

Lolita, “the most mythopoeic nymphet”

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Humbert’s “most mythopoeic nymphet” (186/211) belongs to Nabokov’s mythological system: from the beginning of his narrator’s Confession, he made him utter “by word of mouth¹” a story whose opening word was the heroine’s name almost chanted like a magic formula as if to give her shape and life. He managed to create this life-impression so well that *Lolita* seems to be deeply rooted in reality, hence the confusion between representation² and reality which many critics started and encouraged, to finally engage in waging a moral war against the publication of such an indecent book written by such a dirty old pervert. But like all great myths, *Lolita* survived.

I decided to dwell on the mythical dimension of this fictional figure to explain how it became a paradigm, and my demonstration will rest on the following proposition: in order to satisfy his pathological obsessions and fantasies, Humbert fabricates in his fancy a perverted being, Lolita, based on the portrait of a rather commonplace American teenager, Dolly Haze. Lolita has almost all the characteristics of a mythical figure since, in many respects, she belongs to a supernatural, or at least “supra-human” world, and her love story with Humbert is not meant to ring “true”, despite what all moralizers pretended. Moreover, Humbert’s narrative is largely concerned with explanations about how Lolita came to exist, which recalls the way myths, which are always concerned with creation, are made up. So what type of mythical figure is represented in Nabokov’s *Lolita*?

From the outset, Humbert deliberately mixes up story, the written discourse and its enunciation, thus his logorrhea-like technique reveals and gives shape to his obsession, and also reflects the obsessive pursuit of his destiny. Moreover, his narrative pattern corresponds to the way myths, which can be regarded as the meeting of man with the supernatural causes of his fate, are built up: myth and literary myth rest on a symbolical organization which is meant to create sensitive reactions in a large audience. Nevertheless, Humbert-the-narrator’s troubled wording of facts and feelings may be prone to alter the myth as it is being made up when

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1. In Greek, *muthos* means “anything uttered by word of mouth” and it refers to a story involving supernatural or supra-human beings. It explains how something came to exist and embodies feeling and concept.
 2. I am not thinking of representation in terms of imitation, but as creation since mimesis can be worked out through the transposition in signs of elements of life.

Humbert-the-protagonist attempts to draw this mythical creature out of the frame of his fancy to make her his; in this process, little girl and fantasy merge to lure the pervert, as all the mirror effects met with in the book can attest. This trap is set for non-astute readers in order to catch them in and create this amalgamation between fictional character and person of flesh and blood. An impulse which has never been checked and which accounts for the fact that Lolita has now become such a paradigmatic figure that her name, after having been diverted from its original referent, belongs to everyday language and is used in magazines and advertisements and can be said to be part of the mythical world of modern mass culture. But Lolita has not been turned into a concept yet, since no derivative forms of her name exist, like “Quixotic” for instance. At some point, her creator may have been tempted by such a future for her since he did make up some derivative forms which can be found at the end of his 1959 diary¹ like “Lolitnik”, “Cosmololitan” or “Lolitapop”. More than anything else, these reflect the inventive strain which has always prompted him and which illustrates particularly well the role Lolita was meant to play: she was to be nothing like a pale reflection of life. Moreover, the name “Lolita” is also used as autotextual references in *Ada* and *Pale Fire*².

All in all, we can say that Lolita’s paradigmatic value, even though it was born from a rather reductive alteration of the original, warping the character’s personality and limiting it to the needs of the users of her name, is fundamentally poetic. It is based on antonomasia, a stylistic figure which turns proper names, usually issued from Greek mythology or classical literature, into common nouns, endowing them with a meaning restrained to a specific trait of character or behaviour³. Such an archetypal restriction of Lolita does not correspond to the undeniable complexity of this multifaceted personage known as Dolores Haze, Dolly, Lo, Lola, Dolita and Lolita according to the various aspects she presents. Moreover, one must keep in mind that Lolita’s complex nature has reached us after having been filtered through Humbert’s deranged mind and it is very perilous to try and define human idiosyncracies through both the manifestation of an obsession and fiction. In other words, Dolly Haze, the representation of an American teenage-girl is not Lolita and an ocean—perhaps the one Humbert has to cross in his attempt to recover his “kingdom by sea”—seems to separate the so much adored name from the object of desire.

1. Vladimir Nabokov Archives, Montreux, Suisse. I would like to thank Dmitri Nabokov for granting me access to the Archives and allowing me to use this information.
2. *Ada*, Part One, ch. 2, 19: “I had gone to my aunt’s ranch near Lolita, Texas.”
Pale Fire, “Pale Fire”, Canto Three, lines 679-680, 49: “It was a year of Tempests: Hurricane/ Lolita swept from Florida to Maine.”
3. Like “un Harpagon” for a miser or “a Casanova” for a womanizer.

In having taken hold of this name, the collective unconscious has extracted it from the novelistic-poetical world of words to which it originally belonged to finally lock it in the prison of words of our trivial modern world. If Humbert sometimes repeats the name like a chant, probably in the hope of making the object of his desire appear in his "tombal jail" (109/123) to soothe the torturous pain her absence causes his body, he can also disembody her when he prefers to obliterate the object of his sin, only to keep a written trace of her and transform his offence into a virtual crime: "Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!" (32/33). In these two examples, the narrator takes precedence over the protagonist, but the plot situation cannot be by-passed. In the first instance, when Humbert writes the word "Lolita" nine times¹, we have reached a decisive point in the story: he has not possessed her physically yet, but he is about to fetch little Lo (Charlotte's favorite diminutive) after her mother's death at Camp Q. Then he can already make out in his mind, as if in a dream, the creature he yearns after when he declares: "I could of course visualize Lolita with hallucinational lucidity" (107/121), and this is why he can buy his nymphet the adequate wardrobe in a very adequate store since it has the "touch of the mythological and the enchanted" (108/122). All in all, the structure of Humbert's narrative enclosed between John Ray's Foreword and Nabokov's Afterword, and the mode of its writing with its flights of lyricism initiated by and concluding on Lolita's name form a loop in the verbal chain of which this little American girl appears to be tied up.

This technique, which consists in sealing off the confession with a word—the heroine's name in this case—places enunciation in the foreground, showing that it is sound and sense-productive, but also renders Lolita more immaterial because it shuts her up in a world where only poetico-lexical games matter. All this probably aiming at toning down the sordidness of little Dolly Haze's story. Humbert's opening litany invites the reader to follow its movement and hear its complicated rhythm like music borne by a rather irregular swell, enhancing the narrator's intentions: to have the reader be carried away by the sounds of his lover's name because at this early stage in the story the girl cannot be understood yet. This flux can even become overwhelming in crucial and uncontrollable moments as when Humbert sees Lolita for the first time: "then, without the least warning, a blue sea-wave swelled under my heart" (39/41), an experience which almost repeats Albert Albinus's death at the end of *Laughter in the Dark* after his young mistress has shot at him, and which might be read

1. Her name is repeated nine times in Part I, ch. 26: nine, as thrice three, is representative of plural perfection and may be evocative of all the potentialities Lolita represents. She could be the nine muses or the nine orders of angels all in herself.

as a forerunner of danger: "That blue, blue wave [...] [c]oming, coming, coming to drown me. There it is. How it hurts. I can't breathe¹..."

Henceforth, *Lolita* cannot really correspond to the antonomastic device which attributes only one meaning to the proper name: Humbert-the-narrator endows her with so many enticing characteristics that one cannot be enough to transform Lolita, the nymphet, into "a Lolita"—a word that covers too wide a range of meanings, going from seduction to vulgarity or from venality to sadism. What most people call "a Lolita" can only be the result of over-simplification, and it is on this that the problem of her having attained a mythical dimension rests: she cannot have become this figure thanks only to the magical power of the six letters which make her name. Yet one has to admit that *the myth is a word* if we trust etymology as Roland Barthes does in his essay *Mythologies*, a statement to which he adds: "The myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way it is uttered²." *Lolita* can be read with this interpretation of myth in mind since it is a confession in which enunciation has allowed Humbert's erratic thought to be organized as a written discourse around the immutable Lolita figure which has then become the absolute referent of his enunciation. Barthes's semiological theory based on the interrelation of signifier, signified and sign may, in certain respects, correspond to Nabokov's "Interreaction of Inspiration and Combination" (311/353), aiming, like Barthes's system, at forming a system of their own. Nabokov developed this idea in the article he wrote for the *Saturday Review* in 1972, entitled "Inspiration", in which not only does he describe the successive stages of inspiration and the way they interreact to make the ideal combination on paper, but also compares inspiration to "a nubile muse³" who accompanies the author. His demonstration largely shows that all this process pertains more to the unreal and to magic than to the real. And when Nabokov, on the one hand, tries to analyze inspiration, and, on the other hand, admits in his Afterword to *Lolita* that with his formula he "sounds like a conjurer explaining one trick by performing another" (311/353), he comes closer to the triangular situation presented by Barthes who defines myth as a kind of juggling with words and concepts⁴. In addition, the conjurer's

1. *Laughter in the Dark*, 291-2.

2. My translation. *Mythologies*, 193.

3. *Strong Opinions*, 308-14.

4. When Barthes maintains that "the myth is a particular system because it establishes itself from a semiologic chain which already existed before it" (Barthes, 199, my translation), he means that signifier and signified are on an equal footing and both refer to myth. The signifier is both the final term of a linguistic system providing meaning and the initial term of a mythical system providing form, whereas the signified is a concept, and sign provides significance. In this triangular interreaction between form (an abstract notion almost emptied of its initial meaning, now ready to accept its new significance), concept (a concrete but open notion, not

trick metaphor can apply indifferently to Nabokov's method and myth-making: in both cases original objects, which serve as medium, are spirited away to leave room for a new object. When Humbert tries to replace Dolly Haze by Lolita he both tries to conjure up the creature of his dreams—that has kept nourishing his obsession and, henceforth, the literary creation we are reading—and makes a myth. Unfortunately, his story comes to a dead end when, after having attempted to spirit away Dolly Haze to make Lolita appear, Humbert finally discovers that his creature has effectively disappeared in Elphinstone never to come back to him, whatever reading of the end of the story we choose to do. In point of fact, the personage he meets at the end in Coalmont is Dolly, not Lolita. Confusion is born from the ambiguous relation between the object, its representation and the words used to make up this mythical image. As a consequence, we may wonder what this nymphic image presented to us is.

I think it manifests itself under various forms issuing from Humbert's reinterpretation of ancestral myths. When Charlotte mentions her daughter to Humbert for the first time saying: "That was my Lo [...] and these are my lilies" (40/43), she spontaneously quotes together her girl and the emblem of purity, which happens also to be the flower of love¹. But the narrator's discourse goes further. Humbert being bilingual, the homophony between Lo and the French word for "water" cannot have escaped him and it may help justify all the working of his fancy and the link already established between little Lo, Annabel Leigh, his first love, and Edgar Allan Poe's Annabel Lee². Moreover, the word "Lilies" may be a variation on the name of the female demon "Lilith", sometimes called "Lilis", an ambiguous creature already mentioned by Humbert, the narrator, when he was trying to define the nature of the protagonist's obsession: "Humbert was perfectly capable of intercourse with Eve, but it was Lilith he longed for" (20/19). The analogy between the appeal Lolita exerts on him and his seemingly natural attraction for Lilith is rather troubling. It is all the more disturbing when related to Nabokov's 1928 poem "Lilith", and the warning to the

only limited to a specific image or set of images that has to be appropriated to gain its mythical value) and significance (an association of form and concept on which myth rests), significance is not obtained after having hidden or obliterated former signs but through warping them. Hence its being rather uncontrollable and its depending on ambiguity as it alternates between the original meaning of the signifier and its form, between object and image.

1. Song of Solomon 2:16: "My beloved is mine, and I am his: he feedeth among the lilies." 4:5: "Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies."
2. "All I want to stress is that my discovery of her was a fatal consequence of that 'princedom by the sea' in my tortured past" (40/42). It should also be noted that Humbert's "Confession", like Poe's poem, is a posthumous work: John Ray warns us that the manuscript he has edited can only be published after the death of the two protagonists of this story; Poe's poem, which evokes a young girl in her sepulchre, was published two days after the poet's death, on October 9th, 1849.

readers the author thought advisable to add at the end of the English version of the poem at the time of its publication, some forty years later: "Intelligent readers will abstain from examining this impersonal fantasy for any links with my later fiction¹." This can only incite us to watch more closely for similitudes between the two fictional characters and the Biblical Lilith².

In Hebrew, Lilith only explicitly appears in Isaiah 34:14, an apocalyptic poem about the destruction of Edom, "where she is a female demon associated with night and storm, one of a host of unclean and ghoulish creatures inhabiting the ruins and waste places to which Edom will be reduced by God's vengeance." Etymologically speaking, the word derives from the Sumerian "lil" (meaning "wind" or "spirit"). Folk tradition linked it to the Hebrew "laylah" ("night"), whereas in Akkadian she is the female counterpart of "lilu", "lilita" or "ardatlili" who stole light. "In Mesopotamian texts she is a succuba, sporting with men in sexual dreams", and this image has an echo in Lolita whose body obsesses Humbert's night dreams and fantasies, and who is once said to have: "the body of some immortal daemon disguised as a female child" (139/157), making of Humbert her victim, whereas elsewhere "Humbert the Cubus schemed and dreamed" (71/79) to try and be closer to her world. To go on with the definition of Lilith and its echoes in the text, we could also connect the fact that "Aramaic incantation bowls of the 6th century show her with disheveled hair and tell how she can be bound with iron³" and Humbert's discourse which keeps trying to tie her up in his verbal grip. Lilith is finally identified as the "first Eve" in the Alphabet of Ben Sira, "created from the earth at the same time as Adam", founding this theory on Genesis 1:27: "so God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them", whereas the creation of man traditionally originates in Genesis 2:21-23⁴. In all traditions, Lilith is an evil and destructive character whose charms cannot be resisted, and in this respect she belongs to the larger folklore of supernatural beings prompted by a forceful hunger for revenge ensnaring men to their fall: this is exactly how Humbert tries to make us see Lolita, whom he deems responsible for his fall and his crime. He keeps repeating that he fell prey to a compulsive attraction for demon

1. *Poems and Problems*, 50-5.

2. I would like to thank Professor Leona Toker from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel, for her precious advice and documents.

3. *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, 454-5.

4. "And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; / and the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. / And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man."

girls after having met "a certain initial girl-child. In a principdom by the sea" (9/7) and "espied a demon child, *'enfant charmante et fourbe'*", (20/19). Not only does he try to assuage his pulsions with her, but he wants us to believe that he is trying to relive Man's primitive experience in Creation, as if he were himself creating his own myth. When Humbert is overcome by his first vision of Lolita, water metaphors abound to recall the "enchanted island" he has been heading for, but they also complement Charlotte's depiction of the scene. To think of Lilith in this context may seem rather inappropriate since she is systematically associated with images of arid and sterile land, but when Humbert beholds her for the first time, his "lips [are] like sand" (40/43), in other words, he is described as if he were in one of Lilith's favorite haunts and already in need of Lo/"l'eau". What is more, in some old versions of the Bible, Lilith has sometimes been translated by "siren", probably as the word was evocative of a seductive and fateful creature and therefore, more readily understandable for readers who were not familiar with this Hebrew figure¹. Altogether, the bewitching nature of this creature wins over any other and its devilish dimension bridges the gap between religious and profane traditions, between legendary being and lovely human seductress.

A few lines of Nabokov's poem, "Lilith", suffice to draw a parallel with Lolita, and its never having been published "in any of the sedate *émigré* periodicals of the time²" proves its subject was as delicate as *Lolita's* and could only be published once its author had gained the fame that enabled him to thwart critics. After his death, the poet, who believes to be in Paradise, recognizes the original woman in the guise of a girl-child: "there stood a naked little girl./ She had a water lily in her curls/and was graceful as a woman..." She seems to be born of water, like Botticelli's Venus (who happens to appear three times in *Lolita* to illustrate Humbert's vision of his nymphet³) and he attempts to rejoin her, not in her sepulchre like Poe's lover, but to meet her in the flesh in his Paradise⁴. But after having seduced and swallowed the poet, she expels him and, like Onan in the Bible and

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1. In his French translation of the Bible (a Jansenist version, based on the Vulgate and also known as *Bible de Port-Royal*), Le Maître de Sacy (1613-1684) tries to find meaningful fantastic equivalents for words that otherwise would make no sense, insisting on the supernatural stance, but also finding his inspiration in Greek mythology. For Isaiah 34:14, he proposes: "Les démons et les onocentaures s'y rencontreront, et les satyres y jeteront des cris les uns aux autres. C'est là que la sirène se retire; c'est où elle trouve son repos."
 2. *Poems and Problems*, 55.
 3. "I simply love that tinge of Botticellian pink, that raw rose about the lips, those wet, matted eyelashes;" (64/71); "how much she looked—had always looked—like Botticelli's russet Venus—the same soft nose, the same blurred beauty" (270/308); "He had cupped her Florentine breasts" (274/312).
 4. "[...] And with a wild/lunge of my loins I penetrated/into an unforgotten child."

Humbert in the sofa-scene of *Lolita*, he wastes his semen, a crime for which he has to pay in Hell¹. The link Lilith entertains with tradition in Nabokov's 1928 poem is to be found in her staunch fierceness and her devilish mood; and despite Nabokov's warning, Lilith bears similarities with Lolita: a host of explicit references to the mythical figure of this enticing female demon looking like a water nymph connect her to Humbert's nymphet. Above all, most allusions are supported in the narrator's discourse by a wealth of subtly interwoven metaphors which enrich the myth as they adapt it to the contemporary American environment of the story, while foregrounding Humbert's "nympholepsy"—an illness befalling men enraptured by "nymphanacy". But what exactly does it correspond to?

Nympholepsy can be defined as "a state of frenzy that was believed to seize any man who looked at a nymph²" and in *Lolita* enunciation echoes the nympholeptic myth developed in the story, projecting it in the text. Moreover, if the nymphet Humbert-the-narrator describes is, in certain respects, quite close to Ronsard's little nymph commended in *Les Amours*³, she can also be said to belong to his fancy for nymphs, and the definition he proposes early in the book quite aptly reflects the traditional image of the enchantress: "maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human but nymphic (that is demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as 'nymphet'" (16/15). This idea is constantly undermined by the linguistic meaning of the word "nymph", which designates the most defenseless being in Creation, a stage all insects have to go through before reaching their mature, or "adult" form. Nabokov was quite well aware of this, and deliberately played on the ambiguity: in the novel none of these characters ever reaches adulthood. Why then are they all condemned to disappear? Precisely because the next stage in their development is what Humbert loathes most; this is why he prefers to dwell on what he loves and makes him mad: his nymph-fancy.

In *Lolita*, if the nymphet's demoniac and enticing nature and her vulnerability recurrently come to the forefront, her belonging to the aquatic world is certainly as important⁴. It evokes all the legends implying mermaids and water nymphs, among which the Russalka myth amply

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1. "Writhing with agony I spilled my seed/and knew abruptly that I was in Hell."
 2. Webster's dictionary definition.
 3. "Petite nymphe folâtre/Nymphette que j'idolâtre/Ma mignonne, dont les yeux/Logent mon pis et mon mieux." Cassandre, to whom Ronsard had dedicated his first book of *Les Amours*, was only thirteen when he was in love with her at twenty. This collection of sonnets is quoted from in "*adori d'amoureuse langueur*" (214/243).
 4. Water-related elements are developed in two publications of mine: "Comme un reflet dans Lo" and *Lolita, un royaume au-delà des mers*.