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“Knowing” Lolita: Sexual Deviance
and Normality in Nabokov’s *Lolita*

Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* shocked and appalled its American audience upon its publication in 1955. In its blurring of the fine line that separates “normal” sexual behavior from “deviance,” *Lolita* touched, and still touches, a peculiarly American nerve. Another work that examined the boundary between abnormal and normal sexual activity was Alfred Kinsey’s controversial scientific surveys of sexual behavior among men and women, published in 1948 and 1953.¹ These studies, the so-called “Kinsey reports,” also raised a furor in 1950s America. Both Kinsey and Nabokov essentially challenged myths about the presumed “innocence,” or sexual naiveté, of American women.

Although *Lolita* is presented through the eyes of a pedophile who sees her as an American Eve, the novel appropriates the language and scientific perspective of the Kinsey reports to undercut this mythological view of her. While Humbert presents Lolita’s sexuality as deviant or precocious, Nabokov invokes (albeit parodically) statistical, scientific studies of female sexuality similar to the Kinsey reports; the effect of this perspective is to suggest that Lolita’s sexuality is in fact “normal.” Failing to recognize this scientific view of Lolita, clearly represented in the novel, critics sometimes see Lolita exclusively from Humbert’s perspective—as an archetypal temptress, a modern-day femme fatale. Indeed, critics have sometimes conflated Humbert’s view of Lolita with Nabokov’s, ignoring the ways in which Humbert’s mythologizing of Lolita and his construction of her sexual deviance is one of Nabokov’s many targets in *Lolita*. For example, in a survey of the trend of reviews and criticism of *Lolita* shortly after its 1955 publication, Todd Bayma and Gary Fine found that the majority of critics shared Humbert’s misogynistic interpretation of Lolita. They note, “By arguments similar to those used by convicted rapists in order to view themselves as non-rapists, reviewers depicted Dolores Haze as both morally unworthy and at least partly responsible for her

1. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953).

own victimization" (167).² The way Nabokov deconstructs Humbert's myths about Lolita's perversity eluded these reviewers, who ultimately adopted, rather than condemned, Humbert's view of Lolita. Some contemporary feminist critics have also, I believe, misjudged the novel, erroneously conflating Humbert's view of Lolita with Nabokov's. Linda Kauffman, for example, argues that "the novel allegorizes Woman" and feels as though Nabokov "elides the female by framing the narrative through Humbert's angle of vision" (64–65). It is not the novel, I would suggest, that "allegorizes Woman," but Humbert. And Humbert's "angle of vision" is not the only one we have of Lolita, although it predominates. Nabokov, I suggest, utilizes the sexology that was so controversial in the 1950s to suggest an alternative interpretation of Lolita, one which views her not as a special, nymph-like girl already perverted before Humbert exploits her, but rather as an ordinary, juvenile girl whose "normal" sexual development is warped by a maniacal, myth-making pedophile. By interrogating the boundary between sexual "deviance" and "normality," Nabokov's *Lolita*, like Alfred Kinsey's studies, exposes cultural myths, like the Edenic one Humbert creates, that turn "normal" sexual behavior into "deviance." In giving us not only the misogynistic, mythical perspective of Humbert for Lolita's sexual behavior, but also that of the new science of sexology, which normalized supposedly deviant behavior, Nabokov exposes the volatility of the subjective, social constructs of "deviance" and "normality."³

Lolita poses the question of how a woman's sexual awakening should be viewed. Specifically, through what interpretive or epistemological frame should readers view Lolita's sexuality—through what Humbert and myth tell us, or through a more prosaic lens? Through conscious and obsessive allusions to the Garden of Eden, Humbert creates a distinctly Edenic framework, an epistemology, for interpreting Lolita and her troubling sexuality. If we accept Humbert's epistemology, Lolita, like Eve, is culpable for her fall from innocence, and her fall from sexual *ignorance* becomes a mark of innate depravity. But Nabokov provides (without endorsing) an alternative interpretive frame-

2. Among these critics, Bayma and Fine note, was Lionel Trilling, who stated that Lolita had few emotions to be violated by Humbert's exploitation of her (172).

3. As Eric Rothstein notes, "*Lolita* complicates and compromises normativity. It does so by the paradoxes and slippages in Dolores's and Humbert's norms, the uncertain status of the many cultural references, and by toying with reading practices, aesthete and philistine alike" (40). The role of myth and science in such shifting and "slippages" of normativity and deviance, I will argue in what follows, is clearly on display in the novel.

work for understanding Lolita's sexuality. Modern science, or, more specifically, sexology,⁴ provides a competing epistemology by which to understand Lolita's sexuality.⁵ The science of sexology undermines Humbert's Edenic perspective of Lolita and establishes her behavior and development as normal. Rather than being a nymphomaniac who seduces Humbert Humbert, from this perspective she becomes a normally developing young woman who is exploited by an imaginative man who ironically sees *her* as the deviant. In highlighting Humbert's ironic interpretation of Lolita as deviant (and himself as "helpless as Adam") and showcasing his clever arguments about the normalcy of his own apparently deviant behavior, Nabokov suggests that the concepts of "deviance" and "normalcy" are disturbingly fluid, contingent upon our social perspective, and shaped by our own prejudices and desires. From Humbert's literary and mythic perspective, Lolita is a modern avatar of a long line of wayward, deviant women. From the perspective of Alfred Kinsey and other "sexologists" of Lolita's day, she is a normally developing female experimenting with her sexuality. By providing us sporadically with such a perspective—albeit through the exaggerating lens of parody—Nabokov forces readers to reconsider Lolita's apparent deviancy and exposes the myths by which Humbert and many critics turn Lolita into a deviant "nymphet."

The Apple Trail in *Lolita*

Apples plague *Lolita*; and these apples become symbolically important because Humbert, a man conscious of his role as Adam and even more conscious of Lolita's role as Eve, appropriates them into myth and arranges them in an Edenic setting of his own erudite imagination. While it is *Nabokov* who provides the actual apples, so to speak, the literal gardens, it is *Humbert* who imposes symbolic weight and importance on these elements of Eden in the modern world. Ultimately, Humbert provides an archetypal context for Lolita's sexuality to justify his own perversion of her.

Humbert's romance with archetypal gardens begins with his tryst with Annabel, a girl with whom he has a frustrated adolescent romance while

4. While Freud is a palpable presence in *Lolita*, Nabokov also clearly had in mind more recent studies of female sexuality that involved statistical analysis of kinds of sexual behavior, such as the "Kinsey reports" of 1948 and 1953.

5. Charles Glicksberg, in *The Sexual Revolution in Modern American Literature*, discusses the important role science played in twentieth-century portraits of sexuality. For naturalists, for example, mechanistic understandings of sexuality diverted attention from the moral dimension traditionally assigned to it (12).

a tenant at his father's Hotel Mirana.⁶ Humbert's consummation of this romance, however, is interrupted as he is about to lose his virginity with Annabel—and this interruption is the origin of Humbert's obsession with sexual transgression. His original meeting with Lolita also takes place in a garden. Mrs. Haze (Lolita's mother) eagerly purrs, "Let me show you the garden."⁷ In Humbert's description, Mrs. Haze seems to be an Eve, a temptress, even before her rival daughter usurps her place. He remarks, "Her smile was but a quizzical jerk of one eyebrow; and uncoiling herself from the sofa as she talked, she kept making spasmodic dashes at three ashtrays and the near fender (where lay the brown core of an apple)" (37). The images of a ravished apple and a serpentine Charlotte Haze are ambiguous. Is the apple Mrs. Haze's detritus or Lolita's? In either case, the imagery establishes that Humbert has entered the domain of a fallen temptress.

As the apple trail grows, it becomes strewn with allusions to Eden. Humbert is rarely subtle about his Edenic fantasies: shortly before his first clandestine orgasm with Lolita as she sits playfully on his lap, Humbert describes her "holding in her hollowed hands a beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple" (57–58). The apple that Humbert tinges with Edenic colors becomes a playful object of flirtation between the mismatched pair. Humbert snatches the apple away from Lolita, who soon retrieves and bites into it. As the flirtation continues, Humbert becomes more and more excited as he watches Lolita "devouring her immemorial fruit" (59). Why the fruit should be considered "immemorial" by Humbert isn't evident until we recognize that Humbert is fitting Lolita into a long line of mythical temptresses—beginning, here, with Eve.

The scene develops serious overtones as Humbert's climax and Lolita's "abolishment" of her apple coincide:

As she strained to chuck the core of her abolished apple into the fender, her young weight, her shameless innocent shanks and round bottom, shifted in my tense, tortured, surreptitiously laboring lap; and all of a sudden a mysterious change came over my senses. I entered a plane of being where nothing mattered, save the infusion of joy brewed within my body [...] The least pressure would suffice to set all paradise loose. (59–60)

6. The name is similar to Miranda, the Shakespearean heroine who has come to symbolize youth's process of discovery. In this context, the subtle reference can be seen to reflect the passage of youth into a distinctly brave new sexuality.

7. *The Annotated Lolita*, 38. Subsequent references to this edition will be cited parenthetically in the text.

And yet despite Humbert's portrayal of an Edenic transgression, it is not followed by an Edenic fall. Humbert prides himself on his theft of sinful pleasure without incurring any of the sin and boasts about his supposedly innocent transgression: "I had stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor [...] and still Lolita was safe—and I was safe" (62). Humbert's version of the Edenic consumption of the forbidden apple without the subsequent fall, therefore, both invokes and subverts the myth in a way that exonerates him from blame.

The next mention of apples occurs in an equally significant context; but on this occasion, Lolita is fully aware of Humbert's sexual excitement. After Lolita has "seduced" Humbert for the first time, Humbert imagines what kind of scene he could paint to express his ecstasy, again transforming the experience into myth.

There would have been nature studies—a tiger pursuing a bird of paradise, a choking snake sheathing whole the flayed trunk of a shoat. There would have been a sultan, his face expressing great agony [...] helping a callypygean slave child to climb a column of onyx [...] There would have been poplars, apples, a suburban Sunday. (134)

Humbert imaginatively fits his pedophilic conquest into the framework of mythology. Mythically evocative words in Humbert's tableau, such as "snake," "paradise," and "Sunday," as well as "apples," all invoke a specifically Edenic framework for his sexual intercourse with Lolita. While Humbert never is able to transcend this mythological reading of Lolita—in the end of the novel describing her, retrospectively, in similar terms—Nabokov *does* provide alternative contexts Lolita's sexuality.

Humbert's self-conscious references to apples and Eden, however, develop his interpretation of Lolita further before any alternative suggests itself. When Humbert and Lolita are at Beardsley, for example, he suddenly fears, when Lolita shows signs of interest in high-school boys, that she has become sexually active with those her own age. Strangely enough, Lolita appears to Humbert as suddenly similar to his Parisian prostitute: Lolita has lipstick on her teeth, and this red stain triggers an uncanny comparison in Humbert's mind. He compares Lolita's cheeks to the prostitute's "*pommettes*"—in French, literally, "little apples" (204). While Humbert is idiomatically referring to rosy cheeks, he also evokes the image of apples, and, consequently, again casts Lolita as a post-lapsarian Eve, a fallen or depraved woman. By likening Lolita to a prostitute, Humbert furthers his own need to justify his exploitation of her by establishing her as a deviant. The beginning of this view, interestingly, is his consideration that Lolita may have become sexually active with those

her own age. Such activity, for Humbert, is a sure sign of deviance.

Apples continue popping up, with greater or lesser degrees of subtlety, even on the road trip Humbert takes to arrest Lolita's patently normal social (and sexual) maturation. "That day or the next," Humbert notes, "after a tedious drive through a land of food crops, we reached a pleasant little burg and put up at Chestnut Court—nice cabins, damp green grounds, apple trees, an old swing [...]." Lolita, coincidentally, Humbert remarks, has an insatiable craving for "fresh fruits" (212).

That Humbert's references to apples are more than a literary man's natural proclivity for allusion is made evident as he recreates Eden as well as forbidden apples throughout the novel. Humbert's obsession with Lolita begins with a frustration of his own sexual maturation, or a hindrance to his crossing the threshold between sexual ignorance and knowledge. As an adolescent about to consummate his first sexual relationship with the Poe-esque Annabel, he is surprised in the garden by an intruder (Dr. Cooper) (15). In another thwarted experiment, Humbert and Annabel are discovered exploring each other by two men emerging from the sea; later, Humbert recalls their hasty effort to cover themselves (53). Numerous scenes in *Lolita* reenact Humbert's primal Adamic experience—a sexual transgression in some secluded garden, a moment of detection in the forbidden act, and, finally, an awkward scrambling to cover nakedness—like Adam and Eve made suddenly aware of human sexuality.

After Humbert's account of his initial abortive, Edenic transgression with his childhood sweetheart, Annabel, we have only to wait some ten pages before he re-creates in his memoirs, or tries to re-create, the scene that is to haunt him throughout his life. With a Parisian prostitute, Humbert tries to re-create, unsuccessfully, Annabel's innocent sexual awakening. She masquerades as a "nymphet," though she is clearly too old to actually be one, and meets Humbert in a hotel room for their tryst. Humbert's reference to Eden in the scene reiterates the way he has chosen to frame his memories of sexual awakening with Annabel. In the hotel room, Humbert sees Eden reflected in a mirror and Eve and Annabel reflected in a prostitute: Humbert remarks his "dreadful grimace" in "the mirror reflecting our small Eden" (22). Humbert's purposeful conflation of Annabel (and, later, Lolita) with this prostitute reveals his perverse understanding of female sexuality. Does a woman's sexual awakening place her on the same level as a prostitute? For Humbert, Nabokov's strategies suggest, the distinction is not clear. For him, the images of the fallen woman, the prostitute, and Lolita are identical—all of them, to him, equally deviant, corruptible, and corrupting. But the novel later offers other potential interpretations of Lolita that do not draw such easy parallels between Lolita and Eve and "fallen" women in general. And yet such alternative interpretations

remain in the background of Humbert's archetypal arguments about Lolita.

Perhaps the centerpiece of Humbert's Edenic re-creations is his first clandestine orgasm. Humbert's epiphany occurs alongside Lolita's re-enactment of Eve's transgression as she devours an apple in his "surreptitiously laboring lap." However, Humbert cannot satisfy himself with this re-creation and must devise more scenarios, even if it means resorting to drugging Lolita. At the mercy of his lust, Humbert makes the ludicrous claim that he is "helpless as Adam at the preview of early oriental history, miraged in his apple orchard" (71). By associating himself with a helpless Adam, rather than acknowledging his role as a sexual predator, Humbert prepares himself for an Edenic "fall" for which he will not be responsible, transforming himself from sexual deviant to a helpless victim of Lolita's magnetism. While he is the one acting upon Lolita, mentally as well as physically, he transfers his onus of temptation and guilt to Lolita, making her out to be a modern Eve while identifying *himself* with a helpless Adam.

Humbert's re-creations of an Edenic fall remain stubbornly consistent to the end of the novel. While Lolita outgrows her role as Humbert's fallen woman, his Eve who has seduced a "helpless" Adam, Humbert's view of her does *not* change. He recalls his own transgression with Lolita repentantly, but still casts her in the same mythic context he has imposed on her from the start. He reflects, "there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate—dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me [...]" (284). Because of Humbert's conscious re-creation of Eden and his symbolic entrapment of Lolita within this myth, it is hard *not* to consider Lolita's role as Eve; but it is important, also, to look at the ways she transcends the myth Humbert writes for her and, in doing so, becomes less a modern avatar of an archetypal figure and more of a unique modern woman. Humbert utilizes myth to underscore Lolita's deviance; but "science" is soon introduced to suggest Lolita's normalcy and expose Humbert's rationalizations.

Beyond the Apple Trail

While Humbert sees a "twilight" in Lolita, there is also an important dawn of sexuality in her that must not be overlooked. And it is Lolita's awakened sexuality that enables Humbert, and some critics who concurred with his sophisms, to cast her as a "fallen" woman even before he first has intercourse with her.

While Lolita's juvenile experiences could be viewed as an awakening, Humbert sees her experience as a mark of depravity. Soon after Humbert justifies his exploitation of Lolita with the trump in his deck of rationalizations—"it was she who seduced me" (132)—Lolita reveals to Humbert, as Humbert

puts it, “the way she had been debauched” (135). For Humbert, Lolita is the experienced temptress. And yet Lolita’s frank discussion of sexuality suggests not so much a fallen woman as a girl who confuses, or is unable to distinguish, natural sexual experimentation with sexual perversity. Ironically, Lolita seems naively eager to *teach*, rather than *seduce*, Humbert. Clearly, she is negotiating in her own mind the meaning of what normal development of human sexuality constitutes. Humbert notes, for example, her preoccupation with the “proper” or “normal” technique of loving: “It was very curious the way she considered—and kept doing so for a long time—all caresses except kisses on the mouth or the stark act of love either ‘romantic slosh’ or ‘abnormal’” (133).⁸ Lolita, like Humbert, has her own ideas about what constitutes normal, as opposed to abnormal, sexual behavior. A moment later, Lolita assumes the role of Humbert’s sexual instructor, appalled that he has not had her “normal” experiences. Lolita insists upon “teaching” Humbert, and Humbert interprets Lolita’s apparently precocious knowledge of human sexuality as a mark of “hopeless” depravity caused by “modern co-education” (133).

Lolita’s juvenile sexual experiences, which, for Humbert, are evidences of her “depravity,” can be viewed, in light of such contemporaneous studies as Kinsey’s 1953 *The Sexual Behavior of the Human Female*, as the *normal* sexual awakening and sex play of girls Lolita’s age (barring her experience with Humbert, of course). From Humbert’s perspective, though, it is essential to establish Lolita’s experiences as utterly perverse so that he can feel exonerated from the charge of perverting her; consequently, he uses Lolita’s account of her juvenile sex life to justify his own innocence. She makes explicit sexual confessions to Humbert—talking to him, it seems, almost as one juvenile girl confiding in another. She begins with a tale about a girl named Elizabeth Talbot, Lolita’s tent-mate at a summer camp. Humbert tells us that Elizabeth “instructed her in various manipulations,” an ambiguous experience that Humbert interprets as “sapphic diversions” (136). What is more interesting to Humbert, he tells us, is Lolita’s “heterosexual experience” (136), which he neatly summarizes for us: “Well, the Miranda twins had shared the same bed for years, and Donald Scott, who was the dumbest boy in the school, had done it with Hazel Smith in his uncle’s garage, and Kenneth Knight—who was the

8. Such apparently odd ideas, Eric Rothstein notes, may be a function of the *mélange* of conflicting norms Lolita has absorbed from American culture: “for young Dolores, the real, present world centers on what’s normal and what she therefore accepts as ideally normative. On the other hand, she can’t tell what *is* normal. Dolores’s normality embraces the real real and the unreal real: her small-town life is rouged over by escapist movies, pop songs, and Mom’s affectations” (28).

brightest—used to exhibit himself wherever and whenever he had the chance [...]” (136–37). What we see is that Lolita’s experiences are *not* unique, strange, or exceptional. Sexual experimentation (including homosexual experience and exhibitionism) is here placed, by Lolita, in the context of normal sexual development. Seeing her behavior in context raises the question of whether Lolita is really, as Humbert argues, a specially depraved, fallen child. Humbert denounces the new generation as sexually precocious, compared with his own. And yet looking back on his own exploits with Annabel, we see that he too, like David Knight, exhibited himself; he too, like Charlie Holmes, absconded into the woods to discover his sexuality. So Humbert’s experiences, despite his profession that he is “naïve as only a pervert can be” (25), complement, rather than distinguish themselves from, Lolita’s descriptions of the sex play and encounters of her classmates. Her reference to the Miranda twins is also telling: the allusion to the Shakespearean heroine connects Lolita with a character who is the quintessence of juvenile discovery. Lolita, like Shakespeare’s Miranda, is discovering a brave new world. Her encounters with Charlie are spurred by curiosity, “to try what it was like” (137), and not, as Humbert proposes, by some intrinsic depravity congruent with her status as “nymphet.” By placing Lolita’s “experience” alongside those of her peers, Nabokov begins the process of blurring the clear line Humbert has tried to draw between normal sexual behavior and Lolita’s precocious, deviant, nymph-like sexuality.

In this sense, the novel is like Alfred Kinsey’s reports, which challenged prevailing notions of “deviance” by showing how prevalent and widespread such behavior was among large groups of the American populace—among them, to the shock of the American public, supposedly chaste married women and young, juvenile girls. In a section on “Pre-Adolescent Sexual Development,” for instance, Kinsey reported that “14 per cent of all the females in our sample [...] recalled that they had reached orgasm either in masturbation or in their sexual contacts with other children or older persons [...]” (105). The statistics on “Pre-Adolescent Heterosexual Play” were even more striking: “15 per cent had had sex play only with boys, 18 per cent had had it only with girls, and another 15 per cent had had it with both boys and girls” (108). When viewed in such a context, a pre-adolescent girl’s sexual experimentation with other girls and boys might seem less like special indications of depravity than part of a pattern of sexual activity among a sizable group. Although these and other findings were later called into question and were perhaps compromised by the dubious representativeness of Kinsey’s sample, the popular impact they had made Americans reconsider the question of “normal” sexual behavior. In particular, the reports threatened myths about

sudden “falls” into womanhood and instantaneous “loss of innocence.” It is just such a myth that Humbert creates to justify his exploitation of Lolita.

The process of Lolita’s discovery of her sexuality, not nearly so perverse and unique as Humbert would like to believe, is irreversibly warped by Humbert’s exploitation of her. While Humbert establishes himself as yet another Charlie Holmes, happy that he is not the one to despoil her, he is clearly not just another tentative and “normal” experiment in Lolita’s sexual awakening. Lolita’s fall and perversion begins and ends with Humbert. Humbert takes pains to stigmatize normal social interaction between Lolita and her peers while taking equally great pains to normalize his bizarre exploitation of an innocent by referring to the practice of pedophilia, for example, in ancient Roman and Oriental cultures (124). But while he struggles to establish the cultural relativity of sexual deviance and normality, ordinary juvenile flirtation and courtship constitutes perversion for him—his progressive relativism, we realize, extends to his own bizarre behavior but is denied to Lolita. For example, when it is suggested that he accept and welcome juvenile suitors to his house, his comment is telling: “Welcome fellow, to this bordello” (185). That Lolita slowly *does* learn the clear distinction between her early experiences with others her age and her experience with Humbert is made painfully evident by her fits of crying, which Humbert keeps in the background of his mythical references and re-creations. And because of Humbert’s aggressive appropriation of Lolita’s sexual exploitation and normal awakening into the Edenic myth he constructs, the relative normality of her awakening becomes difficult to distinguish from Humbert’s view of her as a fallen Eve—and yet it is crucial to make this distinction to appreciate how Nabokov’s presentation of Lolita is not the same as Humbert’s. For Lolita, the transition from sexual awakening to sexual perversion and deviance is brief—a transition that Humbert does his best to efface. But Lolita’s short-lived awakening is clearly distinguishable and distinct from Humbert’s assimilation of her experiences into an Edenic myth of a fallen woman.

Humbert’s guilty motives for casting Lolita as a fallen woman make the validity of Edenic myth as a context for what goes on questionable. Is it really Lolita who “seduces” Humbert? Is she really a depraved Eve who beguiles a “naïve,” “helpless” Adam? While Humbert’s perspective dominates the novel, Nabokov suggests another interpretation of Lolita by introducing a scientific, rather than a literary and mythical, view of her sexuality.

The Myth of Science and Female Sexuality

An alternative to Humbert’s interpretation of Lolita as a fallen woman is offered by a pseudo-scientific perspective of female sexuality, expressed in

several places in the novel. While *purely* scientific understandings of the sexuality of the modern woman are consciously parodied by Humbert and Nabokov, it is the reductionist science of John Ray, Jr. and, later, Miss Pratt, that is ridiculed, not the scientific study of female sexuality per se. Nabokov's affinities with Alfred Kinsey, who published the most disturbing scientific expose of female sexuality of his time, just as Nabokov published the most disturbing literary study of female sexuality of that decade, have been duly noted in recent criticism.⁹ That Nabokov was aware of the *type* of studies Kinsey conducted, if not the studies themselves, is made clear by his parodic references to scientific statistics about American sexuality: Humbert's wry citations of sexology statistics evoke the kind of statistical analysis typical of contemporary scientific studies of female sexuality. John Ray, Jr., PhD (the fictional academic who introduces the novel) invokes science and sexology less ironically. At one point, for example, Ray suggests that Humbert, had he sought appropriate psychiatric help, could have averted his fate. Ray even cites statistics about percentages of the population subject to Humbert's disorder, noting that "at least 12% of American adult males—a 'conservative' estimate according to Dr. Blanche Schwarzmänn (verbal communication)—enjoy yearly, in one way or another, the special experience 'H.H.' describes with such despair [...]" (5). Such a statistic was of the sort that shocked American audiences of the Kinsey reports.¹⁰

Alfred Kinsey's initial 1948 report about American male sexuality also marshaled statistics and percentage analyses of sexual behavior to prove that sexual experience and deviancy were more common (and thus more "normal,"

9. David Rampton has suggested a cultural kinship between Kinsey and Nabokov. He notes, "The country had been sensitized to questions regarding female sexuality by the publication of Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* in 1953 [...] the two authors who did so much to outrage conventional mores in America in the 1950s were both mild-mannered family men with a scientific bent and an interest in specific details" (88).

10. In his notes to the novel, Alfred Appel also points out that Nabokov was likely aware of the type of studies Kinsey was conducting. Appel notes, referring to John Ray, Jr.'s citation of statistics about what percentage of the population suffers from Humbert's perversion, "such 'sextistics' (as H.H. or Quilty might call them) poke fun at the work of Alfred Kinsey (1894–1956) and his Indiana University Institute for Sex Research" (324). While Nabokov may "poke fun" at such an approach to human sexuality, it later obliquely comes into play in challenging Humbert's view of Lolita. Such a scientific approach, as I later argue, may distort Lolita, but does so in a way that undercuts the mythical framework that allows Humbert to rationalize his exploitation of her.

or less “deviant”) than a shocked American public was prepared to believe. More importantly, Kinsey went on to reveal similar facts and percentages about sexual behavior among *women* in 1953—a report that, like *Lolita* five years later, caused a great public furor, disturbing, as it did, sacrosanct notions of the purity and relative innocence of American women.

Humbert parodies these kinds of “facts” by utilizing meaningless statistics to rationalize his exploitation of Lolita. Kinsey’s report was similarly criticized and parodied at the time for reducing female sexuality to an animalistic level. And yet this scientific perspective directly contradicts Humbert’s understanding of Lolita: while Humbert attempts to make Lolita’s experience decidedly sinful, casting her as the fallen woman, the scientific interpretation of Lolita’s experience tries to normalize her juvenile experiences with others her age—to acknowledge pre-marital and even pre-pubescent sexual experience, as did Kinsey’s report, as a part of “normal” sexual awakening.

Although Humbert himself invokes scientific evidence about Lolita’s sexual precocity and preparedness for an adult sexual relationship,¹¹ he accepts science as an interpretive context for Lolita only when that view does not suggest that she is a “normal” girl. The principal of the Beardsley school, in which Lolita is briefly enrolled, uses science to tell Humbert what he least wants to hear—that Lolita’s sex play is normal. However, Miss Pratt’s evaluation of Lolita is as ridiculously scientific as Humbert’s is ridiculously romantic. “Dolly Haze,” she says, “is a lovely child, but the onset of sexual maturing seems to give her trouble [...] She is still shuttling [...] between the anal and genital zones of development” (194). Pratt’s stark reduction of Lolita to a case study becomes worse yet, almost as bad as *Humbert’s* reduction of her to literary and mythic types. She says, “[...] we all wonder if anybody in the family has instructed Dolly in the process of mammalian reproduction” (195). Her perspective clearly lies at the opposite end of the interpretive spectrum as Humbert’s: while Lolita hardly fits the role of Eve in Humbert’s Edenic garden, she is certainly more than another case study, as John Ray and Pratt suggest (5), more than part of a mean age of pubescence, and more, ultimately, than physiological drives and “mammalian” needs. Nevertheless, it is this naturalization of the Humbert’s hitherto fay-like Lolita that permits readers to see her for the first time as potentially normal.

11. When it suits his purposes, Humbert is fully capable of invoking sexology to bolster his justification for exploiting Lolita. At one point in the novel, Humbert attempts to assess Lolita’s preparedness for exploitation scientifically by referring to statistical variables, such as chronological age and even geographical climate and temperature, supposed to affect the onset of female pubescence (43, 135).

Mythic and scientific aspects of Lolita’s sexuality clash in Pratt’s conference with Humbert about Lolita’s participation in the school play, entitled *The Hunted Enchanters*.¹² She believes that the play might help Lolita mature normally. “What worries me,” she tells Humbert, “is that both teachers and schoolmates find Dolly antagonistic, dissatisfied, cagey—and everybody wonders why you are so firmly opposed to all the natural recreations of a normal child.”¹³ Humbert bristles at this and replies, wryly, “Do you mean sex play?” Pratt retorts that she is referring to Lolita’s participation in an actual play, not sex play (196). What ensues is an interpretive battle in which Humbert tries to make Lolita’s participation in the play perverse while Pratt tries to establish this as a part of normal social (and sexual) maturation. She replies to Humbert’s connection of a high school play to juvenile sex play briskly: “dramatics, dances and other natural activities are not technically sex play, though girls do meet boys, if that is what you object to” (196). What Humbert objects to is the idea that sex play could be, just like a harmless drama, a method of maturation, and not an indelible mark of Lolita’s depravity. Accordingly, he gives his consent reluctantly: “She can take part in that play. Provided male parts are taken by female parts” (196). The line is brilliantly complex and evocative. In one sense, Humbert will give his permission for *homosexual* sex play as well as Lolita’s participation in a dramatic play—but *heterosexual* sex play is strictly off limits for Lolita. In Humbert’s myth, Lolita’s sexual corruption can be effected only by a man. But Charlie Holmes (the boy Lolita *claims* deflowered her) is not, as Humbert asserts, a “rapist”—but merely another player in the sex play that the modern world seems to accept as a normal part of maturation. Humbert, however, interprets Lolita’s sex play and experimental sexual experience as signs of an irreversible and monumental fall that justifies his own *truly* perverse sexual exploitation of her. In Humbert’s struggle to establish normal juvenile experimentation and sex play as deviant, and in Miss Pratt’s emphasis on the normality of Lolita’s development, Nabokov dramatizes a sudden inversion of “normal” and

12. The name of the play is interesting. Lolita is falling into the grip of the author of the play, Clare Quilty. Quilty, like Humbert, also casts her, literally, in a mythical role. Quilty, truly deviant, like Humbert, utilizes myth to pervert Lolita.

13. For all the fun Nabokov has with the jargon-spouting Pratt, her objection is a rare moment in the novel where we are provided with a different perspective of Lolita—one that readers can adopt without also swallowing Pratt’s theoretical foundation for such a notion, which involves a *mélange* of Freudian psychology and liberal ideas of modern “co-education,” something Humbert earlier says is responsible for Lolita’s “hopeless” depravity.

“deviant” sexuality—an inversion that is the interpretive consequence of exchanging Humbert’s mythological perspective for Pratt’s scientific one.

At the end of the novel, Humbert describes how he finds Lolita after years of searching. Although he expects to find her ruined by her own innate deviance and Clare Quilty’s perversion of her, he unexpectedly finds Lolita married and pregnant—a typical housewife. Nabokov slyly presents readers with a portrait of normalcy that is undercut by the reader’s knowledge of Lolita’s supposedly deviant history. Humbert’s interpretation of Lolita’s sexuality is defied or spoiled by the way Lolita is able to escape his invocation of Edenic myth. At the novel’s close, she is the quintessential American housewife, and Humbert’s disappointment is palpable. He notes her modern aspect with a note of romantic despair, facing Lolita in an utterly domestic setting:

Couple of inches taller. Pink-rimmed glasses. New, heaped-up hairdo, new ears. How simple! The moment, the death I had kept conjuring up for three years was as simple as a bit of dry wood. She was frankly and hugely pregnant. Her head looked smaller [...] and her pale-freckled cheeks were hollowed, and her bare shins and arms had lost all their tan, so that the little hairs showed. She wore a brown, sleeveless cotton dress and sloppy felt slippers. (269)

The picture of homely domesticity in the new Schiller household is unsettling to Humbert. Why isn’t Lolita reaping the ruin of the fallen, deviant woman rather than leading a stereotypically “decent” life? Nabokov not only challenges Humbert’s understanding of Lolita as intrinsically deviant, but also interrogates myths about spotless, “normal,” married women. Like Alfred Kinsey’s 1953 report, Nabokov’s novel uncovers the supposedly “deviant” past behind the apparent normality of the all-American housewife. Lolita’s supposed deviance leads not to a squalid life of pornography, prostitution, or exploitation, but, ironically enough, to a normal life as a housewife in American suburbia. Such a twist, a deviation from the expected corruption or downfall of the deviant woman, was more than enough to disturb American audiences—unaccustomed, perhaps, in the 1950s, to see the hitherto clear boundary between deviance and normalcy dissolved and flipped back and forth like a reversible figure that depends on the viewer’s preconceptions.

Influential feminist critics, unfortunately, have failed to recognize the way *Lolita* attacks the ways men, in particular, impose the label of “deviance” on female sexual experience. Instead, most confuse Humbert’s perspective with Nabokov’s, grouping *Lolita* with other patently misogynistic classics. Linda Kauffman, for example, connects the novel with “certain stories of Edgar Allen Poe” (65). But Lolita’s anti-climactic and anti-romantic appearance as an

ordinary housewife shows up Humbert's allegories of Lolita for the false myths they are and disturbs simple distinctions between "deviant" and "normal" sexual behavior. Humbert's mythical framework presents Lolita as a sexual deviant who perverts a supposedly "innocent" pedophile. But the novel questions the ability of myth to assess modern female sexuality and morality, essentially interrogating the line drawn between the "deviant" behavior of dangerous women and the "normal" behavior of "good" ones.¹⁴ In this sense, the novel is as much a part of *feminism* as it is of modernism.

Indeed, affinities between Nabokov and contemporary feminist critics are stronger than might appear after a first reading of *Lolita*. These critics are re-examining and questioning the validity of myths about archetypal women. Nina Baym, at the vanguard of this movement, has looked at the way *women* writers rewrite myths about women.¹⁵ Meredith Powers and Dana Heller have discussed how misogynist myths can be *reinterpreted* (as well as rewritten) from a feminist viewpoint. Powers asks, for example, why Eve is traditionally a villain for stealing divine knowledge, while Prometheus is just as traditionally seen as a hero for the same theft. Heller makes similar points about Psyche.¹⁶ By challenging Humbert's mythical and literary interpretation(s) of Lolita's sexual awakening, Nabokov, like contemporary feminist critics, rewrites and reinterprets myths about female sexuality, "deviance," and "normalcy." In exposing the ways in which Humbert uses myth to establish Lolita's sexuality as "deviant," ironically considering his own perversion of her "innocent," Nabokov shows how the arbitrary concepts of "deviance"

14. Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* presents four distinct interpretations of the troubling sexuality of Candace Compson. Quentin Compson interprets Caddy's sexuality or sexual experience by the standards of a dying chivalric code. Like Faulkner, Nabokov provides different, competing epistemologies for understanding the puzzling or enigmatic sexuality of a girl whose voice, like Caddy's, is largely muted in the narrative.

15. Baym notes that a woman might not write a female character, for example, so easily into a male myth that equates women with virgin land. "If women portray themselves as brides and mothers it will not be in terms of the mythic landscape. If a woman puts a female construction on nature—as she certainly must from time to time, given the archetypal female resonance of the image—she is likely to write of it as more active or to stress its destruction or violation" (78–79).

16. Powers, in addition to analyzing traditional understandings of Eve, discusses misogynist readings of Daphne, Psyche, Pandora, and Helen (128–35). Dana Heller, in *The Feminization of Quest-Romance*, discusses how Psyche, while traditionally read as "exemplifying insatiable feminine curiosity," can be reinterpreted as the questing heroine (23).

and “normalcy” can be used as a means of manipulation—and exploitation.

Nabokov utilizes both scientific and mythical contexts for the events and characters of *Lolita*, although the mythical context is dominant. By satirizing both Humbert’s romantic, mythical construction of Lolita and the scientific view of Lolita as a statistic who exhibits normal characteristics of “mammalian” sexual development in the human female, Nabokov suggests the inadequacies of conflicting ways of knowing Lolita. *Lolita* has sometimes been criticized as a misogynist work. But just as contemporary feminist critics such as Baym, Powers, and Heller highlight the ways myths are used to stigmatize and belittle women, so Nabokov reveals the damage that a misogynist myth can inflict on a young woman. The new field of sexology and surveys of a wide array of sexual behavior and a general mid-century change in the way human sexuality was being viewed allowed Nabokov to provide readers with an interpretation of Lolita’s behavior that differed radically from Humbert’s. Throughout the novel, this scientific view of Lolita breaks through in subtle ways during key lapses in Humbert’s rationalization of his exploitation of Lolita. Clearly, though, Nabokov points up the way a scientific approach dehumanizes as well as “normalizes” young women like Lolita: Miss Pratt’s normalization of Lolita’s behavior involves understanding “mammalian reproduction” and Freudian phases; and John Ray’s conservative estimate of the percentage of the population afflicted with Humbert’s malady reduces both Humbert and Lolita to statistics. But it is the Kinseyan moments in the novel (those few in which Lolita’s sexual activity is seen in the context of her peers) that expose the distorting effects of Humbert’s mythologizing of Lolita—moments in which the muted suggestion that Lolita is in fact “normal” despite her sexual experiments with her peers makes Humbert Humbert’s exploitation of her even more repulsive. Instead of participating in or perpetuating misogynist myths about female sexuality, then, Nabokov’s *Lolita* exposes them for their elision of the person behind the sexuality so boldly on display. That many critics have adopted, and perhaps still adopt, Humbert’s mythological framework for viewing Lolita is perhaps not surprising given the fact that Humbert’s perspective suffuses the novel. But Humbert’s is not the only “angle of vision”; and recognizing the way Nabokov parodically deploys a burgeoning new scientific perspective of human sexuality that boldly “normalized” acts that are considered deviant in Humbert’s misogynistic mythology opens up a new perspective of both Lolita and Humbert—one which exposes the complicity of myth and romantic literature in the sexual exploitation of innocents like Lolita.¹⁷ Nabokov said, in writing about

17. Eric Rothstein has noted that *Lolita* seems to condemn literary devices that abstract individuals from reality and lift them into a realm of spirit. He

the novel, "I detest symbols and allegories (which is due partly to my old feud with Freudian voodooism and partly to my loathing of generalizations devised by literary mythicists and sociologists)" (314). *Lolita* shows us that the roots of such detestation lie in the way allegories and symbols allow Humbert (a bona fide "literary mythicist") to turn Lolita into an abnormal sexual deviant deserving or inviting exploitation. Although the new science of sex is ultimately ridiculed by the novel, it nonetheless is one source of the feminist statement Nabokov makes about the connection of myth to misogyny.

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notes, "From myths of courtly love to Wagnerian surges and spasms, romantic tradition honors cruelty. It adulates possessive violence, false consciousness, and debasement as—what else?—those wild fin-de-siècle norms, the ecstatic, the Dionysiac, the compulsive. Humbert, then, is quite normal, but in accord with a norm to which few prefer to appeal" (39). Rothstein argues, generally, that while Nabokov condemns the romantic/decadent mode by which Humbert aestheticizes Lolita, he advocates a kind of genuine "aesthetic bliss" that occurs when readers see the intrinsic beauty of people such as Lolita, rather than imposing some symbolic or allegorical worth upon them. Such a perspective, though, is not as readily available as the scientific one forwarded by Pratt and Ray—which, while parodied by Nabokov, does move readers towards considering Lolita from a perspective radically opposed to what Rothstein identifies as Humbert's fin-de-siècle vantage.

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