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**Doubled Reality and Morality in *Lolita* and *Ada***

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## Introduction

In his introduction to *The Annotated Lolita*, Alfred Appel, Jr. discusses the mechanisms of Nabokov's writing in terms of a doubled plot, stating "there are... at least two 'plots' in all of Nabokov's fiction: the characters in the book, and the consciousness of the creator above it—the 'real plot' which is visible in the 'gaps' and 'holes' in the narrative" (Appel xxvi). Nabokov himself outlines this technique in his autobiography, in a typically Nabokovian (involved and self-conscious) manner, by describing the works of Sirin, his own pen name: "the real life of his books flowed in the figures of speech, which one critic has compared to 'windows giving upon a contiguous world... a rolling corollary, the shadow of a train of thought'" (*Speak, Memory* 288). This "contiguous world" is the author's consciousness, which is both reflected in and reinforced by the art he creates. Thus, the manifest plot of a Nabokov novel, which is concerned with characters and chronology and which seems to refer exclusively to a fabricated fictional world, simultaneously conceals and refers to an authorial consciousness beyond the text. The process by which this consciousness comes into conflict with—and gradually subsumes—the world of the novel comprises the second ('real') plot, which makes itself apparent in the "gaps" and "holes."

Nabokov believes that "in a first-rate work of fiction the *real* clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world" (*Speak, Memory* 290, emphasis mine). "Reality" doesn't exist on a diegetic, intertextual plane; rather, this plane of plot serves as a staging place for the author's reality, where he is able to "set himself certain unique rules that he observes, certain nightmare obstacles that he surmounts, with the zest of a deity building a live world from the most unlikely ingredients" (*SM* 291). Nabokov has a very particular understanding of reality—a

word which, in the afterword to *Lolita*, he describes as “one of the few... which mean[s] nothing without quotes” (*Lolita* 312). For Nabokov, reality is subjective but not solipsistic. Although ‘reality’ is the product of individual consciousness, it is still deeply invested in the external world. Leland De la Durantaye notes that Ada and Demon both have a particular modality for comprehending “reality,” which they share with Nabokov: Ada "uses the term 'reality' to denote only the most rare and personal of experiences" (De le Durantaye 39), as does Demon, who possesses "that *third sight* (individual, magically detailed imagination)... without which memory (even that of a profound 'thinker' or technical genius) is, let us face it, a stereotype or tear sheet" (*Ada* 252). De la Durantaye extends this definition to Nabokov's aesthetics, claiming that for "Ada and Demon, as for their creator, ‘reality’ is not passive intake but imaginative engagement with the world around them" (De la Durantaye 39). In *Lectures on Literature*, Nabokov argues that "any outstanding work of art is a fantasy insofar as it reflects the unique world of a unique individual" (*Lectures on Literature* 252): in this way, neither fantasy nor reality is an objective concept, and, further, they are not opposed to each other. Both are products of acute individual consciousness, "the magic precision of a poet's word meeting halfway his, or a reader's, recollection" (*Speak, Memory* 271).

Taking into account Nabokov’s view of “reality,” *Lolita* and *Ada* can be seen as novels that invert Nabokov’s conception of truth and art:

We should always remember that the work of art is invariably the creation of a new world, so that the first thing we should do is study that new world as closely as possible, approaching it as something brand new, having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know.

(*Lectures on Literature* 1)

As narrators, both Humbert and Van attempt to sustain illusory worlds by transposing them onto reality. Rather than acknowledging that his solipsistic universe exists only in the realm of fiction, each narrator attempts to elevate his fantasy to the level of truth—which, in Nabokov’s view, is “an insult to both art and truth” (*LL* 5). Humbert claims that his “own creation” of Lolita is “perhaps more real than Lolita” (*Lolita* 62); similarly, Van finds that “in his love-making with Ada, he discover[s]... the agony of supreme reality,” a moment in which reality “[loses] the quotes it wore like claws.” As in Humbert’s description, this objective, quote-less reality privileges Van’s artistic consciousness over direct sensory input: “the color and fire of that instant reality depended solely on Ada’s identity *as perceived by him*” (*Ada* 220, emphasis mine).

However, the presence of a “real” secondary plot persists in both *Lolita* and *Ada*: both novels resolve in a typically Nabokovian manner, with the reader’s realization of the artifice of art through the intrusion of Nabokov’s consciousness. As narrators, both Humbert and Van construct the false “first plot” of the novel, creating illusory worlds and garnering the reader’s complicity through the logic of the novelistic form itself. The second plot that appears in the “gaps” and “holes” of the text is not the buildup to an authorial apotheosis (the presence of “an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me,” as Nabokov calls it) but rather Nabokov’s demonstration of the reality that each narrator is attempting to obscure. However, the realization of the second ‘reality’ is not a narratorial failure on Humbert’s or Van’s part: rather, both novels are structured so that the collapse of illusion is intimately linked with each narrator’s subtexual attempt to apologize for and redeem what he’s destroyed—Lolita’s childhood, in the case of Humbert, and Lucette’s life for Van and Ada.

## Chapter 1:

### “The great rosegray never-to-be had”: Forgiveness and Fiction in *Lolita*

A faulty timescale in *Lolita* indicates that the final section of the novel, in which Humbert reunites with 17-year-old Lolita in the town of Coalmont and goes on to murder Quilty, never happened. He claims to have spent fifty-six days on the composition of the manuscript, and the foreword states that he died “of coronary thrombosis” (*Lolita* 3) on November 16, 1952: this indicates that Humbert began writing on September 22. However, according to his narrative, Humbert received a letter from Lolita on September 22 and spent the following three days locating her and Quilty. Humbert would not have had time to embark on his quest if his chronology is correct. Although one could argue that this is simply a function of his (or Nabokov’s) “calendar getting confused” (*Lolita* 109), Humbert exhibits such calendrical precision elsewhere in the novel<sup>1</sup> that oversight or miscalculation seems unlikely. Christina Tekiner points this out in her essay “Time in *Lolita*,” and argues that *Lolita* was written in a “psychopathic ward” (*Lolita* 308) rather than a prison, and that the events that occurred after September 22 are all a fabrication on Humbert’s part (Tekiner 466). At the close of her essay, Tekiner raises the question of what implications this reinterpretation of the text have for an understanding of Humbert and claims that “the only love Humbert achieves is love for Lolita, a character produced by his solipsistic art” (Tekiner 469). However, this reading is limiting, as it fails to take into account the way in which the final nine chapters of *Lolita* serve a

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, in the poem he composes after Lolita’s alleged disappearance: “Wanted, wanted: Dolores Haze/Hair: brown. Lips: Scarlet. Age: five thousand three hundred days” (*Lolita* 255). This is easy to overlook as a minor detail inserted to complete the rhyme scheme, but what is remarkable is that 5,300 days is the *exact* amount of time that has elapsed between the date of Lolita’s birth (January 1 1935) and the date Humbert discovers her missing in Elphinstone (July 5 1949).

highly significant role in Humbert's development as a character; they comprise his attempt to redeem himself for what he has done to Lolita and to redeem for her what she has lost.

Tekiner points out that the final paragraph of *Lolita* is "jarring" in two ways: the first is the rapid prose ("Be true to your Dick. Do not let other fellows touch you. Do not talk to strangers. I hope you will love your baby. I hope it will be a boy." [*Lolita* 309]); the second is the abbreviations of H.H. and C.Q. for himself and Clare Quilty, respectively (Tekiner 465); to explain this, she quotes an interview in which Nabokov explained to Alfred Appel that he wanted "to convey a constriction of the narrator's sick heart, a warning spasm causing him to abridge names and hasten to conclude his tale before it's too late" (*Strong Opinions* 73). The novel and Humbert's life end fairly simultaneously, thus increasing the importance of the timescale and foregrounding the importance of September 22. Tekiner further claims that Humbert pieces together the Quilty enigma after stumbling across *Who's Who in the Limelight* in the ward library, which "enable[s] him to understand the significance of Quilty's fleeting appearance and subsequently weave them into the narrative" (Tekiner 466) before fabricating a final confrontation.

There are, however, a number of small errors in her theory that imply that Lolita never fled with Quilty in the first place and that Humbert's depiction has barely any basis in reality. Alexander Dolinin alludes, in his essay "Nabokov's Time Doubling," to the possibility that Lolita died in the hospital in Elphinstone (Dolinin 30). According to the logic of this theory, John Ray, Jr., who wrote the foreword, is also an creation of Humbert's – which explains why his initials (JR, Jr.) are doubled like Humbert's – meant to simultaneously mock vulgar psychiatric conventions (possibly the doctors who are observing Humbert, even) and to augment the sense of

the “reality” of Humbert’s writing. As Dolinin points out, the “digression” that Humbert launches into after receiving John Farlow’s letter on September 22, the day he begins composing his manuscript, is “sloppily disguised as a commentary on [the] letter” but actually “describes Humbert’s own situation” (Dolinin 34):

No matter how many times we reopen "King Lear," never shall we find the good king banging his tankard in high revelry, all woes forgotten, at a jolly reunion with all three daughters and their lapdogs. Never will Emma rally, revived by sympathetic salts in Flaubert's father's timely tear. Whatever evolution this or that popular character has gone through between the book covers, his fate is fixed in our minds, and similarly, we expect our friends to follow this or that logical and conventional pattern we have fixed for them. Thus X will never compose the immortal music that would clash with the second-rate symphonies he has accustomed us to. Y will never commit murder. Under no circumstances can Z ever betray us. We have it all arranged in our minds, and the less often we see a particular person the more satisfying it is to check how obediently he conforms to our notion of him every time we hear of him. Any deviation in the fates we have ordained would strike us as not only anomalous but unethical.

(*Lolita* 265)

Humbert is establishing a separate ontology of fiction that draws on, rather than obfuscates, reality. He creates a distinction between a solipsistic worldview that reduces humans to characters with no real agency and one that takes into account others’ subjectivity, and thus their unpredictability. This difference, essentially, is that the first worldview consists of projecting patterns onto the world and the second centers around detecting them. Thus, in order to recover for Lolita the person- and child-hood of which he deprived her, Humbert creates a new form of fate, which he dubs McFate. This particular American brand of fate at first seems to arrange coincidences for him, but, as the novel progresses, becomes aligned with the various indications and clues that point to Clare Quilty’s presence as his pursuer. In this way, he utilizes his authorial role to fix an invented fate for himself and Lolita, thus doing the impossible and creating for her an alternative happier ending.

Therefore, Clare Quilty, too, is a creation of Humbert's – possibly chosen as a subtextual apology to Lolita, whom Humbert knows admires the playwright. The possibility that Quilty is a figment of Humbert's imagination explains his mutable appearance: he goes from being described as “some crooner or actor chap on whom Lo has a crush” (*Lolita* 43), handsome enough to be utilized in a cigarette ad that Lolita hangs over her bed (*Lolita* 63), to being described in grotesque terms. As the novel progresses, Humbert describes Quilty as “a broad-backed man, baldish” (*Lolita* 218), “not pretty” (*Lolita* 219), “rather lardy” (*Lolita* 244), and, in their final meeting, as having “black hairs on his pudgy hands... [and a] hirsute chest” and being “semi- animated, sub-human” (*Lolita* 295). It seems unlikely that Lolita's celebrity crush could degenerate so much in the course of five years. Therefore, Quilty's increasingly misshapen appearance serves both to indicate the falsity of Humbert's invented “reality” and as an embodiment of Humbert's own beastliness, since Humbert's relationship with Clare Quilty can be seen as a parody of the literary double genre.

The revisionist theory of the ending of *Lolita* is further supported by the illogical nature of Lolita's escape from the hospital. Before Humbert takes Lolita to the doctor, he takes her temperature and finds that she has a fever of 40.4 degrees centigrade, which is about 104.7 degrees Fahrenheit (*Lolita* 240). Humbert describes the narrative of her escape from Elphinstone as some form of brilliant master plan, but there is no accounting for how Lolita could make herself that physically ill. Humbert claims that Lolita's “illness was somehow the development of a theme—that it had the same taste and tone as the series of linked impressions which had puzzled and tormented me during our journey” (*Lolita* 241). Arguably, these linked impressions are not the recurrence of Quilty, but rather indications of Humbert's blindness to

Lolita's suffering. The journey of which Humbert speaks is the "thousand-mile stretch of silk-smooth road [from] Kasbeam... [to] fateful Elphinstone" (*Lolita* 247). It is in Kasbeam that Humbert gets a haircut from a barber who rambles on about his "baseball-playing son" the entire time; Humbert is "so inattentive" that he fails to realize until the end of the story "that the mustached young ball player had been dead for at least thirty years" (*Lolita* 213). Thus, Humbert's solipsistic inability to perceive any "reality" that does not correspond to his fantasy of the world is aligned with the inability to perceive a child's mortality – this sets the scene for Lolita's death, which haunts him for the "three empty years" (*Lolita* 253) that follow, until he endeavors to deliver her through art.

Furthermore, there are various repetitions that point to the constructed nature of Lolita's life after Elphinstone. Brian Boyd criticizes the revisionist theory by pointing out that Humbert "has no gift of narrative invention, apart from his penchant for vague self-indulgent fantasy" and, thus, that "it seems impossible to imagine a Humbert who could construct a scene as rich in independent life as the reunion with Lolita at Coalmont" (Boyd 1995: 3). As true as this may be, there are a variety of details that indicate that both Lolita's cohabitation with Quilty and move to Coalmont are not truly that "rich in independent life" at all. Firstly, Lolita's description of the Duk Duk Ranch is borrowed directly from Humbert's understanding of what happened to his first wife, Valeria. In Coalmont, Lolita tells Humbert that Quilty took her to a ranch in California and tried to make her to "weird, filthy, fancy things"; Humbert asks her, "Where is the hog now?" to which she responds that "he was not a hog" (*Lolita* 276). Similarly, Valeria was used in a "year-long experiment" in California that involved "a diet of bananas and dates and a constant position on all fours" (*Lolita* 30). The swine-like depravity of Duk Duk Ranch is thus taken directly

from Valeria's life; further, both Valeria and Lolita die in childbirth (*Lolita* 4, 30), so even the method of Lolita's invented death is not original.

In addition, Dolinin notes that Humbert "concocts the image of the grown-up Lolita from fragments of memories, chance observations and even old newspapers" (Dolinin 37): he provides her with the dog she dreamed of as a child and pink-rimmed glasses which match "the photographs of brides... holding bouquets and wearing glasses" by which she is "curiously fascinated" (*Lolita* 165). Furthermore, as Dolinin points out, her husband is constructed from various images scattered throughout the book. Her husband's "[a]rctic blue eyes, black hair, ruddy cheeks, [and] unshaven chin" (*Lolita* 273) correspond both to an advertisement she admired in her youth which depicts "a dark-haired young husband with a kind of drained look in his Irish eyes" (*Lolita* 69) and to "a strong and handsome young man with a shock of black hair and blue eyes" (*Lolita* 213) whom Humbert sees at the Kasbeam motel – his pregnant wife, described as "far gone in a family way" (*Lolita* 213) mirrors the "frankly and hugely pregnant" Lolita in Coalmont (*Lolita* 269). In this way, the very unoriginality of the final nine chapters indicates that they are the product of unimaginative Humbert's artistic endeavors rather than an accurate rendering of reality.

In this revisionist view of the novel, the narrative of Humbert's life with (and loss of) Lo is essentially the story of a constructed, solipsistic paradise lost, and it can be divided into three sections: the first is completely self-indulgent, mired in mirage: essentially an extended version of one of the "diminutive one-sided romances" or "fancied adventures" (*Lolita* 20) that pre-dolorian Humbert enjoyed privately by watching and fantasizing about nymphets. The Lolita that appears in this section is truly "another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps more real than Lolita... having no will, no

consciousness—indeed, no life of her own” (*Lolita* 62). Because reality has not yet intruded on his conception of Lolita, Humbert is able to minimize if not completely ignore her subjectivity. Her absence augments the ease with which Humbert fictionalizes her: she is away at camp (but dreamed about, described, and re-envisioned constantly) for about half of this section (44 pages of the 103 since their initial meeting). The disconnect between this fantasy of Lolita and the “reality” of Dolores Haze is reified when Humbert picks her up at Camp Q:

She was thinner and taller, and for a second it seemed to me her face was less pretty than the mental imprint I had cherished for more than a month: her cheeks looked hollowed and too much lentigo camouflaged her rosy rustic features... but ‘in a wink’... the angelic line of conduct was erased, and I overtook my prey (time moves ahead of our fancies!), and she was my Lolita again—in fact, more of my Lolita than ever.

(111)

He describes his infatuation in terms of fancy *overtaking* and defeating time (or “reality”). For Humbert, love arises from the competition between reality and mirage rather than from their merging. Thus, until Humbert rapes Lolita at the end of this first section, he does not have to come into contact with reality (as connected with corporeality). He is able to convince himself that he exists with the “successfully solipsized” (*Lolita* 60) Lolita in “a brand new, mad new dream world where everything [is] permissible” (*Lolita* 133); however, he is unable to sustain the fictive Lolita because she does not correspond to the human girl with whom he “had strenuous intercourse three times that very morning” (*Lolita* 104). No matter how hard he tries, Humbert is incapable of imposing his dream onto the flesh-and-blood human he holds captive in his dungeon of desire.

As previously mentioned, *Lolita* can be read as a story of Humbert imagining and reimagining solipsistic universes which crumble when they come into contact with reality. His immensely self-indulgent moral imperative that other humans

“follow this or that logical and conventional pattern we have fixed for them” with “the stability of type that literary characters acquire in the reader’s mind” (*Lolita* 265) is constantly crumbling upon contact with active human agents who resist (in their limited ways) their static roles within Humbert’s hermetic Humberland. This occurs first with Valeria, supposed to play the role of the wincing, acquiescent simpleton who exists simply to do Humbert’s bidding. As with Lolita, his desire for her to adhere to the role he prescribed for her blinds him. Immediately before she leaves him for ‘Taxovich,’ H.H. notes that she “was not her usual self; had acquired a queer restlessness; even showed something like irritation at times, which was quite out of keeping with the stock character she was supposed to impersonate” (*Lolita* 27). Since Humbert has no idea what Valeria is actually like—he cruelly refuses to see her as anything but a stock character in the novelization of his life—he sees her independent behaviors and desires as disruptive.

Humbert’s solipsism repeats throughout his recollections, blinding him to external facts that contradict his worldview: at Hourglass Lake, which he sets up like a sealed-off stage,<sup>2</sup> the hypothetical perfect crime he imagines (drowning Charlotte in solitude) is ruined by the presence of Jean Farlow in the woods, who can see them so clearly that she notices that Humbert forgot to remove his wristwatch. Further, right before Charlotte’s death, Humbert sets up a scene of overwhelming routine, in which everything is so in tune with his expectations that he can tell the time based on the behaviors of his neighbors (“I knew it was exactly half past three because the nurse who came to massage Miss Opposite every afternoon was tripping down the narrow

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<sup>2</sup> He describes how “there was nobody around” save for a retired policeman and plumber off in the distance, whom he portrays like puppets in a play staged by a “puppet-master” and a “director of acrosonic effects” (*Lolita* 86) and whom he believes will passively accept any story he tells them about Charlotte’s hypothetical drowning.

sidewalk” [*Lolita* 95]). Before returning home and finding Charlotte in hysterics, he proclaims, “Everything was somehow so right that day” (*Lolita* 95). Although the primary function of this statement is to foreshadow the ultimate realization of his hopes (a dead mother and a helpless nymphet to enjoy!), it also serves to set up an ironic tension between the expected idyllic serenity of suburbia and Charlotte’s horror. This contrast is augmented by the fact that Charlotte’s death is caused in part by her unexpectedly subverting Humbert’s authority and reading his diary entries in which he outlines his passion for Lolita, most likely in response to the terrible aloofness he subjects her to and expects her to unquestioningly accept. Thus, although her one act of defiance is ultimately fatal, it resituates her as a subject rather than a stock character. Further, were it not for her “fortuitous” death, Charlotte’s discovery of the diary would have ruined the possibility of Humbert’s hoped-for paradise, as she would have fled with Lolita “to Parkington, or even back to Pisky, lest the vulture snatch her precious lamb” (*Lolita* 99). It is telling that his immediate solution is to construct a false reality in order to trick his wife: “Rewrite. Let her read it again. She will not recall details. Change, forge. Write a fragment and show it to her and leave it lying around” (*Lolita* 96).

The primary narrative of the conflict between Humbert’s false reality and the manifest “reality” that exists outside of his solipsism is, clearly, the story of his monstrous cohabitation with Lolita. By raping her, he loses his ability to fantasize harmlessly; thus, his “lifelong dream... over[shoots] its mark—and plunge[s] him into a nightmare” (*Lolita* 140). This nightmare is the second portion of Humbert’s tragic triptych, which extends from the beginning of Part 2 of the novel to the point at which Humbert claims to have received the letter from Lolita; it is a literalization of the race between H.H.’s fancy and nature’s reality. Not only is Humbert attempting to outrun

any suspicion of violated taboo that his and Lolita's cohabitation may invoke, he is also trying to escape the ennui, listlessness, and sense of complete depravity that should come from their shared existence in "a world of total evil" (*Lolita* 284)—by keeping his "companion in passable humor from kiss to kiss" (*Lolita* 154), Humbert can overlook his unfavorable opinion of her as a "most exasperating brat [and]... a disgustingly conventional little girl" (*Lolita* 148). Further, his flight from the invented Clare Quilty is also a flight from reality: Clare is his "shadow" (*Lolita* 219), "another Humbert" (*Lolita* 217), his doppelgänger—a vulgar pervert and a pedophile; he is the reification of Humbert as he truly appears. By fleeing him, Humbert is fleeing the fact that he is not an "artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy" (*Lolita* 17), but rather a "beastly pervert" (*Lolita* 298) who has deprived "a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze... of her childhood" (*Lolita* 283).

Throughout this section, the author-Humbert begins to insert his retrospective, disenchanted perspective between the illusionary fragments of Humberland. What Hum-the-character sees as a tour of his "elected paradise – a paradise whose skies were the color of hell-flames – but still a paradise" (*Lolita* 166), Humbert the author envisions "in retrospect" as "a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night – every night, every night – the moment I feigned sleep" (*Lolita* 176). At one point, the authorial Humbert interrupts the narrative to lyrically lament the nature of his relationship with Lolita:

I would shed all my pedagogic restraint, dismiss all our quarrels, forget all my masculine pride – and literally crawl on my knees to your chair, my Lolita! You would give me one look – a gray furry question mark of a look: "Oh no, not again" (incredulity, exasperation); for you never deigned to believe that I could, without any specific designs, ever crave to bury my face in your plaid skirt, my darling!

Here, Humbert-the-author is entirely visible. He has, in a wave of remorse, halted his own narrative flow to recount with shame and sorrow Lolita's coldness and lack of consent before his selfish, pathetic compulsions. At the end of this short section, he self-consciously re-assumes his role as narrator: "never mind, never mind, I am only a brute, never mind, let us go on with my miserable story" (*Lolita* 193).

This interruption raises an important question: who, exactly, is the brutish "I"? Is Humbert-the-author still under the sway of self-deception – has he truly had a "moral apotheosis" (*Lolita* 5), or are his appeals to the reader's sympathy a way of justifying and validating his brutish treatment of Lolita? To describe her suffering is not the same as taking responsibility for it; after all, Humbert-the-character heard the sobs in the middle of the night, too, but did nothing about them. Description may be another means of evasion and deception: Humbert-the-author is well aware of his power of persuasion (he mentions earlier how much he enjoys "trifling with psychiatrists: cunningly leading them on; never letting them see that you know all the tricks of the trade..." [*Lolita* 34]; the trade of *Lolita* is novel-writing, and "well-read Humbert" [*Lolita* 70] is highly equipped to trick the reader with lyrical wordplay and moving, romantic passages). This implies that there is a chance that Humbert-the-author's admission of his own brutality is simply another inverted deception-enchantment mechanism; he could be enchanting the reader with a grandiose display of remorse and romanticism in order to disguise his true culpability; at the end of the second section, it is debatable whether Humbert has truly understood the extent of the damage *he* has inflicted on Lolita.

However, it is subtextually evident that Humbert *does* feel remorse and take responsibility for the suffering he has inflicted upon Lolita; firstly, through a careful patterning of images which reveal his awareness that he was an agent responsible for

constructing the myth of nympholepsy, rather than a helpless victim under the sway of supernatural forces; secondly, through constructing for Lolita a simple, foreseeable future free from the sinister fairy tale image that had been attached to her for the first two sections of the triptych; and, finally, through a subtextual apology to Charlotte and Lolita, which becomes more manifest when he gains complete narrative control over the fictionalized third and final section of his narrative and functions as a “kind of thoughtful Hegelian synthesis linking up two dead women” (*Lolita* 307).

The book is framed within an account of Humbert attempting to obtain pleasure from a voyeuristic vision of what he assumes to be “a nymphet in the act of undressing before a co-operative mirror” (*Lolita* 20); in reality, it is “a man in his underclothes reading his paper” (*Lolita* 20). This account first appears after Humbert’s initial description of what a nymphet is, and originally comes across as a pathetic description of Humbert’s helpless and hopeless longing. He recounts it later, *immediately before* “receiving” Lolita’s letter. Significantly, although the event described is the same in both accounts, Humbert’s description of his role in the illusion changes once he has completed his and Lolita’s story; in his re-telling of the event, he admits that he had complicity in perpetuating the deception. Rather than realizing with horror that there was no nymphet once he had finished “rac[ing] with speed to [his] lone gratification” (*Lolita* 20), he makes it clear in the second portrayal that he knew all along that “Eve would revert to a rib” and, thus, that he knowingly bore the deception in an attempt to win “the race between [his] fancy and nature’s reality” (*Lolita* 264). By no longer attempting to describe himself as “helpless” (*Lolita* 71) before the power of nymphets or as a victim, Humbert-the-author is condemning Humbert-the-character. This indicates that the way in which he intentionally ignored Lolita’s suffering throughout the book was done for

“retrospective verisimilitude” (*Lolita* 71) rather than as a continued act of self-deception.

Aware of his complete culpability and no longer able to “ignore Lolita’s states of mind while comforting [his] own base self” (*Lolita* 287), Humbert attempts to make amends for what he has done by re-inventing his fantasy life to correspond more closely with reality and give Lolita a human identity at long last. According to Humbert’s retelling, he receives two letters on September 22: the first is from John Farlow and the second, he claims, is from Lolita. This (as he tells it) inspires him to find her and then track down and kill Quilty, which takes him three days. However, because these events do not fit into Humbert’s timescale, this indicates that these final three days are a fabrication on his part (which would explain the strange surrealism of Quilty’s murder<sup>3</sup>). The first section of Humbert’s narrative is mirage, the second is the antagonistic tension between fancy and reality, and the third is mirage once again—but the quality of this mirage is entirely different. Instead of conflicting with “reality,” Humbert’s fancy in this section imitates and draws from it.

This means that the arrival of Farlow’s letter causes Humbert to start composing his memoir and to fictionalize its nine chapters; two things in Farlow’s letter are especially striking and act as catalysts toward the composition of *Lolita*: the first is Farlow’s demand that Humbert “produce Dolly quick” (*Lolita* 266), which

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<sup>3</sup> The murder sequence appears twice in the preceding text as either a dream or fantasy sequence: Humbert discusses how he could imagine himself “shooting [Valeria’s] lover in the underbelly and making him say ‘akh!’ and sit down” (*Lolita* 87) and invents a story for Lolita and Charlotte about shooting a polar bear in the arctic who, in response, “sat down and said: Ah!” (*Lolita* 45). In Pavor Manor, Humbert sees “a polar bear skin on the slippery floor” (*Lolita* 294) before shooting Quilty repeated; Q’s reactions are much like Taxovich’s and the polar bear’s: “his face would twitch in an absurd clown manner, as if he were exaggerating the pain; he slowed down, rolled his eyes have closing them and made a feminine ‘ah!’” (*Lolita* 303).

Humbert tragically cannot do because she is dead. The second is Farlow's rapid and unexpected change in personality, which contradicts Humbert's carefully constructed solipsistic worldview. If John Farlow can go from being "a devout widower, [a] dull, sedate, and reliable person" (*Lolita* 265) to someone who is adventurous, exotically remarried, and slightly "hysterical" (*Lolita* 265), this implies that Lolita, too, would have changed and grown had she not been kept prisoner in a static world where growth and independent will are synonymous with disenchantment. *This* is what causes his "moral apotheosis" (*Lolita* 5), which is tacked anachronistically onto the end of the novel. Humbert realizes sincerely that "the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from [his] side but the absence of her voice" (*Lolita* 308) from the resounding concord of children at play.

By placing the repeated image of the nymphet dissolving into an "obese partly clad man reading the paper" (*Lolita* 264) right before the reception of John Farlow's letter, Humbert indicates and structures his remorse. The fabricated third part of the book thus grows from the collapse of self-indulgent fantasy; it is author-Humbert's attempt to make amends through "the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art" (*Lolita* 283), because "spiritual solace" is meaningless as long as Lolita is tainted by "the foul lust [he] had inflicted upon her" (*Lolita* 283). No longer is he tailoring his perception of reality to fit with his impossible selfish fantasy – now he is revising his fantasy in order to provide Lolita with her own reality. In the words of Charles Kinbote, "Once transmuted... into poetry, the stuff *will* be true, and the people *will* come alive" (*Pale Fire* 214). Through this elaborate fantasy sequence, he is restoring Lolita's identity in "the refuge of art" (*Lolita* 309). At last she is a human with her own voice, her own will, and a foreseeable future free of her "poor romance" with Humbert, which she is able to dismiss "like a bit of dry mud caking her

childhood” (*Lolita* 272). In this realm of fiction merged with reality, he is able to love “*this* Lolita, pale and polluted, big with another’s child” (*Lolita* 278); more importantly, he is able to realize that she had never and would have never loved him.

Further, he manages to drag from the muck her mother’s poor trod-upon existence within the book: a sustained shadow of Charlotte Haze appears throughout *Lolita*. Despite Humbert’s original dismissive and cruel treatment of her, he does not let her sink into oblivion after her death. Humbert links the image of her face in death to moments in which Lolita’s subjectivity as well as her attempts to resist Humbert’s tyranny over her life are emphasized, as well as to a narrative that sets the stage for her invented escape. During a strange scene on the tennis court, in a Borges-esque moment of bifurcating paths, Humbert imagines that Lolita is attempting to flee:

I saw that the tennis court was deserted... and for some reason, with a kind of icy vividness, saw Charlotte’s face in death, and I glanced around, and noticed Lo in white shorts receding through the speckled shadow of a garden path in the company of a tall man who carried two tennis rackets. I sprang after them, but as I was crashing through the shrubbery, I saw, in an alternate vision, as if life’s course constantly branched, Lo, in slacks, and her companion, in shorts, trudging up and down a small weedy area, and beating bushes with their rackets in listless search for their lost ball.

(*Lolita* 163)

As in the revisionist theory of the ending, Humbert is (in a panic) imagining Lolita’s liberation from his personal “prison cell of paradise” (*Lolita* 145), and, in doing so, sees Charlotte’s face. This occurs again, during the second road trip, when Humbert implies that Lolita has snuck off to make a phone call, and, as “Lolita veer[s] from a totally unexpected direction,” having needed privacy to phone the imagined Quilty, Humbert notes that the “sound of Charlotte’s last sob incongruously vibrate[s] through [him]” (*Lolita* 212).

Further, Charlotte is linked with Quilty linguistically: the term “sunburst” is connected with her death, first in *Who’s Who in the Limelight*, where it’s listed as the first play that Roland Pym appeared in<sup>4</sup>, thus creating an association between the word “sunburst” and the idea of something beginning; later, when Humbert describes Charlotte’s death as “the ultimate sunburst” (*Lolita* 90) of opportunity, the reader realizes that what is starting is Humbert’s feverish fantasy – at the cost of Charlotte’s life. Much later, on Humbert and Lolita’s second road trip, Humbert is momentarily blinded by a sudden “sunburst [sweeping] the highway” (*Lolita* 218), which causes him to pull over in order to purchase sunglasses. It is here, at this gas station, that he comes into contact with Quilty as his pursuer for the first time. Thus, the word “sunburst” switches from a signifier of the start of Humbert’s fantasy to something that signals its dissolution. Further, the connection between Lolita-as-a-subject, Quilty-the-escape-accomplice, and Charlotte is deepened once they resume driving and Lolita, for the first time, speaks “spontaneously of her pre-Humbertian childhood,” saying, “When I was a little kid... I used to think [the odometer numbers would] stop and go back to nines, if only my mother agreed to put the car in reverse” (*Lolita* 219). Unprompted, Lolita shocks Humbert with a tenuous glimpse of her subjectivity, which, significantly, refers back to her dead mother. In addition, this seemingly innocuous anecdote refers not only to her past but also to the impossibility of turning back time, heightening the heartbreaking remoteness of her childhood.

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<sup>4</sup> Roland Pym is Humbert’s stand-in of the three listed actors; obviously, Dolores Quine is Lolita and Clare Quilty has his own entry. Pym connects with “pim”, Humbert’s signature drink which he consumes with increasing vigor throughout the novel; the play *The Strange Mushroom*, a phallic image, connotes him in a vulgar fashion; *I Was Dreaming Of You*, another play he appeared in, effectively summarizes his entire relationship with Lolita.

The pattern linking Lolita, Charlotte, and the narrative of Lolita's escape is reified most strongly in the imagined scene in Coalmont, when Dolores, having fled with Quilty and then fled from him, smokes a cigarette<sup>5</sup> before firmly and finally refusing Humbert's offer of a fairy tale ending and looks so much like her mother that "[g]racefully, in a blue mist, Charlotte Haze [rises] from her grave" (*Lolita* 275) for an instant. In addition, Lolita's death at the hospital in Elphinstone is linked with Charlotte's: the "tartan lap robe dropped in a heap" (*Lolita* 97) at the site of Charlotte's death is mirrored by the "folded tartan lap robe" (*Lolita* 247) that the nurse gives to Humbert after Lolita "leaves" the hospital, sustaining a connection between the two women. Finally, and perhaps most touchingly, Charlotte is present at Humbert's "moral apotheosis" on the hillside: earlier in his account, Humbert sees an "aster-like anemic flower [growing] out of a remembered chink in the sidewalk" (*Lolita* 289) in the place of Charlotte's death when he goes back to Ramsdale, and, during his tragic realization of Lolita's loss of childhood, he is accompanied by "a population of asters bathing in the detached warmth of a pale-blue afternoon" (*Lolita* 307).

Humbert is granting Lolita (and, to a lesser extent, Charlotte) literary immortality, but not on the terms of his own desire. Instead of immortalizing her as his idealized nymphet and finding some poetic means of enshrining his vision of her eternally, he is preserving his tragically belated recognition of her humanity. His narrative reifies the "theory of perceptual time" he proposes in his 1951 essay *Mimir and Memory*, in which the mind is "conscious not only of matter but also its own self, thus creating a continuous spanning of two points (the storable future and stored

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<sup>5</sup> A subtle sign of her reconceptualization, free from Humbert's desires for her, seeing as cigarettes were "*streng verboten* under Humbert the Terrible" (275).

past”) (*Lolita* 260). His narrative is a tension between these two things: the past which he manipulated, which he overlooked, which he collected in sordid heaps and thus lost by neglecting its manifest “reality” and the future from which he precluded Lolita. His act of repenting to her comes not from restoring this past self, but rather from imagining for a foreseeable future. Although she has died by the time of publication, Dolores Haze (no longer merely Humbert’s Lolita) has been both denied and re-given a life of her own through the restorative power of art.

## **Chapter 2: “The green reality of the garden”: Solipsism and Suffering in *Ada***

In *Ada*, solipsism is a precondition of the false paradise of Ardis; rather than constructing this solipsistic Eden as Humbert does in *Lolita*, Van presupposes it. It seems that his and Ada’s shared happiness blots out surrounding “reality” to the extent that they both fail to see it exists – they envision themselves in the Eden of Ardis the first, in which everyone else is a dummy, a reflection, or a character. Nabokov is not complicit in this valuation: through complex subtextual patterns and repetitions, he calls into question the nature of Van and Ada’s love, indicating its cruel undercurrent, and emphasizes Lucette as a subject who is unjustly neglected and dehumanized. He further warps the paradisiacal imagery associated with Ardis and associates it with Lucette’s suffering, thus condemning the solipsistic urge that accompanies romanticism. However, Van himself is not simply an egotistical “brute,” as Updike alleged (Updike 1969): although he is capable of immense brutality and selfishness, and although he often (especially in the first half of the novel) dehumanizes others for the sake of preserving his artistic vision, he utilizes his role as author to subtextually apologize to Lucette and establish her as the novel’s secret center.

Ada and Van’s relationship unfurls among Edenic imagery: notably, the first semi-sexual contact between the two occurs when they fall out of “the glossy limbed shattal tree... in a shower of drupes and leaves” and Van inadvertently kisses Ada’s inner thigh, setting off his sexual obsession with her, wherein he is plagued not only by “the necessity of dissimulation” (*Ada* 98) but also by the “despair of desire” (*Ada* 100) – not merely for “complicated release,” which is “only a dead end, because unshared... [and] not likely to melt into any subsequent phase of incomparably

greater rapture” (*Ada* 100). Although his desire for Ada is played out primarily through sexual dimensions, it is not simply about sex—it is a greater and more hopeless desire, one that situates them in a shared paradise. Immediately after the fall, she tells him that “it really is the Tree of Knowledge... imported last summer... from the Eden National Park” (*Ada* 95). This is the same “shattal apple tree” whose branches Ada straddles, without underwear, in order to “assuage the rash in [her] soft arch, with all its accompaniment of sticky, itchy, not together unpleasurable sensations” (*Ada* 78). This sexual contact within *and with* the Tree of Knowledge seems to link Van and Ada’s ecstatic and excessive sexuality with a sort of prelapsarian freedom from shame, fear, and punishment.

Further, the romantic depiction of Ardis as a sun-suffused, overwhelmingly green garden helps to construct it as a sensual paradise. During this first blissful summer, the manor is constantly swathed in the color green and in sunlight; this verdant illumination is connected with both their feverish lovemaking and with illusion of “the pang, the *ogon*’, the agony of supreme ‘reality’” (*Ada* 220). As Van approaches Ardis for the first time, “sunflecks and lacy shadows [skim] over his legs and [lend] a green twinkle to the [coachman’s] brass button” (*Ada* 34), and these sunflecks reappear in Ada’s “shadow-and-shine” games (*Ada* 51); immediately after he arrives and fails to seduce Blanche, Van is described as passing “through the French window into the green reality of the garden” (*Ada* 49); during their initial kissing stage, Ada is described as “blinking in the green sunshine” (*Ada* 105); Van is referred to as “our green lover” (*Ada* 126) the morning after the Burning Barn – which makes little sense if “green” is understood as “inexperienced,” as Van at this point is already quite carnally familiar with whorelets; during Van’s first guided tour of the estate, he and Ada pass a toolbox which “a pointer of sunlight daubed with

greener paint” (*Ada* 53) – this is the spot in which they first have sex upon his 1888 return, remaining together until “the first ray of light dab[s the] toolbox with fresh green paint” at dawn, at which point they go to breakfast, “as children in old fairy tales” as “the thrushes... sweetly whistl[e] in the bright-green garden as the dark-green shadows [draw] in their claws” (*Ada* 191). This image linguistically connects verdant Ardis to Van’s solipsistic depiction of his relationship with Ada, in which, momentarily, “reality... [loses] the quotes it wore like claws” (*Ada* 220), especially in conjunction with the earlier image of the garden as a site of “green reality.”

In addition, there seems to be a connection between Ada and Eve. The first time Van catches a glimpse of her undressed, she is washing herself over an “old-fashioned basin with a rococo stand” around which “a fat snake of porcelain [is] curled”, and, “as both the reptile and he stop to watch Eve,” she drops “a big mulberry-colored cake of soap” (*Ada* 60). This image of Ada clasping an apple-like object, connected with a pillar and a serpent, connects to a later Edenic sex scene, which augments the connection between Ardis and paradise:

She fondled him; she entwined him; thus a tendril climber coils round a column, swathing it tighter and tighter, biting into its neck ever sweeter, then dissolving strength in deep crimson softness. There was a crescent eaten out of a vine leaf by a sphingid larva. (*Ada* 141)

However, it is here that the idea of Ardis-as-Eden begins to deteriorate. Both the description of Ada-at-the-sink and that of Ada-the-column-climber resemble Parmigianino’s little-known (on Antiterra, that is) painting of “Eve on the Clepsydrone,” which has nothing to do with paradise and which is said to resemble Marina:

It showed a naked girl with a peach-like apple cupped in her half-raised hand sitting sideways on a convolvulus-garlanded support, and had for its discoverer the additional appeal of recalling Marina... [it also contained

Eve's] raised shoulder and... certain vermiculated effects of delicate vegetation (*Ada* 13)

The Edenic sex scene appears as a metamorphosis between a series of paintings: at first, Ada and Van resemble a picture that “might have been attributed to Michelangelo da Caravaggio in his youth,” of “two misbehaving youths, boy and girl, in an ivied or vined grotto” (*Ada* 140). Van goes on to describe the “caravagesque light” of his erection jutting through her dark hair, then attempts to place her in another painting – “Whose brush was it now? A titillant Titian? A drunken Palma Vecchio? ... Dosso Dossi, perhaps?”, but cannot decide until she rises and “the Dutch [takes] over: Girl stepping into a pool under the little cascade to wash her tresses” (*Ada* 141). In this way, Van explicitly compares Ada’s appearance both before and after the sexual act to paintings, and although he does not mention the parallel between the actual sexual act and the Parmigianino painting, the similarities are striking: Eve’s “raised shoulder” (*Ada* 13) finds its reflection in Ada’s “raised ivory shoulder” (*Ada* 140); Van’s metaphor for oral sex (“thus a tendril climber coils round a column” [*Ada* 141]) mirrors the painting as well – his graceful euphemism for “penis” matches the “convolvulus-garlanded support” upon which Eve perches; finally, both the painting and the ardent encounter contain “vermiculated effects of delicate vegetation” (*Ada* 13): in Vaniada Eden in Ardis Park, there is “a crescent eaten out of a vine leaf by a sphinghid larva” (*Ada* 141). Significantly, this vignette is preceded by the first hint that Ardis as a green and gold paradise is a transient phenomenon:

Their immoderate exploitation of physical joy amounted to madness and would have curtailed their young lives had not summer, which had appeared in prospect as a boundless flow of *green glory and freedom*, begun to hint hazily at possibly failings and fadings, at the fatigue of its fugue – the last resort of nature, felicitous alliterations...

(*Ada* 139, italics mine)

Here, the immoderately blissful freedom presupposed by Van and Ada is inextricably linked with the color green, and thus with the initial Edenic ardor: however, contained in this description is the inherent impossibility of sustaining this Eden.

The connection of Ada with Eve does not place her in Eden, but rather in the Parmigianino painting – her resemblance to the picture does not serve to indicate the blissful essence of Ada and Van’s time together at Ardis; rather, it hints at the couple’s future jealousy, betrayal, and cruelty. Brian Boyd has pointed out that “Proust pervades *Ada*, especially in connection with jealousy” (Boyd 2011) and that the image of Eve on the Clepsydrone is borrowed from *La Prisonnière*<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, this allusion implicitly connects Eve with infidelity; further, it explicitly connects the two in that it recalls Marina in the midst of being unfaithful to Demon, “rung out of a hotel bathroom by the phone,” while her other lover runs a bath for her, slyly asking the other man “something that [Demon] could not make out because the bath’s voice drowned her whisper” (*Ada* 13). This image of Marina characterizes the deterioration of any viable future between Demon and her – Demon writes her, irate, in mid-April 1869 to describe “one image [he] shall not forget and will not forgive”:

Your voice was remote but sweet; you said you were in Eve’s state, hold the line, let me put on a *penyuar*. Instead, blocking my ear, you spoke, I suppose, to the man with whom you had spent the night [Baron d’Onksy]... Now *that* is the sketch made by [Parmigianino]... coinciding, except for the apple of terrible knowledge, with an image repeated in two men’s minds.

(*Ada* 16)

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<sup>6</sup> III, 99-100: "Waiting for her to finish her call, I wondered why, since so many painters are trying to revive the female portraiture of the eighteenth century in which the ingenious setting is a pretext for expressions of waiting, sulking, interest, or revery, why none of our modern Bouchers . . . paints, instead of 'The Letter,' or 'The Harpsichord,' a scene that could be called: 'At the telephone,' where a smile would come to life on the lips of the woman listening that would be all the truer because unaware of being seen".

Both Marina and Ada bear a striking likeness to the picture, and, since it is so intimately tied with infidelity and rage, it forms another loop in the pattern of the subtextual dark and destructive undertones of Van and Ada's relationship, which they ignore or overlook, caught as they are in the "pardonable blindness of ascending bliss" (*Ada* 213). The "epithelial alliteration" (*Ada* 19) of Marina-Ada-Eve draws a comparison between the behavior of Ada-and-Van and Marina-and-Demon, something that Van's discourse explicitly forbids, as he depicts Marina as "a dummy in human disguise" (*Ada* 252) whom Van and Ada regard with complete contempt. However, Ada's behavior once Van discovers her affairs eerily mirrors Marina's: when Demon questions her, Marina weaves "a picturesque tissue of lies, then [breaks] down and confesse[s]" (*Ada* 14), just like Ada, who conceals her relationships with Herr Rack and Percy de Prey from Van, lying to him for an entire summer about her involvement with both of them. Ada's two lovers – Herr Rack (ailing, dying, impotent) and Percy de Prey (enlisted in the army) – are echoed in Marina's description of Count d'Or as "a physical wreck and a spiritual Samurai" (*Ada* 14). Van and Demon react in the same fashion – both attempt to seek revenge, and both are denied the satisfaction of actually killing their rival: d'Or does not die of a wound Demon inflicts on him during their duel, but rather "of a gangrenous afterthought... possibly self-inflicted... which caused circulatory trouble" (*Ada* 15); Percy de Prey is killed in the Crimean War and Rack dies in the hospital after being poisoned by his wife. Thus, the painting and its associations equate Ada's behavior with Marina's, thus contradicting the novel's claim that Ada and Van's love is somehow ontologically superior to other loves, that they are somehow "a unique super-imperial couple" among "billions of brilliant couples in that one cross section of... spacetime" (*Ada* 71).

The dissolution of the paradisiacal illusion of both of these motifs (i.e., the motifs of Ada-as-Eve and of green as a signifier of the paradisiacal nature of Ardis) inevitably involves Lucette, whom Brian Boyd has called “*Ada’s* moral center” (Boyd 1985: 125). Her too-soon, callously overlooked sexual awakening is connected with the cake of mulberry soap and therefore with the dark underbelly of Ardis. When Ada and Van attempt to confine Lucette to the “liquid prison” (*Ada* 144) of the bath in order to rid themselves of her so they can have sex undisturbed, she stands “with the mulberry soap between her legs” and cries, “I’m Van” (*Ada* 144). It is later revealed that the soap was at an erect angle. Once Ada and Van realize that Lucette had previously caught sight of them in coitus, Van says, “Good lord! ... That explains the angle of the soap” (*Ada* 152). Thus, Lucette’s premature understanding of sexuality is linked with both the patterns that constitute the dissolution of the Edenic imagery and with the painting of Eve on the Clepsydorophone, inextricably connecting her with the pattern of jealousy, loss, and Eden undermined.

In addition, Lucette, too, is intimately connected with sunlight and with the color green. She is consistently depicted as wearing green: in “her green nightgown” (*Ada* 64) and “in her green pajamas” (*Ada* 229) at Ardis, in her “remarkably well-filled green shorts” (*Ada* 280) returning from a picnic, “in a lustrous cantharid green” (*Ada* 410) out to dinner with Ada and Van before their “*debauche a trois*” (*Ada* 554) and “still in her willow green nightie” (*Ada* 417) during it, in a green bikini with an “emerald-studded cigarette case” (*Ada* 479) on the ocean liner, described, post-mortem as simply “Lucette in glistening green” (*Ada* 575). Her connection with sunlight, too, is apparent in Van’s dismissive description: “With Lucette herself, he was only obliquely concerned: she inhabited this or that dapple of drifting sunlight, but could not be wholly dismissed with the rest of sun-flecked Ardis” (*Ada* 367).

Once verdant Ardis has been left behind irrevocably, Lucette appears as a continuation of it – the shades of paradise lost are transferred onto her; in this way, she comes to embody the shattered illusion of blissful solipsism. This is not a mere conflation of Lucette with the manor, however: her association with the Edenic aspects of Ardis doesn't reduce her to a background image in Van and Ada's enchanted garden. The green of Ardis becomes a tool with which she spells out her despair and highlights the suffering Van and Ada attempt to overlook. In Manhattan, after the brother and sister force Lucette to partake in what they assume is a harmless sexual game but which is really a cruel near-rape (she is held down in "a martyr's pudibund swoon" [Ada 418] with "pried-open legs" [Ada 419]), Lucette vanishes and leaves a "note scrawled in Arlen Eyelid Green... pinned to the pillow" (Ada 420) proclaiming that she is "so miserable" (Ada 421). Finally, she commits suicide by "gulp[ing] down one-by-one four green pills" (Ada 492). The horrific transformation of green – from a suffusion of paradise to a reminder of what has been lost to a marker of complete misery – shows how, as in *Lolita*, Van and Ada's "lifelong dream" has "overshot its mark—and plunged into a nightmare" (*Lolita* 140).

Further, both Lucette and the color green are entangled in the motif of poetry and (mis)translation that occurs throughout the text: Brian Boyd points out that Van and Ada's dinner table conversation in Chapter 10 provides a starting point for a "charged accumulation of [subtextual] meaning which builds [throughout the novel] until we are hurled into a new dimension of understanding" (Boyd 1985: 45); on the surface, the reader is dazzled by Ada and Van's wit, intelligence, and compatibility, all of which encourages him/her to "fail to make a necessary judgment" (Boyd 1985: 40), i.e., to recognize the couple's brutal callousness to Marina, who they condescend and exclude from their esoteric discourse. Further, this scene anticipates the loss of

contact and jealousy that is to plague Van and Ada's relationship. It is at this dinner that Rimbaud's "*Mémoire*" and Marvell's "The Garden" are introduced; on the surface level, this is "Nabokov's economical way of showing that Van and Ada knew the two poems and knew that the other knew them" (Boyd 1985: 40), allowing the duo to later use these two poems as the basis of their coded correspondence once the summer ends and they leave Ardis. However, the rereader, aware that the breakdown of this correspondence foreshadows Ada's infidelities and Van's rage (Boyd 1985: 6), is sensitive to the disillusionment implied by the presence of the two poems: this subtextual refutation of Van and Ada's blind passion is augmented by the way in which Lucette is identified with the poetry, since Lucette's continued suffering blatantly contradicts Van's depiction of his and Ada's relationship as blissful and ideal. Thus, the grouping of "*Mémoire*" and "The Garden" is not only connected with the failings of Van and Ada's relationship itself, but also it serves to foreshadow Lucette's too-early initiation into the carnal world as well as her suicide.

Boyd argues that Ada's lushly witty criticism of Wallace Fowlie's 1946 mistranslation of "*Mémoire*" (she rails against "the transformation of *souci d'eau* (our marsh marigold) into the asinine 'care of the water'—although [Fowlie] had at his disposal dozens of synonyms, such as mollyblob, marybud, maybubble, and many other nicknames associated with fertility feasts" [Ada 65]) implicitly and "unmistakably" connects the mistranslation with Molly Bloom's "famous musing on the blob of a ruptured hymen" in *Ulysses*<sup>7</sup>, thus anticipating Lucette's suicide, which occurs "after she fails to entice Van to deflower her" (Boyd 1985: 36-7). Further,

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<sup>7</sup> This connection is strengthened by the fact that Ada's "marginal note" regarding her own loss of virginity is "written in red ink" (Ada 129). This imagistically connects with Bloom's speech, in which she claims that men "always want to see a stain on the bed to know you're a virgin for them... they're such fools too you could be a widow or divorced 40 times over a daub of red ink would do" (Joyce as quoted by Boyd, 36).

Lucette and the color green are conflated with, and effectively embedded, into the poem:

“our learned governess [said Ada]... drew my attention... to some really gorgeous bloomers... in a Mr. Fowlie’s *soi-disant* literal version... of *Mémoire*, a poem by Rimbaud...”  
“...*les robes vertes et déteintes des fillettes*...” quoted Van triumphantly.....  
“...Incidentally, she [Larivière, the governess] will come down after tucking in Lucette, our darling copperhead, who by now should be in her green nightgown—”  
“*Angel moy*,” pleaded Marina, “I’m sure Van cannot be interested in Lucette’s nightdress!”  
“—the nuance of the willows, and counting the little sheep on her *ciel de lit* which Fowlie turns into ‘*the sky’s bed*’ instead of ‘bed ceiler.’”

(Ada 64)

Rimbaud’s little girls in green dresses (“*les robes vertes... des fillettes*”) are in this way connected with Lucette, a little girl similarly garbed in green. Ada furthers this comparison by continuing the poem—despite the indignant interjection of Marina, who fails to see the reference and takes Ada’s comment as solely sexual—adding “the nuance of the willows,” which connects with Rimbaud’s imagery: (literal translation: “The green and faded dresses of little girls/make willows, from which birds jump without restraint”) and furthers this association by referring to Lucette’s bed as “her *ciel de lit*,” which is also taken from “*Mémoire*.” Lucette is discursively absorbed into the poem—as mentioned earlier, when Van and Ada nearly rape Lucette in Manhattan, she is wearing a “willow green nightie” (Ada 417), which connects that scene of depraved insensitivity to both the dinner conversation that foreshadowed Lucette’s premature loss of innocence *as well as* to the Rimbaud poem itself. This serves to implicate Lucette in the dissolution of the illusion of Ardis as a paradise by both involving Lucette in the subtextual transformation of “*Mémoire*” and “The Garden” into signifiers of jealousy and loss and by indicating that the poems themselves are affected by the changing connotation of the color green.

Marvell's "The Garden," too, is ensnared in this pattern: thematically, both Van and Marvell refigure Eden in terms of solipsism and invention (Van's creation of Antiterra mirrors Marvell's notion of a solitary, mental paradise: "Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less,/Withdraws into its happiness:/...it creates, transcending these,/Far other worlds, and other seas..." [Marvell, lines 40-6]); linguistically, images and phrases from "The Garden" reoccur throughout the text. Marvell's "green thought in a green shade" (Marvell, line 48) is mirrored in the "dark-green shadows" in the "bright green garden" of Ardis (*Ada* 191). As Boyd notes, Van's first departure from Ada is a pastiche created from fragments of Rimbaud and Marvell: Van is described as "stumbling on melons, fiercely beheading the tall arrogant fennels with his riding crop..." (*Ada* 159): the first half of this sentence comes directly from line 39 of "The Garden," and the "arrogant fennels" of the second half come from lines 18-19 of "*Mémoire*" (Boyd 1985: 9). As mentioned earlier, this departure sets the stage for Ada's infidelity, Van's brutality, and the complete collapse of Ardis as Eden. In addition, Marvell later becomes a signifier of the vulgar, unromantic side of Van and Ada's ardor: Ada shows Van a collection of photographs taken by Kim Beauharnais, the kitchen boy, of the couple engaging in coitus over the years, one of which is of an "interesting plant, Marvel's Melon, imitating the backside of an occupied lad [Van having sex with Ada]" (*Ada* 405). This specific reference implicates both the original poem and Van and Ada's first separation, and these two conflicting sets of meaning are encapsulated in Van's response to the album: "That ape has vulgarized our mind-pictures" (*Ada* 406). In Van's reaction, it is made clear that he privileges the 'reality' of his own constructed "mind-pictures" over the comparative objectivity of a photograph; here, the original, idyllic connotation of the poem as a signifier of Van and Ada's wittiness and an appeal to a literary tradition is

juxtaposed with its subtexual, secondary connotation, which expresses the brutal effects of Van and Ada's intense egotism, by which they harm not only those around them, but also each other.

This pattern of mistranslation and transformation as connected with the pastoral/Edenic as well as the color green is shown perhaps most strikingly in Ada's strange "revised monologue of [the] mad king" in *King Lear*:

*Ce beau jardin fleurit en mai,  
Mais en hiver  
Jamais, jamais, jamais, jamais, jamais  
N'est vert, n'est vert, n'est vert, n'est vert, n'est vert.*  
[Darkbloom: "This beautiful garden blooms in May, but in Winter never,  
never, never, never is green etc."] (Ada 92)

Ada has taken Lear's final speech, a moment of supreme and devastating tragedy, and drained it of all emotional substance. Her "revision" is undeniably clever: the way in which she transfigures Lear's famous "Never, never, never, never, never" into "N'est vert, n'est vert," etc., thus losing the sense but retaining the sound, is simultaneously genius and meretricious. Ada's "translation" thus mirrors Van's composition of *Ada* itself in that its brilliantly alluring style belies a nearly depraved indifference to the suffering of others. It can hardly be seen as a coincidence that Ada changes the subject of Lear's monologue from emotional agony to a green garden, especially since Ada is also able to recite Marvell's "The Garden" in "[her] own [French] transversion," "*Le jardin*" (Ada 65). Ada's *King Lear* translation thus constitutes another link in the subtexual pattern linking green with the transformation of Ardis from an illusory paradise to a hell, and, following this pattern, it regains a connotation of suffering when Van's solipsistic world collapses. Once Van finds out about Ada's other lovers and leaves the estate, Ada's phrase resurfaces in his tortured stream of consciousness, in which he attempts to place himself within the literary tradition:

“She [Anna Karenina] walked to the end of the platform in Tolstoy’s novel. First exponent of the interior monologue, later exploited by the French and Irish. *N’est vert, n’est vert, n’est vert...* Never, never shall I hear again her ‘botanical’ voice...” (*Ada* 300). It is notable that Van’s stream-of-consciousness keeps Shakespeare’s meter (i.e., the five “never”s), transforming halfway from French to English and thus semantically moving from the lack of green to loss in general and readopting the connotation of tragedy by effectively keeping Shakespeare’s original line intact.

While the green pattern occurs throughout the novel as an indication that Ardis-as-paradise is a doomed illusion and as a reminder of Lucette’s suffering, there is another chromatic subtexual pattern which serves to indicate the various aspects of Van and Ada’s cruelty: the solipsistic illusion of romance, the selfish compulsions inherent in Ada’s sexual awakening, destruction, and the attempt to make all of the above seem alluring. This pattern is reified in Chateaubriand’s mosquito, “*Culex chateaubriandi* Brown” (*Ada* 105), an obvious reference to the author on whose *Romance a Hélène* the “theme poem” for Van and Ada’s love is based. He provides a romantic point of reference for the pair, as his novella *René* is “a story... about a pair of romantic siblings” (*Ada* 133); Ada sometimes calls Van “*cher, trop cher René...in gentle jest*” (*Ada* 131)<sup>8</sup>. This theme poem becomes connected with loss as the novel

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<sup>8</sup> This connection between the itch of Chateaubriand’s mosquito bite and the itch of incestuous ardor is strengthened by the anagram game that 12-year-old Ada plays at a picnic with innocent Grace Erimin, her neighbor and coeval: Grace suggests they use the word “insect,” and Ada comes up with the anagrams “scient” and “incest” (*Ada* 85), neither of which Grace recognizes as a word. This game, which is the scene in which Ada’s precocious sexuality is referred to for the first time, is referenced throughout the book: Ada is described by her archaic adjective “scient” (*Ada* 136) in the chapter in which she and Van research incest and copulation in the library; at the picnic which a drunken Percy de Prey crashes, Ada notes “it seems so long, long ago... that I used to play word games here... ‘Insect, incest, nicest’” (*Ada* 266); when Ada visits Van in Manhattan with Kim’s photographs, Van describes himself as “omniscient... Better say, omni-incest” (*Ada* 394).

progresses: it first appears as a signifier of happiness immediately before the oral sex scene which connects Ada with Eve on the Clepsydorophone; it reappears upon Van's 1888 return as a realization of what has been altered in Ardis – Van attempts to comfort himself by saying “Nothing, nothing has changed!... ‘My sister, do you still recall...’”, to which Ada responds “Oh shut up!... I’ve given up all that stuff” (*Ada* 192); Van repeats it bitterly (“*Oh! Qui rendra mon Hélène—*“ [*Ada* 530]) upon learning that Ada is going to remain with Andrey Vineland, her new husband whom he would have her divorce in order to be with him.

Nabokov ties Chateaubriand's mosquito elaborately to both the insatiable, obsessive nature of Van and Ada's desire and to the suffering it causes – during the first summer, its bites cause Ada to be plagued by an “excruciating itch” (*Ada* 106); she cannot control her urge to scratch it, to the extent that her “unfortunate fingernails [would] stay garnet-stained and, after a particularly ecstatic, lost-to-the-world session of scratching, blood literally streamed down her shins” (*Ada* 107); this painful, compulsive reaction to an itch is mirrored in her later appeal to Van:

Van, you are responsible for having let loose something mad in me when we were only children, a physical hankering, *an insatiable itch*. The fire you rubbed left its brand on the most vulnerable, most vicious and tender point of my body. Now I have to pay for your rasping the red rash too strongly, too soon... (*Ada* 334, italics mine)

Just as Ada cannot control her urge to scratch her bug bites until blood pours down her legs, she cannot prevent herself from succumbing to her ardent itch – leading her into unfaithfulness.

Further, Chateaubriand's mosquito ties into another color motif – one that links yellow-black with suffering and destruction. The insect is described as having “small black palpi... hyaline wings... yellowy in certain lights” (*Ada* 106). Black and

yellow figure through *Ada* as harbingers of death and doom: Aqua is wearing “yellow slacks and a black bolero” (*Ada* 28) when she commits suicide; when Van is summoned to Marina’s room so that she can warn him about the adverse effect his romantic attentions are having on Lucette, he is wearing “a black training suit, with two yellow cushions propped under his head” (*Ada* 230); during the picnic at which Percy de Prey and Van get into a brawl that leads to Percy challenging Van to a duel, Ada is wearing “maize yellow slacks” and a “ribbon of black silk” in her hair (*Ada* 266); when Van learns of Ada’s unfaithfulness and perceives himself as “a dead man going through the motions of an imagined dreamer,” Ada is wearing “yellow slacks and a black bolero” (*Ada* 295); finally, immediately preceding her suicide, Lucette changes “into black slacks and a lemon shirt” (*Ada* 492).

Further, black and yellow are connected to another prominent and repeated anagram. While playing Scrabble, “Lucette’s blocks form the very amusing VANIADA, and from this she extract[s] the very piece of furniture she [is] in the act of referring to in a peevish little voice: ‘But I, too, perhaps, would like to sit on the divan” (*Ada* 226). It is on this divan, which is “covered in black velvet, with two yellow cushions” (*Ada* 41) that Ada and Van first consummate their love on the night of the Burning Barn. In Ada and Van’s Manhattan apartment, too, they have “a black divan [with] yellow cushions” (*Ada* 425); when Lucette offers herself to Van she tells him “my divan is black with yellow cushions” (*Ada* 464) in an attempt to entice him. In this way, Van and Ada’s complete absorption in each other, and Lucette’s complete exclusion from it, is patterned in the colors of pain and linguistically reified through a conflation of the divan anagram contained in VANIADA. Their union takes place in a linguistic hall of mirrors: they physically become one on top of an object that connotes their complete union.

Further, Ada's name itself contains and reflects this motif. According to David Eagleman, Nabokov named Ada after a yellow-black-yellow butterfly that he was "particularly fond of": as a synesthete, Nabokov associates A with yellow and D with black, so he sees said butterfly in Ada's name (Strainchamps 2006). In Van's unposted letter to Ada, which he sends after Lucette's death, he refers to Ada as "my Zegrís butterfly" (*Ada* 500)<sup>9</sup>, a species known for the black and yellow pattern on the underside of its wings. Therefore, Ada's name itself is connected with suffering and loss – which is made manifest throughout the book in the continued reminders that *ada* means hell or Hades in Russian: Aqua's original note is signed "my sister's sister who *teper' iz ada* ('now is out of hell')" (*Ada* 29); Ada characterizes her second letter to Van after he leaves her as "a second howl *iz ada* (out of Hades)" (*Ada* 332); Van describes her as "Adockha, *adova dochka* (Hell's daughter)" (*Ada* 403) as they're looking through Kim's stills; when discussing death, Ada says that she will be with Van "in the depths *moego ada*, of my Hades" (*Ada* 583). Thus, hell, suffering, and destruction are all contained *within Ada's name*, which itself refers back to Chateaubriand.

However, to claim, as Boyd has done, that Nabokov alone is responsible for the entire pattern of subtextual condemnation of Van and Ada's behavior fails to give enough credit to Van as a narrator. Like Humbert Humbert, Van utilizes his narratorial agency to create a separate reality that serves to redeem his novel from solipsism: the story is ostensibly set on Antiterra, a planet separated from our earth by a chronological "gap of up to a hundred years... a gap marked by a bizarre confusion of directional signs at the crossroads of passing time with not *all* the no-longers of one

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<sup>9</sup> In a dizzyingly genius move, this butterfly connects back to Chateaubriand as well – Zegrís is the name of one of the "Families of Granada Moors" whose "feud inspired Chateaubriand" (601), as Darkbloom notes.

world corresponding to the not-yets of another” (*Ada* 18); our earth, known on Antiterra as Terra, is described as “a distortive glass of [their] distorted glebe” (*Ada* 18). On one level, Van’s creation of Antiterra allows him to institute a separate logic and system of morals: Antiterra is much more sexually permissive than Terra, which slightly (but obviously not completely) lessens the sense of depravity that lingers around Van and Ada’s relationship. On another level, though, Van’s admission that Antiterra is his own fabrication allows the reader to understand that this separate reality is structured around the unspeakable disaster of Lucette’s suicide.

In the penultimate chapter of his family chronicle, Van admits that Antiterra does not exist in describing the popular reaction to his ‘science fiction’ novel, *Letters from Terra*, in which he allegedly outlined Terranian reality:

From the tremendous correspondence that piled up on Van’s desk during a few years of world fame, one gathered that thousands of more or less unbalanced people believed... in the secret Government-concealed identity of Terra and Antiterra. Demonian [a synonym of Antiterranian] reality dwindled to a casual illusion. Actually, we had passed all through all that. Politicians, dubbed Old Felt and Uncle Joe [Stalin] in forgotten comics, had really existed. Tropical countries meant, not only Wild Nature Reserves but famine, and death, and ignorance, and shamans, and agents from distant Atomsk. Our world *was*, in fact, mid-twentieth-century. Terra convalesced after enduring the rack and the stake, the bullies and beasts that Germany inevitably generates when fulfilling her dreams of glory. Russian peasants and poets had not been transported to Estotiland, and the Barren Grounds, ages ago—they were dying, at this very moment, in the slave camps of Tartary. Even the governor of France was not Charlie Chose, the suave nephew of Lord Goal, but a bad-tempered French general [Charles de Gaulle].

(*Ada* 582)

The implications of Antiterra as an authorial creation are crucial in understanding Van’s subtle display of morality and remorse. One of the defining features that distinguishes Demonian history from that of Terra is that, on Antiterra, electricity has been banned following an incident vaguely referred to as “the L disaster,” which “had the singular effect of both causing and cursing the notion of ‘Terra’” (*Ada* 17), and

which resulted in the replacement of all electrical appliances with water- and clockwork-powered machines. On first reading, it would seem that “L” is some kind of shorthand for “electricity,” since that word is forbidden on Antiterra – however, what is unclear is how the L disaster was responsible for causing the notion of Terra. However, taking into account Van’s admission that Antiterra does not exist, it becomes evident that the L stands for Lucette, and the L disaster does not refer a “well-known historically and obscene spiritually” (*Ada* 17) occurrence, but rather to the moment that Lucette committed suicide by drowning herself after being callously rebuked by Van for the final time. Thus, Van has immersed his novel in the medium of Lucette’s death and the impossibility of changing it: travel and long-distance communication is mediated through imagery that refers to time and to water: “old clockwork taxi[s]” (*Ada* 35), “clockwork luggage carts” (*Ada* 115), “hydrodynamic telephones” (*Ada* 23) and “hydrograms” (*Ada* 178), to name a few.

Further, the fiction of Antiterra indicates that the Parmigianino painting of “Eve on the Clepsydorophone” is Van’s creation, too, because it only exists on Antiterra. This would mean that Van, not Nabokov, is behind the warped Edenic imagery; this is further evidenced by the fact that there is no way that Van could have known what, exactly, happened between Marina and Demon. His and Ada’s knowledge of their affair is secondhand, gleaned from incredibly obscure hints left on the back of a wedding photograph and in a nearly nonsensical botanical journal kept by Marina when she “sojourned [in Switzerland] before her marriage” (*Ada* 7)<sup>10</sup>, and

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<sup>10</sup> Van and Ada are able to “collate [the] date (December 16, 1871)” of Marina and Dan’s real wedding “with another (August 16, same year) anachronistically scrawled in Marina’s hand across the corner” of her and Dan’s wedding picture (*Ada* 6), thus realizing that Marina is lying about the date of her wedding in order to conceal the fact that she was pregnant with Ada – who Demon fathered – at the time of her wedding to Dan. The “regular little melodrama acted out by the ghosts of dead

through Demon's 1869 letter to Marina, which was mentioned earlier. However, upon reexamining this letter, it is conceivable that it provided a flimsy frame onto which Van projected an invented past: the letter vaguely refers to Marina's acting career, to Demon's love for her, to her unfaithfulness, and to a "sketch made by a young artist in Parma, in the sixteenth century, for [a] fresco..." (*Ada* 16), but Baron d'Onsky is never named, nor is the exact sketch. The possibility that Marina and Demon's past has been embellished and fictionalized by Van is strengthened by the fact that the arc of Marina and Demon's relationship borrows from a variety of literary sources: Demon and Marina meet for the first time when she is playing Tatyana in an "American play based by some pretentious hack on a famous Russian romance [*Eugene Onegin*]" (*Ada* 10); as Boyd notes, the "orchestra-seat neighbor" (*Ada* 10) whom he bets that he will sleep with Marina before the show is over is named Prince N., the name of Tatyana's husband in *Eugene Onegin* (Boyd 2011); the Baron d'O of the play both stands in for Onegin and prefigures Baron d'Onsky, Marina's lover; the description of Marina's emotions on stage semantically mirror Emma's in *Madame Bovary*, during the performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor* at which she is inspired to begin an affair with Léon (Boyd 2011); Boyd also notes that

[T]he date of the action, 1868, the location, New York, the snow and the evocation of Demon and Marina driving home through the snow seem to point to a deliberate echo of the opening of a novel that itself offers a late echo of the nineteenth-century theater scene: *The Age of Innocence* (1920), by Edith Wharton.

(Boyd 2011)

All this indicates that, although Van and Ada *do* unarguably know about the fact of the relationship, there is no conceivable way that they could be aware of specific details; thus, Van borrows and invents the details of Marina and Demon's past.

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flowers" (*Ada* 7) contained in Marina's botanizing album reveals—albeit very obscurely—Marina's pregnancy, Van's birth, and Aqua's miscarriage. See Boyd, 2011.

Therefore, because it is apparent that Van's entire account of Marina and Demon's relationship is his own creation, it logically follows that the unfavorable parallel between Van and Ada and their parents is an intentional design on Van's part.

In addition, Van further undermines his own fictive universe through creating his own subtextual pattern: by repeating the image of Lucette's doll abandoned in a river, Van thematizes the cruel neglect he and Ada subjected her to and thus heightens his and Ada's connection to Demon and Marina by drawing a parallel between Lucette and "poor Aqua" (*Ada* 7, 21, 23). Aqua's stillborn child – which Demon and Marina later replace with Van in order to cover up their affair – appears as "a surprised little fetus, a fish of rubber that she had produced in her bath" (*Ada* 25); obviously, Van can't have known what the stillborn fetus looked like, or even that the miscarriage took place in a bath. This invented image serves both to sustain a connection between various instances of Ada and Van's inability to notice Lucette and to link Aqua's misfortune with the tragedy of Lucette's death via the medium of water.

This image reappears after the onset of Van and Ada's physical relationship, when the three (half- and whole-) siblings are playing by a stream:

Van... was searching for his wristwatch that he thought he had dropped among the forget-me-nots... Lucette... [was squatting] on the brink of the brook and float[ing] a fetus-sized rubber doll. Every now and then she squeezed out of it a fascinating stream squirt of water through a little hole that Ada had had the bad taste of perforate for her in the slippery orange-red toy  
(*Ada* 143)

By linking the stillborn fetus to Lucette's doll, Van equates Marina and Demon's cruelty to Aqua (it was not until after they resumed their affair that she had to be institutionalized, after all) with his and Ada's neglect of Lucette. The "surprised little fetus... of rubber" finds its reflection in the "fetus-sized rubber doll." Further, the

hole that Ada “had had the bad taste to perforate” in it (i.e., create for the doll genitals) reflects the way she carelessly and savagely exposes Lucette to sex. This connection to sex is heightened in a later picnic scene, after Van fights Percy de Prey and sees his used condom in the brook:

Van... recognized, with amused embarrassment, the transparent, tubular thing, not unlike a sea-squirt, that had got caught in its downstream course in a fringe of forget-me-nots.

*(Ada 275)*

Lucette’s doll is transformed into a fouled contraceptive, pointing to the degenerate side of Van and Ada’s supposedly beautiful and glorious love. Lucette’s sexual initiation is continued in this scene; she says, afterwards “I saw you—horseplaying” (*Ada 279*), referring, of course, not to the fight between the youths but rather to the intercourse between her half-siblings. Further, Van emphasizes the fouled image of the doll during his depiction of Lucette’s suicide:

[s]he did not see her whole life flash before her as we all were afraid she might have done; the red rubber of a favorite doll remained safely decomposed among the myosotes [the scientific family to which forget-me-nots belong] of an un-analyzable brook...

*(Ada 494)*

As with Marina and Demon’s past, it is obvious that Van is inventing Lucette’s final stream-of-consciousness, since he cannot possibly know what was going through her mind as she drowned. He metonymically substitutes the doll for Lucette’s whole life and thus endows it with a great deal of significance; this substitution also poignantly acknowledges his and Ada’s complete lack of compassion toward their half-sister and foregrounds their culpability in causing her suicide.

Thus, Van uses the image of the doll in order to contextualize Lucette’s suffering by connecting it with Aqua, to refer to the true “reality” of her familial relationships with Ada and himself, to represent her mistreatment at their hands, and

to foreshadow and encompass her suicide (the obvious cries of “forget me not!”). However, this image is not merely a signifier of remorse. It also possesses a redemptive quality and serves, in the final paragraph, as a still more blatant expression of regret. The book closes in flippant tone in a parody of a book jacket or a summary written by a careless reader who has taken the memoir at face value and revels in the “pure joyousness and Arcadian innocence” of the romance and who finds Lucette’s “tragic destiny... one of the highlights of this delightful book” (*Ada* 588). In seemingly vacuous praise of “the delicacy of pictorial detail,” this facetious summary lists a variety of pastoral images, in the midst of which is “a pretty plaything stranded among the forget-me-nots of a brook” (*Ada* 589). By closing the memoir with this metonymic image for poor, tormented Lucette, Van is highlighting her significance as a character and resisting what appears on the surface to be her relegation to the background.

Despite Ada and Van’s attempt to “redeem [their] childhood by making a book of it” (*Ada* 406), the Eden they envisioned as Ardis the first never existed; their increasing sadness the second summer was not a result of some form of expulsion from paradise, but rather an intrusion of reality. Through a sophisticated and subtle array of patterns, Nabokov reveals that the strength of Van and Ada’s passion never justified their self-indulgent behavior, not even in the stages when everything seemed idyllic and harmless. However, it is not Nabokov alone who condemns the selfish nature of their romance: Van uses his authorial role to, on one level, sustain and support his illusory and solipsistic worldview, and, on another, to undermine and call into question romantic love’s cruel undercurrent. In doing this, both Van and Nabokov emphasize Lucette and restore her neglected humanity through art.

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