humanity and works to restore it. Whereas Vogel offers a savior to a sick man, no one helped save Dolores or Lil' Bit; instead, the treatment by such men fueled a fire that continued to burn late into the 1990s.

## Chapter 7: "Come on You Know You Like Little Girls"<sup>5</sup>

Even though it is always interesting to analyze books and films, there is a reason for the dive into the “*Lolita* universe.” While each of the films offers an interesting conversation about taboo topics such as pedophilia and incest, they are precursors to a deeper issue. Even though *Lolita* came out in 1955, its influence peaked with the release of Lyne’s remake and continued to spread into the 2000s. The influence of *Lolita* might be more noticeable in the 2000s with the rise of singers such as Lana Del Rey, who turned the novel into a subgenre of music. Yet the influence that *Lolita* culture had on the 90s is much deeper than it appears and in some ways is more detrimental to the girls who latched onto those films.

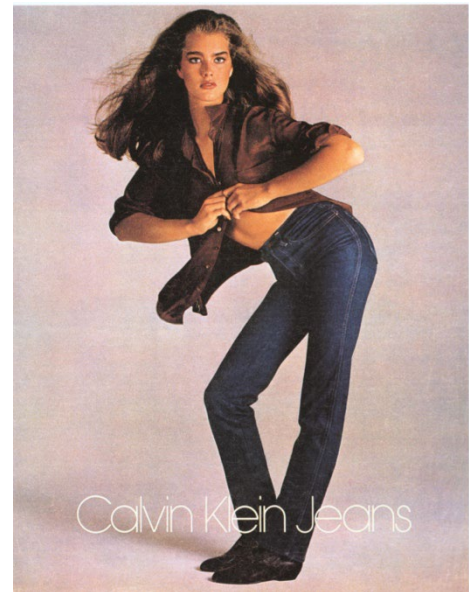
Before the 90s *Lolita* was already a controversial figure in literature, and its rise in popularity after the release of films such as *The Crush* and Lyne’s 1997 remake launched the character to new heights. *Lolita*’s influence has enhanced popular culture’s need to erotize young girls. In her article “The Visual Rhetoric of Innocence”, Shari Savage delves into the countless examples of *Lolita*’s effect on popular culture. More importantly, she focuses on the growing obsession with young-looking models and the need for them to appear innocent. While one watches as Uncle Peck convinces Lil ’Bit to take scandalous photos of herself under the guise of helping her portfolio, Savage delves into the real examples of it occurring. With the popularity of *Lolita* and the schoolgirl aesthetic growing in the 90s, advertisers and modeling agencies took advantage of that and sought out younger models. Savage recalls the 1995 Calvin Klein ad that showed a disembodied voice instructing young girls to disrobe on camera (Savage 104). Though the ads were not meant to be fetishized, the porn-like undertones of the campaign created negative waves in the media. Yet this did not stop companies from painting young girls as sex

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<sup>5</sup> This is a line from Lana Del Rey’s 2012 unreleased song *Put Me In a Movie*

icons. Other campaigns also took place in the late 1990s with teenage girls either posing topless or with very little clothing. While the companies claimed this was an artistic decision with no pedophilic undertones, it is hard to ignore that notion when staring at a 14-year-old model as she lies draped against a couch. This isn't the first time that young girls have been sexualized in the media, but the trend that occurs is much more common this time around. One can look back on the controversial 1980 Calvin Klein ad that featured a 15-year-old Brooke Shields. The ad features young Shields in tight jeans and unbuttoning her blouse, with the tagline, "You want to know what comes between me and my Calvins? Nothing."

While Shields did not see it as sexual at the time of its release, it has now become one of the prime examples of the eroticization of young girls in the media. Even though the models and the companies themselves might not see the harm in their images, there is still a clear line that is being crossed. It is a conscious effort of these companies to seek out younger models and create the narrative that innocence is sexy. Although the notion of lusting after



8 (Stock P)

innocence has been an ongoing issue, Lyne's 1997 release of *Lolita* amplified the issue tenfold.

Audiences are now invited to see the way that Irons' Humbert looks at Dolores. Many young girls strived for this attention. The next day, these same girls are flipping through magazines and are met with ads of girls the same age as them in nothing more than a bra or their arms to cover their chest, and it almost feels as if something clicks in their head. The gaze and attraction of an older man are now seen as desirable and a trend rather than the curse that it truly is. To seek the attention of older men, the girls need someone to embody and copy, and here is

where *Lolita* becomes the perfect archetype. Girls now have the perfect model to copy, and if they aren't the biggest fan of Dolores' crass nature, they can turn their focus toward Adrian from *The Crush* or live like a cheerleader as they copy Angela. As 90's teens confuse Humbert's lust for love, they find themselves even more drawn to the archetype of *Lolita*. If it is as easy as being underaged and showing a little skin to get attention, then what is stopping them from achieving the love they think they deserve? They now want to emulate the image of Lolita that they see plastered over movie theater walls or on the covers of books and forget what it will cost them. The appeal of "legal fuckability" and the overtly sexual imagination of society has led these girls down a dark path (Wells 4). If it is what modeling agencies are looking for and what theaters are showing, why wouldn't a self-conscious and unsure teenage girl wish to achieve it? Media, including films, of the 1990s, discovered how to entice an entire population as well as rake in views from the perverted underbelly of society. They would be damned if they didn't capitalize on it, no matter how many girls lost their innocence in the process.

While it seems like a far stretch to claim that a novel such as *Lolita* could have such a strong hold on girls, 90s culture created the perfect breeding ground for it. The '90s were rife with colorful magazines full of articles telling girls how to dress or what they should do to attract a boy. The 1980s saw the rise of movies such as *Pretty in Pink* and *The Breakfast Club*, which were advertised to teenagers and younger audiences as the genre portrayed the life of characters that they could relate to. The continuation of "teen" movies and TV shows spread into the 1990s and grew to a lifestyle that many teens wished to copy. Many teens turned to various forms of media to help explain the unanswered questions that they had as they grew up. They would turn to magazines to determine how they should dress or determine what music they should listen to, or they turned to movies and television to learn how to make friends or flirt with their crushes.

Perhaps the most relevant fact is that many teens turned to media when they began to explore their sexuality and what it means to be sexually active. So it is no surprise that films such as *Lolita* managed to create a deep impact on girls of the 90s.

While the topic of sex and one's promiscuity has become much more open, it was still very hush-hush in the 1990s, with many girls expected to remain a virgin and not dabble in sex until they were married. Yet this narrative was shattered as film and television created a channel for girls to become introduced to the world of sex. In Henry Giroux's article "Teenage Sexuality, Body Politics and the Pedagogy of Display," he describes this phenomenon that occurred as representation pushed to control youth's bodies, and as a sign of resistance, teens took hold of certain pop culture references and used it to express "transgressive sexuality" (Giroux 313). With the battle between trying to limit teens' exposure to sex against the need for companies to push a narrative that innocence is sexy, *Lolita* was able to plant its seed. There is an inherent and age-old need for teenagers to rebel against their parents. As long as an adult is telling a child what they can and can't do, there will be a teen waiting to challenge the rules. So when a girl is told by her father she can't date until she is 30, all while being exposed to movies such as *The Crush*, she has the perfect template to win the affections of an older man all while fighting back against her parents. *Lolita* came at a time of teenage rebellion in the form of promiscuity. Mixing the need to explore their sexuality and to defy the adults in their lives, girls had no choice but to flock to *Lolita* and other films. It offered a play-by-play on how they could use their innocence to achieve what they want the most: sex, love and attention. The generation of 90s girls were already on the track of becoming more sexual than their mothers, but it was the release of *Lolita*-style films that sent them speeding down the track. In under two hours, girls were able to find

themselves in characters such as Dolores, Adrian, or Angela, and the minute they stepped out of the theatre, they began to replicate them.

The sexually charged environment of the 90s allowed *Lolita* to grow and infect countless sections of popular culture, but it also had to stick in the heads of girls. Although the need for male attention or the growing daddy issues gave way to an obsession with *Lolita*, girls were already dealing with being told what to do. There is no such thing as “just being a girl.” Even to this day, females are bombarded with pages full of tips on how to appear ageless or advertisements telling them what type of bra to wear. Perhaps it is worse, as young girls yearn to fit in with their peers and appear as if they walked straight out of the pages of *Teen Vogue*. Even though magazines might include a page on how to achieve an angel-like glow or what to wear on a date, no magazine is going to include a section on how to sleep with an older man or how to dress to make your hot 30-year-old neighbor fall in love with you. Although it seems like a stretch to believe that girls wish to succeed on these fronts, the films studied in this thesis prove differently. In a time when young girls have no clue what they want from sex and a relationship, they turn to others for guidance. There is no judgment in these films or dialogue on how a young girl should wait for the right person to take her virginity. Instead, the audience is bombarded with scenes of teenage girls clad in bikinis and short skirts as they succeed in seducing the object of their desire. Yes, the audience knows that it is not ok and that the relationships occurring are very much illegal, but that does not stop the growing infatuation. While every other media source makes a living off of telling a girl what she should be, *Lolita*-style films offer an escape. There is no telling a girl she can't embrace her sensuality; instead, it is a clear-cut guide on how to do so. With a little bit of red lipstick, some rollerblades, and a cheerleading skirt, any little girl can attract the man next door.



*Lolita* might not be everyone's favorite book; in fact, it might be the one book that people vow never to read. But *Lolita* created something that Nabokov never expected when he first published the novel. With the hope of creating a novel that forced the reader to question their morals, *Lolita* evolved into so much more once it reached the silver screen. What once was a novel about the relationship between a girl and her stepfather morphed into a template for a whole generation of girls. Gone was the hope that the boy who sat next to them in class would kiss them at the playground. Instead, it was replaced with the hope that their male English teacher would ask them to stay after class or with the hope that their dad's friend would think they looked nice in their swimsuit. The smell of sex in the air and the need for attention that clouded the girls of the 1990s lent itself as the backdrop for *Lolita's* takeover. Nabokov, Lyne, Mendes, Vogel, and Shapiro introduced the Lolita archetype to 1990s girls. This would forever change the mentality of young girls as they sought to become the light of someone's life and the fire of someone's loins.

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