

The Elitist Scholar and the Unpretentious Teenager Building Consumer Identity in V. Nabokov's *Lolita*

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Abstract

Developing upon George Ritzer's research that eventually everything and anything has a potential to become a commodity up for basic consumption (Ritzer, 2003), this research paper will explore the various consumption patterns of the self-proclaimed scholar (Humbert Humbert) in contrast to those of the young (Lolita) In V. Nabokov's novel, *Lolita*. The two main characters (Lolita and Humbert Humbert) manage to construct their respective identities by aid of their consumption patterns. Lolita stands as a young person that conforms to the standard of what one might expect from a mid-twentieth-century adolescent. On the other hand, Humbert Humbert always positions himself in contrast to the mainstream current, as he identifies with the concept of the outsider looking in, standing for a corrupted and decadent old Europe. He chooses to differentiate himself from the trivialities of the mainstream mostly uneducated society. This comes to contradict Lolita's tendencies for fitting in and conforming with the given norm. The consumption patterns displayed within the narrative offer an insight on the power struggles between Lolita's inclination towards the low-brow popular culture and Humbert Humbert's blatant disregard of it. The presentation will analyze the consumerist patterns of the two characters and discuss the clash between them, which actually represents a clash between generations.

Keywords: Consumption Patterns, Consumerism, Consumer Identity.

Introduction

Power struggles found a way to thrive and develop prevailing always as an important topic for scholarly research. The power struggles chartered an important topic for scientific research as they stand at the basis of the distinction process, that individuals so yearn for. Culture and other similar concepts, that might indicate an individual's elitist heritage/background shall prove beneficial as a starting point for the current quest for identity. Scholarly research pertaining to The Frankfurt School advanced on the distinction between high and low culture. Withing this school of thought, Adorno and Horkheimer (The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception, 1947) coin terms such as "high" and "low culture", "culture industry" and "mass culture". Ensuing this obvious distinction, they managed to ascribe to American culture the characteristic of pertaining to a lower category (100). One might be inclined to draw the conclusion

that scholarly research illustrated that individuals are segregated within this distinction, pertaining either to the upper or lower category.

Within this dissociative system, individuals chose to identify themselves inside the range of this pre-established binary system: by choosing either category, as they deem fitting. Due to this fervent desire to fit in within the boundaries of a certain group of desired peers, individuals started either emulating the upper-classes, the lower ones, or specific non-mainstream niched groups of individuals. This particular line of research stemmed from earlier scholarly endeavors, particular to the nineteen century, when scholars like the American economist Thorstein Veblen (The Theory of the Leisure Class, 1899) brought to the attention of the scientific community the concept of the "leisure-class". His research also focused on distinction, as some individuals

chose to identify and emulate the upper-classes (deemed the leisure-class due to their predisposition to leisure activities as they had time at their disposal).

Although, some individuals did elect to accept their status quo as pertaining to the lower working-classes. In trying to showcase how these individuals desired to identify with their selected peers, Veblen's research further focuses on their consumption practices. Afterwards, he states that "the motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation [...] The possession of wealth confers honor, it is an invidious distinction. Nothing equally cogent can be said for the consumption of goods, nor for any other conceivable incentive to acquisition, and especially not for any incentive to the accumulation of wealth" (Veblen 59).

Advancing towards the Twentieth Century, George Ritzer (*The Globalization of Nothing*, 2003) studied the later effects of consumerism and noted that everything can be construed as a consumption good. Conventionally, individuals would not think of medicine or education as consumption goods. But presently there are more and more individuals who consider, and adopt a consumeristic attitude towards these fields (232-233).

The Unpretentious Adolescent

As any customary individual that is susceptible to the consumeristic manipulations, Lolita, maybe even more so than usual as she is a developing teenager, truly takes to heart everything she reads, or sees advertised in popular culture medium. Fashion-wise she also takes to heart and internalizes the advice received from popular magazines. Even more so, she is attracted to any gift shop that she sees on roadside signs. Expanding on this line of thought, one might choose to address to Humbert Humbert, who describes the person to whom popular culture is closest and whom it affects most: a twelve-year-old who falls prey to everything consumeristic-oriented: "novelties and souvenirs' simply entranced her by their trochaic lilt." Simple things like "ice cold Drinks" enchanted her, even if, as Humbert states, every single drink was always cold (194).

Humbert manages to portray Lolita as a typical adolescent, at the same time permitting that his elitist nature surface: "she it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster." (195) Due to him succumbing to societal elitist rigors by placing himself above his Lolita (who is a mere teenager affected by consumeristic-induced manipulation) showcases his desire to present himself as someone who is above such trivialities. An avid consumer of almost everything with an advertisement, Lolita would be "charmed" even by the facilities signs (200). What adolescent would not be? Even more so, Humbert deems Lolita an avid reader of movie magazines, an expert in dream-slow close-ups" [61].

Thus, she transforms into the perfect representation of the late 1950s-1960s teenager. Even her manner of dress is compliant to the fashion of the times: when going to a birthday party Lolita is presented wearing a „full-skirted gingham frock" and a „black ready-made bow" [61]. Furthermore, during their long road trip Lolita comports herself as a usual teenager, the sorts which dresses the part of a fashionable young individual, that normally undergoes some leisure activity like skating, she is presented: "blue jeans and white high-shoes, as most of the other

girls" (209).

Power Relations: Scholarly Elitism and the "How-To" Guides of Outsmarting a Twelve-Year-Old

Lolita's addictive personality would be (and turns out to be) of aid to Humbert whom finds different ways to subdue her by means of her consumeristic-oriented behavior. Due mainly to her consumeristic orientations, that make her a creature of urban dwellings (as advertisements and other consumeristic-oriented activities develop in the city), she has an innate fear of the wilderness, of the solitude, of forests, of anything that cannot fall into the predictability of mass-production like for example: the aversion towards the family farmhouse in the Appalachians where she spent a rainy summer when she was younger (195).

Taking advantage of such fears, Humbert constantly threatens that they will move there if not for her changing her attitude towards him. Other means of taking control over Lolita are found in his terrorizing her in order for Lolita to be afraid to go to the police and admit that she was taken advantage of. If she were to do that she will find herself in the hands of the Department of Public Welfare, and they will take away all that is left from her previously enjoyed consumeristic life: they "will take away your lipstick and fancy clothes." (197)

The Scholarly Snubs

Falling in line with the beliefs entertained by the Frankfurt School, Humbert often frowns upon the joys brought forth by popular culture. Every chance he has, he critiques/ snubs the choices Lolita makes: whether of her choice in reading material, her choice of starstruck fandom, or her choice of clinging to advertisements. When he buys a present for his stepdaughter, for her dreaded thirteen birthday he chooses a deluxe volume of *The Little Mermaid* by H.C. Anderson. This volume is illustrated with "commercially 'beautiful' illustrations" (225).

Believing himself a scholar, Humbert frequently tries to improve Lolita's habitus, which he often fails. During the time of her birthday, he decides to gift her a bicycle and a volume of *The History of Modern and American Painting*, which leads him to bitterly conclude that "[his] attempt to refine her pictorial taste was a failure" due to her rather naïve interests (260).

Their "On the Road" – Type Adventure

"We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing." (227) is a statement that defines this consumerist-fueled year-long quest. It follows the usual patterns of tourist attractions, tourist consumption, lodging in cheap motels, and off-the-grid restaurants, it thrives in the anonymity it offers. During their time on the road, and due to the fact that they did not stay in a particular place for very long, individuals do not notice a middle-aged man and his teenager. In not leaving a mark they thrive in the resulted anonymity. Just as mass-produced goods offer the consumer the tranquil characteristic of its predictable nature, so does this mass-produced tourism offer and subdue to the particular patterns of predictability. It is very interesting to notice that the commodification transposes even to tourist attractions, which could be seen as places one might choose to stop at, but without anything of substantial meaning to them.

Lolita vs. Humbert

Lolita is young, comes from a fairly simple middle-class single-parent American family, and has little traditional education. On the other hand, H.H. comes from a very well-off family of European descent (Swiss, French, and Austrian), owners of a “luxurious hotel on the Rivera”, whose precursors sold “wine, jewels and silk” (10). This juxtaposition is obvious from the very beginning of the novel in question. It is not only their age that makes them stand out as very different from each other, but it is also their cultural background.

Having a fairly happy and healthy childhood, surrounded by sea vistas, clean sand, colorful books (his first immersion into consumerism), and orange trees lead Humbert to flourish at the family hotel, the only downside was the fact that he was growing motherless (a first childhood lack). He took the classes of an English day school where he played rackets and fives (exposure to leisure consumerism reserved for the wealthy) [11]. His clash with a consumeristic society resurfaces, early on, when he admits he wanted to become a famous spy (which is a nonsense as spies thrive on the anonymous nature of their persona) [13]. He further experienced college life like it should have been for a young man of such wealthy roots in London and Paris. His then consumption practices entailed “paid ladies” [19].

Exposure to The Consumeristic Endeavors of The Elitist Nature Similar to the “window-shopping” that is part of the consumption process, Humbert only “looks” and dreams of nymphets, at the beginning. He does this in the park while he reads near small girls playing. He does this in the subway or from his balcony (25-26). As individuals take in the entire experience of those so-called “cathedrals of consumption” where someone might start with window-shopping, browsing, and sometimes deciding to not finalize the entire process with buying a specific product, so does Humbert reap his thrills from olfactory, visual or even auditory experiences that contain nymphets [1]. He turns to the ceremonial aspect of him admiring (from afar) the interests of his longing, he seems to decide that it is enough for him to: “Let them play around me forever. Never grow up.” (25)

His elitist nature surfaces time and time again, when he differentiates himself from the masses as he often resorts to the appanage of poets. Nostalgic and saddened that in order to be a killer it takes a lot of effort, and by the fact that in “our middle-class nosy era” everything will surface. Associating himself with poets rather than soldiers, he admits that he can never resort to murder. He is above it (112).

Popular Culture

As stated above, Lolita’s consumption patterns are not different from any other young individual of her time: she enjoys magazines, she enjoys music (“<<Little Carmen>> record”), she enjoys movies, she enjoys shopping activities, she enjoys lounging outside in the sun, and swimming in the Our Glass Lake (56). Even more so, Lolita is mentioned to be a creature prone to consumerism when she is described as having a lost look when “gloating over a new kind of concoction at the soda fountain or mutely admiring my expensive, always tailor-fresh clothes.”

Even Lo’s mother has her own customary consumption practices: she smokes a great deal. There is also the evidence of popular culture permeating the Haze household by means of various

magazine of the time (Glance and Gulp) that Lolita is very much interested in [58]. As with customary consumption practices, when everything leading to the actual consumption of an item is important because it stands as its process, so does Humbert Humbert go through the consumption process of wanting Lolita [2]. It is sprinkled with “intolerable temptation” and growing passion [59]. And the tell-tale process shows great knowledge of popular culture also from Humbert’s perspective, when he is able to name, from popular magazines, the different names for a girls’ menstruation.

Furthermore, there is also the mention of “Hollywood teachings” as Humbert thinks of what it would be like to kiss Lolita and how she will make use of her Hollywood classes [60]. Popular culture is very important and it is omnipresent as the characters show not only proof of its existence but also prove very knowledgeable in its teachings. While consuming the image of Lolita (which is an avatar for his past love Annabel) he is constantly interrupted and brought back to reality, for short passages of time, by immersions of popular culture, the magazines, a hit song about a certain Carmen (that Lolita was said to have listened to previous to this episode) or the telephone call serve to bring him back from his cloud-floating aftermath [76].

In treating her like any customary commodity, he thinks he can consume her time and time again, without the feeling of guilt. Just as one might ascribe magical connotations to mere commodities, making them appear more than they really are, so does HH ascribe magical connotations to the real Lolita, making her more than she is [3]. This is due to the fact that he did not possess the real Lolita but his own creation, which intersects and collides with the real one, ending up in encasing her, with no will or consciousness at all (78).

When preparing for the new endeavor of going to camp (which is received with animosity by Lolita), Lolita is taken to shop. This brings joy to her as every clothing-related acquisition does wonders for herself. After this, she seems totally fine with going to camp, and she dives into the comic books in her room (also purchased for the rainy days at camp). (81) For Lolita the consumption of objects acts like a mediator for the things she must do, but she is reluctant to. This greatly enhances Humbert’s power over her. Giving away class-related customs that come from old-world Europe when he walks in front of her due to the fact that she is not a lady, Humbert, most of the times, exudes snobbism in his awkward-manner of dealing with Lolita (161).

He constantly snubs Lolita’s interests: Humbert finds Lolita deep into a movie magazine, as one might expect, she kept devouring the magazine as she went to the car, which she pursued until arriving at a coffee place, where she indeed set the magazine aside in order to eat (185). This, of course, frustrates him as he is not the center of her attention [4]. Going back and forth with their quarrels Humbert and Lolita find solace in what they usually contemplate as predictable: Lolita’s popular-culture-induced consumption and Humbert immersed in an avatar for lust. Thus, Lolita in dire times resorts to customary teenager-oriented consumption like a coke and cherry syrup (269).

On the other hand, Humbert always finds solace in what lust does to him, and in trying to obtain what he desires he gives in

to all of Lolita's requests, like for example: going back on the road, but this time letting her choose the destinations (270). In trying to bargain for what each of them desire to obtain they are no strangers to offer what they know the other desires just as in a pragmatic trade of commodities [5]. During this bidirection-

al transaction Lolita offers favors and Humbert offers pecuniary-oriented goods or money as it is. If one might try to draw a parallel between the two subjects of interest the next table might be of use:

Table 1:

LOLITA	HUMBERT HUMBERT
YOUNG	OLD
AMERICA	EUROPE
LOW BROW	CULTURED
MIDDLE-CLASS	UPPER-CLASS
UNEDUCATED	SCHOLAR
SUSCEPTIBLE TO MANIPULATORY TECHNIQUES OF THE MASS-MARKET	ABOVE ALL MANIPULATIONS
CAN BE TAUGHT BY THE PATRIARCH	ASUMES THE ROLE OF THE PATRIARCHAL TEACHER
STANDS AS THE REPRESENTATION OF YOUNG HAPPY CHILDHOOD LOVE	CORRUPTED/CORRUPTING
CONSUMES CHEAP MASS-PRODUCED COMMODITIES OF POPULAR CULTURE	CONSUMES IMAGES OF AN ELITIST TRUTH IN A DESIRE TO OBTAIN THE LOST SOLACE

Thus, Lolita becomes the image of America, with its un/fair scholarly snubs. In this context Humbert transforms into an avatar for cultural Europe, thus susceptible to elitism.

Consumer Society

After leaving Lolita to her newfound peace and family life, Humbert tackles the road again. Arriving "somewhere in Appalachia" he perceives this new space as lonesome and forlorn (this comes, of course, to contradict "rotting Europe"). His perception of this particular space comes to summarize the entire consumer culture that is mentioned time and time again throughout the narrative (372-373). The descriptive illustration of the town's shops and different kind of advertisements serve the consumer to a point that they identify and connect, the specific space to its particular activity:

Sherry-red letters of light marked a Camera Shop. A large thermometer with the name of a laxative quietly dwelt on the front of a drugstore. Rubinov's Jewellery company had a display of artificial diamonds reflected in a red mirror [6-8]. A lighted green clock swam in the linenish depths of Jiffy Jeff Laundry. On the other side of the street a garage said in its sleep genuflection lubricity; and corrected itself to Gulfex Lubrication. An airplane, also gemmed by Rubinov, passed, droning, in the velvet heavens. How many small dead-of-night towns I had seen This was not yet the last. (373)

In a world over-saturated by consumerism, everything becomes a commodity. In such cases understanding the intricacies of such complex processes help individuals adapt easier and thrive [9]. Humbert comprehends not only his whereabouts but also the tensions that arise from such a consumer culture. Thus, he is able to manipulate Lolita, furthermore obtaining what he desires, by understanding both society and his love-interest, and by making

use of a consumption culture, but at the same time keeping himself above the non-elite mainstream [10, 11].

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