

## Chapter Five

# Teaching *Lolita* in the Department of Drama

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“Flipping the paperback over, I see a pair of skinny legs in ankle socks and saddle shoes, a pleated skirt ending above the knobby knees. In big white letters across the legs: *Lolita*. I’ve heard the term somewhere before—an article about Fiona Apple, I think, a description of her as ‘Lolita-esque,’ meaning sexy and too young.” (Russell, *My Dark Vanessa* 72–73)<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION: *LOLITA* IN A COURSE ON DRAMA?

Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) might seem like a surprising choice to include in a course on drama and theatre. The eruption of the #MeToo movement in the fall of 2017 has led theatre and performance studies departments to reckon with their curricula and teaching methodologies. Issues of consent, casting choices, and the choreography of intimacy have become heated topics of debate. Wouldn’t *Lolita* be adding fuel to the fire? In fact, teaching *Lolita* alongside its afterlives on the stage and screen is a productive way to explore questions concerning consent, misogyny, sexual violence, as well as the process of adapting and reinterpreting problematic texts from the past.

Nabokov himself was wary of the potential adaptations of *Lolita*. Although he eventually allowed Stanley Kubrick to make a movie based on the novel in 1962, he expressed reservations: “It was perfectly all right for me to imagine a twelve-year-old Lolita. . . . She existed only in my head. But to make a real twelve-year-old play such a part would be sinful and immoral, and I would never consent to it.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, when describing to his American publisher what he would like to see on the book’s cover, which has since seen its share of risqué images, Nabokov wrote: “There is one subject

which I am emphatically opposed to: any kind of representation of a little girl.”<sup>3</sup> Still, despite Nabokov’s attempt to control the boundaries and reception of his novel, *Lolita* has inspired plays, films, a ballet, an opera, pop music, and fashion. Just as Dolly Haze eventually runs away from Humbert Humbert, so *Lolita* escapes Nabokov’s authorial control. Popular culture has usurped *Lolita* against Nabokov’s consent.<sup>4</sup> These ghosts of *Lolita*, particularly the ones that haunt the theatre and cinema, shed light on the brilliance of the novel’s moral framework as well as its limitations when it comes to the representation of Dolly’s body and voice.<sup>5</sup> No masterpiece is without flaw. Thus the cultural shift of #MeToo at once makes Nabokov’s novel an urgent read and calls for a rethinking of how to contextualize it. A diverse constellation of companion texts, including those drawn from dramatic literature and featuring women’s voices, will allow *Lolita* not only to weather the hurricane of #MeToo, but also to become one of the lodestars of this cultural moment.

I teach *Lolita* in an honors seminar titled “Banned: Transgression and Censorship in the Theatre.” The central questions of the course are: What is the relationship between theatre-making and censorship? Which forms does censorship take and what does it look like in the digital era? How do artists evade, outsmart, or openly defy restrictions on specific content and representations and their creative freedom in general? Students, most of whom are fledgling actors, playwrights, directors, and theatre-makers, examine artistic constraints in different times and across geographical borders. Some of the central issues of the course include political and economic pressure, self-censorship, obscenity, and the relationship between art and law. Each week we focus on one specific case in theatre history, investigating why a given play or performance was banned. In addition, the course looks at stage adaptations of banned books (or books that were once banned) and asks what draws theatre-makers to transgressive content in works like Marquis de Sade’s *La philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795), Pierre Choderlos de Laclos’ *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782), and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955).

## ADAPTING LOLITA

One of the first questions to arise in classroom discussions of *Lolita* is whether the novel is adaptable. After all, there has never been an aesthetically or commercially successful theatrical version of the novel, and, to this day, Stanley Kubrick’s film remains the most positively received adaptation of *Lolita* into any medium. Moreover, one of the most notorious flops in musical theatre history is John Barry and Alan Jay Lerner’s *Lolita, My Love* (1971). Alan Jay Lerner, the lyricist of *My Fair Lady* (1956), approached the British composer John Barry with an idea for a musical based on Nabokov’s novel. Richard Burton was initially cast in the role of Humbert, but turned it

down, passing the baton to Shakespearean veteran John Neville. Although critics praised Neville's performance, *Lolita, My Love* closed in Boston after just nine performances. Despite its colossal commercial failure (the production lost \$900,000), many critics lauded Lerner's lyrics.<sup>6</sup> Song titles included "In the Broken Promise of Land of Fifteen," "March Out of My Life," "How Far Is It to the Next Town?" and "Going, Going, Gone," which became the tagline of one particularly scathing review. Graham Vickers wonders whether audiences were simply not "ready for a musical about a child molester."<sup>7</sup> *Lolita, My Love* would have to wait until the spring of 2019 to have its New York premiere, when the York Theatre Company presented a limited run of a positively reviewed workshop production as part of the Musicals in Mufti Series (on which more later).

Another infamous attempt at adapting *Lolita* for the stage was Edward Albee's *Lolita* (1981). After a tryout run in Boston, the show opened in New York and was greeted by the activist group Women Against Pornography that stood outside with placards that read "Incest Isn't Sexy" and "Rape Isn't Funny."<sup>8</sup> The Broadway production closed after twelve performances. America of the 1980s was a decisively different political and cultural landscape than what it had been in the 1950s, when Nabokov's novel was first published. Was it the historical situation—the height of the feminist sex wars—or was it something intrinsic to the novel itself that made Albee's adaptation problematic?

In the introduction to his ponderous screenplay of *Lolita* (which Kubrick wisely did not use), Nabokov claimed that he was "no dramatist."<sup>9</sup> As students are quick to point out, however, Nabokov makes numerous references to theatre, cinema, and the performing arts throughout *Lolita*. Indeed, Nabokov maintained an active interest in theatre throughout his life. During the beginning of his émigré sojourn in Prague, Berlin, and Paris, Nabokov penned plays in Russian—*The Tragedy of Mister Morn* (1923), *The Pole* (1923), *The Man from the USSR* (1926), *The Event* (1938), and *The Waltz Invention* (1938). And Nabokov's first academic appointment in the United States in 1940 was teaching drama at Stanford University. Yet, as Siggie Frank has shown, while theatre "as metaphor, structural principle, theme and context" is "an essential and pervasive element of his fiction," Nabokov, like most modernists, holds an antitheatrical prejudice.<sup>10</sup> To put it another way, although play and theatricality are important motifs for Nabokov, drama holds value for him as printed text and not as theatrical performance, which is associated with the loss of authorial control, deception, and even posh-lost.<sup>11</sup> It is not by accident that Dolly's acting in the high school play *The Enchanted Hunters* is connected to her betrayal of and escape from Humbert. The play's author, Clare Quilty, is a playwright-turned-pornographer, who kicks Dolly out of his Duk Duk ranch for refusing to participate in his pornographic films. By making the "clearly guilty" character a theatre-maker

and by presenting the world of theatre as a space of treachery, Nabokov exhibits an “ancient distrust of the stage” and a deep-seated hostility toward theatricality that has characterized the Western civilization since Plato.<sup>12</sup> Thus *Lolita*, a novel that Nabokov called “the record of [his] love affair” with the English language, is mainly invested in exploring the power of literature.<sup>13</sup> The moral issues at stake in the text are intricately and intimately connected to the language in which they are raised. However, despite his antitheatrical prejudice and desire for authorial control, Nabokov could not contain the contents of his novel from spilling into other media.<sup>14</sup> In my seminar, the students and I take the case of *Lolita*’s afterlives as an opportunity to explore Linda Hutcheon’s claim that adaptation is not simply “a formal entity or product,” but also “a process of creation,” as “the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation.”<sup>15</sup> Our current culture is saturated with adaptations, and it is likely that, as artists, my students too one day will be involved in the creative act of adaptation. What can the stage and screen versions of *Lolita* teach them?

The story of *Lolita*’s publication and its subsequent transmedial migrations to visual culture, the stage, the screen, and (most disturbingly) to internet pornography reads as a cautionary tale about the unsustainability of the modernist dream of medium specificity. The secondary readings that are helpful to read along with *Lolita* in order to discuss both the moral stakes of the novel and its transmedial afterlives are Clement Greenberg’s “Modernist Painting,” Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation*, and Henry Jenkins’ *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. In a way, *Lolita* makes a strong case for what Greenberg famously called “medium specificity,” namely “the unique and proper area of competence of each art” that “coincide[s] with all that [i]s unique to the nature of its medium.”<sup>16</sup> On the one hand, Nabokov’s novel is deeply invested in the process of remediation, which Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin define as “the representation of one medium in another.”<sup>17</sup> There are numerous references to other art forms such as painting, photography, music, theatre, and film. On the other hand, *Lolita* continually emphasizes that its story should only be told within the textual universe of literature, echoing the Russian Formalist argument about the inseparability of form and content.<sup>18</sup> This high esteem of literature is not surprising. As Hutcheon observes, “writers and literary critics hierarchize in their own particular art’s favor.”<sup>19</sup> For all its cannibalism of American popular culture, from motels to milkshakes, at its core, *Lolita* is a difficult modernist novel whose ethical puzzle relies on the attention, empathy, and patience of a person Nabokov liked to call “a good reader.”<sup>20</sup> The ethics of *Lolita* are bound up with the act of reading.

## TIMELY OR TIME'S UP?

Although Nabokov claims in the 1956 postscript to the novel that “*Lolita* has no moral in tow,”<sup>21</sup> the most attentive of Nabokovian scholars have focused on how the novel offers its readers, to borrow Michael Wood’s eloquent turn of phrase, “plenty of practice for the moral imagination, more than we can cope with, perhaps.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, *Lolita* has been taught with success in courses on ethics and literature.<sup>23</sup> In fact, *Lolita* has become somewhat of a usual suspect on many syllabi, so much so that the *New Yorker* book critic James Wood prefers to teach *Pnin* (1957) in his popular course “Postwar British and American Fiction” at Harvard University precisely because *Lolita* is so ubiquitous. Students interested in literature are unlikely to miss encountering *Lolita* during their undergraduate years as they are to miss *Pnin*.<sup>24</sup> As Sarah Herbold has noted, however, students often “worry (as they should) about whether enjoying the novel makes them complicit in it.”<sup>25</sup> Since the explosion of the #MeToo movement, these worries have only intensified, as students are challenging the curation of texts that they see on their syllabi. *Lolita* has once again come into the spotlight, especially in debates about what to do with literature from the past that depicts the exploitation of and violence toward women.

These debates are happening both inside and outside the classroom. Anne Dwyer, for example, who has taught an undergraduate seminar on Vladimir Nabokov at Pomona since 2008, wrote an insightful piece for *Inside Higher Ed*—“Why I Teach *Lolita*”—based on a lecture that she delivered to her students, when they challenged her choice to teach “a book that inflicted trauma and even perpetuated rape culture.”<sup>26</sup> Tracing the complicated relationship between aesthetics and ethics in the novel, Dwyer concludes her essay with an urgent call to her colleagues to assign “difficult books” and to the students to “read difficult books” and “come to [their] own conclusions.”<sup>27</sup> In my experience of teaching the novel, students often arrive on the first day of class with a preconceived notion of what kind of book *Lolita* is. Their opinions are often formed by what they read online, including on social media. This is why it is crucial to address the various adaptations, riffs, and misappropriations of *Lolita* (such as a fashion line that came out with a lingerie set with the word “*Lolita*” stamped on it) even as we focus on what the novel does differently. Reading journalistic essays, online blogs, and even Instagram comments along with scholarly articles on *Lolita* encourages students to think of their own critical voices as contributing to a high-stakes cultural debate that is happening during their own time. This mixing of high and low culture, of course, also replicates the very aesthetic of Nabokov’s novel, where allusions to French literature coexist with references to popular songs and teenage slang. Moreover, it allows students to see the differences between biased, rushed opinions and critical thinking that takes time and

attention to nuance. The ability to distinguish between different types of discourses, particularly in our purported “post-truth” moment, is of paramount importance. Here are some examples of the kinds of secondary readings that the students did in the course. They were encouraged to approach all the texts with a critical eye.

In light of the #MeToo movement, several think pieces in mainstream media have asked whether *Lolita*’s framework, filtered as it is through Humbert’s manipulative and seductive prose, is misogynistic, since it silences the voice of the victim. “Can *Lolita* be read as anything but a story of predation, depravity, exploitation—and specifically, rape—no matter how stunning Nabokov’s prose might be?” asks E. Ce Miller in a piece titled “I Re-Read *Lolita* in the Age of #MeToo—And I’m No Longer Standing for Its Overt Misogyny.” The writer concludes that *Lolita* is “a novel whose time is up.”<sup>28</sup> In a similar vein, in her chronicle of the 1948 kidnapping case of Sally Horner (to which Nabokov alludes in *Lolita*), Sarah Weinman argues that the “abuse that Sally Horner, and other girls like her, endured should not be subsumed by dazzling prose, no matter how brilliant.”<sup>29</sup> Those who defend Nabokov’s choice of subject matter, however, point out that he is writing about the cruelty and violence that already exist in the world. When feminists in Spain criticized *Lolita* because its narrator is a pedophile, the Nobel Prize-winning Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa responded: “With this criterion, literature will disappear.”<sup>30</sup> Then there are those supporters of Nabokov who emphasize that his book remains as timely as ever precisely because of the material that it covers. “A parable about rape, misogyny, and our cultural obsession with youth is *especially* timely at the moment and aligns with movements such as #MeToo, #TimesUp, and #MuteRKelly,” writes Ms. Lola for *Medium*.<sup>31</sup>

Significantly, Dr. John Ray Jr.’s suggestion in the fictitious foreword to *Lolita* that we be “entranced with the book while abhorring its author,”<sup>32</sup> that is, Humbert Humbert, anticipates one of the most polarizing questions of the #MeToo era: how to approach the art of those cultural figures who have done abominable things—Bill Cosby, R. Kelly, Picasso, Roman Polanski—the list goes on. This thorny question resulted in a rich and stimulating classroom conversation. Given how influential some of these figures have been, boycotting their art is not always possible if only because of the rampant references to and countless adaptations of their works. Yet, are we really prepared to let the art stand on its own, independent of its creator, especially in cases like that of R. Kelly, whose music (fifteen-year-old Aaliyah’s “Age Ain’t Nothing But A Number”) closely reflects his own less than palatable predilections?

One way that *Lolita* posits the question concerning the relationship between the artist and the artwork is by teasing the reader with the deceptive doubles of Humbert Humbert and Clare Quilty. Like his name suggests,

Clare Quilty is “clearly guilty,” and he gets away with abusing children because of his fame and social status. Sound familiar? Yet we do not need to worry about what to do with his “art”—it’s clearly exploitative trash, tainted as it is by an association with theatre and performance. However, in the case of Humbert, a wordsmith and professor of literature, Nabokov’s novel refuses to give easy answers. In the Foreword to the English edition of *Despair* (1965), Nabokov compares the unreliable narrator Hermann to *Lolita*’s Humbert, observing that they are both “neurotic scoundrels,” but, while Hermann will stay in Hell forever, “there is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a year.”<sup>33</sup> Leland de la Durantaye suggests that this slight respite is given to Humbert for his moral awakening, however late, and for his choice, as an artist, to tell Dolly’s story: “And do not pity C. Q. One had to choose between him and H. H., and one wanted H. H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations.”<sup>34</sup> Yet what kind of image of Dolly Haze are we left with? What has Humbert accomplished as an artist? And what can Nabokov contribute to the reckonings of #MeToo?

In an essay for *The Guardian* that urges “women to rewrite the story,” Sarah Churchwell calls out “Poe, Updike, Roth, Mailer,” and other male writers who “have contributed to a culture in which the credibility of women is undermined.” Churchwell does not, however, include Nabokov in their company, suggesting that in showing “the great tragedy” of the absence of Dolly’s voice, *Lolita* reveals, in a critical and deeply empathetic manner, the ways that women have not been able to tell their stories in their own words.<sup>35</sup>

## READ-ONLY

Defending *Lolita* in the age of #MeToo, Caitlin Flanagan writes: “*Lolita* asks us only one question: Are you a reader?”<sup>36</sup> One point that both the defenders and the detractors of the novel agree on is that the reader sees and hears very little of the real girl named Dolly Haze, as the book reveals only Humbert’s view of her. Many good readers have taken this narrative framework, namely the loss of Dolly’s voice, as a crucial piece of the novel’s ethical puzzle.<sup>37</sup> Churchwell, for example, argues that Dolly’s absence is meant to make us uncomfortable.<sup>38</sup> According to Sarah Herbold, the novel permits us only “a trace of the woman (or girl) who was—or could have been—present, but who can no longer truly be made present to author, narrator, or reader.”<sup>39</sup> In a similar vein, Michael Wood argues that, although Nabokov’s *Lolita* affords the reader only “a glimpse of the substantial American child,” it is up to reader to find her.<sup>40</sup> Dolly becomes then “a product of reading, not because the reader makes her up or because she is just ‘there’ in the words, but because she is what a reading finds, and [ . . . ] needs to find, in order to see

the range of what the book can do.”<sup>41</sup> The novel’s language might seduce the reader into complicity with Humbert, but it also has the potential to recover, if only partially, the victim’s voice. Thus writing in Nabokov’s literary universe behaves like Jacques Derrida’s *pharmakon*—it’s both a poison and a remedy.<sup>42</sup> Yet what happens when we get to see and hear the American girl on the stage or the screen?

## TRANSMEDIAL TRANSGRESSIONS

In a way, Nabokov’s *Lolita* resists and even prohibits adaptations and extensions of its textual world.<sup>43</sup> “Idiot, triple idiot! I could have filmed her! I would have had her now with me, before my eyes, in the projection room of my pain and despair!” Humbert says at one point.<sup>44</sup> But, within the pages of the novel, he never gets to make such a film. As Louis Menand notes, “you cannot film this story accurately and stay out of prison.”<sup>45</sup> Dolly’s age (she’s twelve at the start of Nabokov’s novel) has always been a problem for theatre and film directors. Sue Lyon, who played the role in Kubrick’s movie, was fourteen at the start of filming. In addition to being deliberately vague about Dolly’s age, Kubrick’s film also expanded the storyline of Quilty, played by Peter Sallers, in order to stress Humbert’s guilt from the very first scene. In the stage production of Edward Albee’s 1981 ill-fated play, twenty-four-year-old Blanche Baker played the part. Dominique Swain, who starred in Adrian Lyne’s 1997 screen version, was fifteen. Lyne’s *Lolita* jettisoned Nabokov’s dark wit, replacing it with wistful romanticism, and added obligatory Hollywood sex scenes (absent from the novel), which were simulated by Jeremy Irons and a nineteen-year-old body double. In this manner, Lyne visually extended the erotic world of the novel that Nabokov so carefully sought to restrict.<sup>46</sup> Nabokov composed *Lolita* on index cards with a Blackwing 602 pencil. He could not have predicted how the performing arts, cinema, digital media, and virtual reality would transform his heroine and the subsequent debate about fantasy versus reality.

In February 2019, the New York debut and workshop production of *Lolita, My Love* by the York Theatre Company took the opportunity to tell the story from a woman’s perspective. Erik Haagensen revised the script from six of Lerner’s drafts, including two that were composed after the musical closed in 1971. Directed by Emily Maltby, the show addressed the concerns of #MeToo head-on, reframing the musical as Humbert Humbert’s confession to a female therapist, named June Ray (an utterly transformed John Ray Jr.), who offers a corrective commentary to Humbert’s desires, thoughts, and actions. June Ray serves as kind of distancing device that prohibits the audience’s identification with Humbert. It was Haagensen’s idea to make the therapist a woman, “allowing her to serve as something of a surrogate for

Lolita, who, as in the novel, exists more in Humbert's imagination than as her own person."<sup>47</sup> One wonders how Nabokov would react to the presence of an analyst on stage, given his mistrust and even contempt of psychoanalysis. Although this limited run received generally positive reviews, it was impossible not to notice how lightly the image of Dolly Haze is sketched in the novel. In the unforgiving spotlight of the stage, one quickly sees how little the actor (Caitlin Cohn) has to work with. Of course, Nabokov himself predicted the challenges of transposing his story into another medium.

Seeing this production led to another thought-provoking discussion in the classroom. Even if the silencing of a victim's voice is part and parcel of the novel's moral makeup (as readers, we are supposed to condemn it), in the era of #MeToo one cannot help but ask whether such a narrative framework is enough, or whether it reenacts the silencing of women and the erasure of their stories. One student argued that Nabokov's novel was misogynistic because it doesn't take the time to explore female sexuality, echoing a critique that Eric Naiman has heard in his classroom as well, when one of his female students mentioned "the book was hostile to women because Nabokov could not bring himself to represent female sexual pleasure."<sup>48</sup> The cultural landscape has certainly changed. In the era of Lena Dunham's *Girls* (2012–2017) and Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* (2016–2019), students are more accustomed to frank depictions of sexuality and open discussions of female desire. While it is important to historicize the novel and examine how sexual mores are "historically constructed," as Anne Dwyer advises, it is equally important to put Nabokov's *Lolita* in conversation with works by women, who are addressing similar issues and telling the Lolita story (which has now unfortunately become part of our youth-obsessed culture) from the woman's perspective.

Conversely, as one student asked, was Nabokov even in the position to tell the story of a young girl? We know for a fact that Nabokov studied real case studies in psychology and rode on school buses to capture the tone and vocabulary of his teenage heroine.<sup>49</sup> Yet, perhaps, imagining the inner world of a teenage girl, with all of its rich and perplexing contradictions, was either something that was of no interest to Nabokov as a fiction writer or something too difficult for him to tackle. This speculation led us to a fascinating discussion about the potentials and limits of imagination. Zadie Smith's recent essay "Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction" served as our compass. Smith begins by noting that in the age of neoliberalism and identity politics the "old—and never especially helpful—adage *write what you know* has morphed into something more like a threat: *Stay in your lane*." She then asks how "our debates about fiction" would change "if our preferred verbal container for the phenomenon of writing about others was not 'cultural appropriation' but rather 'interpersonal voyeurism' or 'profound-other-fascination' or even 'cross-epidermal reanimation?'" The ever-provocative Smith doesn't

offer any readymade conclusions, but suggests that part of the joy of writing about the lives of others, who are not like us, is the risk and uncertainty of the whole endeavor. At the end of the day, it is up to the reader to decide whether a book succeeds or not in telling the story.<sup>50</sup>

## GIRLS MATTER

Perhaps then theatrical and cinematic versions of *Lolita* have not enjoyed much success precisely because the novel does not give us the voice of a unique girl. The absence that electrifies the page doesn't translate onto the stage or screen. Since the publication of *Lolita* there have been many works, including of dramatic literature, which are inspired by Nabokov's novel, but attempt to tell the story from a woman's perspective. Reading them along with *Lolita* makes for a rich and stimulating experience, one that only heightens the pathos of the loss of Dolly in Nabokov's novel. Not all are successful, however. Pia Pera's *Lo's Diary* (1995), which relates the events from the point of view of Dolores Haze, garnered negative reviews and a lawsuit from Dmitri Nabokov.<sup>51</sup> Those works that feature only echoes of or allusions to Nabokov's novel, while developing their own storylines and characters, seem to have been the more successful, especially in the theatre.

To name but a few examples, plays that take on the relationship between an underage girl and an older man, who should have been her guardian, include Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* (1997), which won the Pulitzer Prize in Drama, and David Harrower's *Blackbird* (2005), which won the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play in 2007. Both plays echo *Lolita* in that they have charismatic male characters who know how to seduce and manipulate with words and female characters who come to terms with their childhood trauma. The key difference is that Vogel and Harrower also feature strong women who stand up to their abusers and have the opportunity to tell their stories in their own words. Vogel was actually inspired to write her play by Nabokov's *Lolita*, which she read in her twenties. She had always been unsettled by the fact that as a reader she felt sympathy for Humbert Humbert.<sup>52</sup> Tellingly, in the character descriptions, Vogel states that Uncle Peck is an "attractive man in his forties" and "should be played by an actor one might cast in the role of Atticus in *To Kill a Mockingbird*."<sup>53</sup> His name also evokes the allure of the well-respected and loved-by-the-public actor Gregory Peck. Vogel clearly wants her audience to be disturbed by the contrast between Peck's charisma and his actions. Although not an adaptation, *How I Learned to Drive* is a thought-provoking response to Nabokov's novel, from which it borrows the road motif and car imagery. The play follows the story of the erotic relationship between Li'l Bit and her aunt's husband, Uncle Peck, from her pre-adolescent years all the way through

adulthood. Vogel turns the process of teaching and learning how to drive into a theatrical metaphor for the taboo affair between her two characters. In contrast to Nabokov's novel, Li'l Bit gets to sit at the wheel most of the time. The audience also gets to see a nuanced and at times troubling portrait of a young girl coming into her own, with all the messiness that ensues. For one, she experiences her own sexual awakening as both a power (that she holds over Peck) and a liability (that she doesn't quite know what to do with, so it doesn't hurt her). Further, the moral problem of the play is that the man who sexually molests Li'l Bit—Uncle Peck—is the same man who will give her one of the greatest gifts—the lifesaving skill of knowing how to drive with confidence. During one of their lessons, Peck explains the stakes:

Men are taught to drive with confidence—with aggression. The road belongs to them. They drive defensively—always looking out for the other guy. Women tend to be polite—to hesitate. And that can be fatal.

Peck then tells Li'l Bit that he's teaching her how to drive, so that if "there's an accident, and ten cars pile up, and people get killed," she'll "be the only one to walk away."<sup>54</sup> As Vogel explains in an interview, Peck not only teaches Li'l Bit how to survive, but also ultimately "enables her [. . .] to reject him and destroy him."<sup>55</sup> The play ends on Li'l Bit checking her side mirrors, fastening her seat belt, and getting ready to hit the road. She's grown up, she's now in charge, and she's going to move on with her life. Suddenly, "the spirit of Uncle Peck" appears in the back seat of her car. What does his ghost symbolize? Is it some type of road spirit that keeps her safe? Is it her past trauma that will always haunt her? The directions also indicate that the two "are happy to be going for a long drive together."<sup>56</sup> So might Peck's presence in the car also stand for Li'l Bit's mixed emotions toward him—one of which, however problematic, might be called "love?"<sup>57</sup> His spirit is both a poison and an antidote. The contradiction remains unresolved. Even as Vogel rewrites the *Lolita* story from a woman's perspective, she borrows from Nabokov that same disturbing feeling that she had when she first read his novel, or what Caitlin Flanagan calls the novel's "combination of revulsion and ecstasy."<sup>58</sup> As Vogel notes, her play "dramatizes the gifts we receive from the people who hurt us."<sup>59</sup> Like *Lolita*, *How I Learned to Drive* is a nuanced and deeply empathetic work that refuses to give us an easily digestible lesson in ethics, encouraging us instead to practice our moral imagination.

Similarly, *Blackbird* stages a confrontation between Una, a woman in her late twenties, and Ray, a man in his mid-fifties, who had sex with her when she was twelve years old. Informed in part by the crimes of sex offender Toby Studebaker, Harrower's play echoes *Lolita* in more ways than the age of the female protagonist. The main male character in *Blackbird* is also a

charming man who knows how to bend the narrative to make himself look better than he is. Ray manages to convince Una, along with the audience, that he has reformed and is now in a relationship with a woman of his age. When Una and Ray end up kissing, the audience might even believe that the two have a chance at a redemptive future until a girl of twelve appears on stage. She's the daughter of Ray's new partner. The audience is just as shocked as Una is. We feel that we have been duped, even betrayed. That's the point. Ray begs Una to believe him, that he "would never," but our trust in him is gone.<sup>60</sup> Again, while Harrower's play presents a more developed character of a young woman, it borrows from *Lolita* the act of manipulation through storytelling. Significantly, both *Blackbird* and *How I Learned to Drive* dramatize female desire and sexual pleasure without "toppling into the genre of at least soft-core pornography," as Eric Naiman rightfully worries would have happened had Nabokov chosen to depict his "heroine enjoying sexual encounters with Humbert."<sup>61</sup> To be sure, it is a difficult and risky endeavor, but one that many writers have taken on in recent years.

There has been a veritable explosion of plays by women, though not exclusively, who have given voice to girlhood. These works explore teenage sexuality, female desire, ambition, and coming of age in a world still dominated by misogyny and violence against women. If, as readers, we are serious about recovering the voice of the "American girl-child named Dolores Haze [who] had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac," then we would do well not only to identify the strategic lacunas in Nabokov's text, but also to imagine what her voice, thoughts, and experience might have been (while paying close attention to historical context).<sup>62</sup> Here are just a few examples of contemporary plays that can help the reader imagine what it is like to be a prepubescent and teenage girl in America today, a world still riven by misogyny. In Ruby Rae Spiegel's remarkable play *Dry Land* (2015), two Florida high school girls on the swim team try to do an abortion by themselves in a locker room, as they navigate the turbulent waters of their friendship. Sarah DeLappe's *The Wolves* (2016), a finalist for the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, follows a group of ferocious sixteen- and seventeen-year-old girls during their weekly soccer team practices, as they grapple with competition, adolescent love, and first sexual experiences. Clare Barron's *Dance Nation* (2019), another finalist for the Pulitzer, dramatizes the ambition and rivalry among thirteen-year-old girls who are competing for the top place in dance nationals. Many of these plays explore either taboo flirtations or relationships between older men and underage girls. Barron's *Dance Nation* features an uncomfortable scene between a female student and her older male dance teacher. The directions read as follows: "*He sort of swats her butt. It's not sexual????????? But also weird and uncomfortable for a grown-ass man to be swatting a thirteen-year-old's butt. Amina is horrified. And also, she loves it.*"<sup>63</sup> Nothing more ever happens between the two and the scene is left in all

its disturbing ambiguity to be discussed and interpreted by the actors and their director. Julia Jarcho's *Pathetic* (2019) is a riff on Racine's *Phèdre*, in which "teen girls experiment with sex, magic and murder while mom sinks deep into lust and self-loathing."<sup>64</sup> (One wonders how poor Charlotte's story will be read in the #MeToo era.) During its New York première, Jarcho's production gave a nod to Nabokov by playing Lana del Ray's songs that explicitly reference *Lolita* and by having *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* adorn the bookcase of a high school teacher who is sleeping with one of his underage students. Yet *Pathetic* doesn't only focus on the trauma of becoming a woman or growing old in a world still full of hatred toward women. It also celebrates female desire, which in and of itself is an act of resistance. As Miriam Felton-Dansky points out in her piece about *Pathetic*, as a society, "we've persisted in understanding women's sexualities as disgusting, and female desire as maybe even a little bit reprehensible."<sup>65</sup> Most importantly, all of these plays move away from the pernicious trope of tracing all of a female protagonist's motivations back to an act of violence done to her. As Clare Barron eloquently notes in her "Playwright's Perspective," which accompanies the script to *Dance Nation*, she wanted "to present a different picture of teenage girls onstage. One where trauma wasn't the central narrative. One where 'being the best' was."<sup>66</sup> Putting texts that celebrate young girls' perseverance, not only their traumas, in dialogue with Nabokov's *Lolita* can lead to productive conversations in the classroom about what kind of stories of girlhood our culture perpetuates. This comparative exercise can also shed light on those things about Dolly in *Lolita* that Véra Nabokov wished "someone would notice"—"her heartrending courage all along, culminating in that squalid but essentially pure and healthy marriage, and her letter, and her dog."<sup>67</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Whether or not Nabokov's novel has "contributed to a 'Lolita myth'" is up for debate.<sup>68</sup> Yet so many cultural symbols (like those red heart-shaped sunglasses, found nowhere in the text, and that Jeffrey Epstein Lolita Express plane) are associated with Nabokov's incendiary novel (no matter how misappropriated, misread, or corrupted) that they can no longer be ignored and should be analyzed along with the novel. My own first encounter with *Lolita* took place not by reading Nabokov's novel, which I only got to in college, but by seeing and misunderstanding Adrian Lyne's film when I was twelve. Today, thanks to the internet, children are exposed to even more inappropriate material at an even younger age. Nabokov's *Lolita*, of course, already explored this thorny question of text versus image. Studying *Lolita* together with its transmedial transgressions onto the stage, screen, and popular culture

is particularly important in the #MeToo era, when social media has helped propel social movements and has also made critical reflection as urgent as ever. In particular, witnessing how Nabokov's novel does not lend itself well to a stage or screen adaptation might encourage us to turn our attention to those works that portray the trials and tribulations of girlhood. The goal is not to boycott or replace Nabokov's *Lolita*, but rather to put his novel in conversation with women-centric narratives. After all, many of these stories, like Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, address the joy and pain of becoming a woman—a time in which reading Nabokov's *Lolita* is a formative experience.

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## NOTES

1. Kate Elizabeth Russell, *My Dark Vanessa* (New York: Harper Collins, 2020), 72–73.
2. Peter Bunzel, "Yes, They Did It: *Lolita* Is a Movie," *Life*, May 25, 1962. PCA File for *Lolita*, Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills. Quoted in Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance, eds., *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood* (Contemporary Approaches to Film and Media Series) (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 177.
3. Vladimir Nabokov, *Selected Letters, 1940–1977*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew Joseph Bruccoli (New York: Harcourt, 1989), 250.
4. Graham Vickers, *Chasing Lolita: How Popular Culture Corrupted Nabokov's Little Girl All Over Again* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2008).
5. I prefer to call the character Dolly because this is how she signs her name and not Lolita, which is the pet name used by Humbert, to distinguish between the "real" child that we don't get to see all that much and Humbert's solipsistic vision of her. See Julian W. Connolly, "Who Was Dolly Haze?" *A Reader's Guide to Nabokov's Lolita* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 53–66, and Elizabeth Sweeney, "Lolita, I Presume; On a Character Entitled 'Lolita,'" *Miranda* 3 (2010): 1–12.
6. Vickers, *Chasing Lolita*, 132–36. See also Ken Mandelbaum, *Not Since Carrie: Forty Years of Broadway Musical Flops* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), 189–91.
7. Vickers, *Chasing Lolita*, 135.
8. Vickers, *Chasing Lolita*, 136–41, 139.
9. Vladimir Nabokov, *Novels 1955–1962* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 673. See also Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 386–7.
10. Siggy Frank, *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2012), 1 and 47–50.
11. Frank, *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination*, 48–49. See also Martin Puchner, *Stage Fight: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 2002). For the importance of play in Nabokov, see Thomas Karshan, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

12. Jonah Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 1–3. Barish notes, however, that “the prejudice in question” is not “confined to the West, especially as it applies to actors,” 2.
13. Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita*, 316.
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15. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Hoboken: CRC Press, 2006), 7–8.
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19. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 34.
20. Vladimir Nabokov, “Good Readers and Good Writers,” *Lectures on Literature*, with an introduction by John Updike (New York: Harcourt, 1980), 1–6, 1.
21. Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita*, 314.
22. Michael Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), 107. For more on the relationship between ethics and literature in Nabokov and on how to read *Lolita* as a moral book, see Leland de la Durantaye, *Style Is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2007); Stephen Jan Parker, *Understanding Vladimir Nabokov* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987); Ellen Pifer, *Nabokov and the Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1980); David Rampton, *Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1993); Michael Rodgers and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, eds., *Nabokov and the Question of Morality: Aesthetics, Metaphysics, and the Ethics of Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
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24. James Wood, “Pnin” (lecture, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, April 12, 2005).
25. Sarah Herbold, “‘Dolorès Disparue’: Reading Misogyny in *Lolita*,” in *Approaches to Teaching Nabokov’s Lolita*, ed. Zoran Kuzmanovich and Galya Diment (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2008), 134–40, 134.
26. Anne Dwyer, “Why I Teach *Lolita*,” *Inside Higher Ed*, May 14, 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/05/14/teaching-lolita-still-appropriate-opinion>.
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30. Michael Skafidas, “Reading *Lolita* in the #MeToo Era,” *The Washington Post*, June 27, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldpost/wp/2018/06/27/mario-vargas-llosa/>.
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32. Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita*, 5.
33. Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair* [1965] (New York: Vintage International, 1989), xiii.
34. Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita*, 309. de la Durantaye, *Style Is Matter*, 84–99.
35. Sarah Churchwell, “Pushing Back: Why It’s Time for Women to Rewrite the Story,” *The Guardian*, February 17, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/17/pushing-back-why-its-time-for-women-to-rewrite-the-story>.

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38. Churchwell, "Pushing Back."

39. Herbold, "'Dolorès Disparue,'" 137. See also Linda S. Kauffman, "Framing *Lolita*: Is There a Woman in the Text?" *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 53–80.

40. Wood, *The Magician's Doubts*, 115.

41. *Ibid.*, 117.

42. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 71–72.

43. For more on the difference between an extension and an adaptation, see Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 284.

44. Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita*, 231.

45. Louis Menand, "Just Like a Woman," *Slate*, August 5, 1998, [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/television/1998/08/just\\_like\\_a\\_woman.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/television/1998/08/just_like_a_woman.html).

46. On the troubles that Lyne's *Lolita* had with distribution and the law, see Vickers, *Chasing Lolita*, 185–204.

47. Louis Peitzman, "An Infamous *Lolita* Musical Gets a Belated New York Debut," *The New York Times*, February 18, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/18/theater/lolita-my-love-york-theater-company-alan-jay-lerner.html>.

48. Eric Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2010), 148.

49. de la Durantaye, *Style Is Matter*, 2.

50. Zadie Smith, "Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction," *The New York Review of Books*, October 24, 2019, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/10/24/zadie-smith-in-defense-of-fiction/>.

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52. J. Wynn Rousuck, "Paula Vogel's Road Home: *How I Learned to Drive* Has Propelled The Maryland-Bred Playwright into Prominence and Given Her License to Take On Projects and Issues Close to Her Heart," *The Baltimore Sun*, May 3, 1998, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1998-05-03-1998123004-story.html>.

53. Paula Vogel, *How I Learned to Drive* [1997], *The Mammy Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1998), 1–92, 4.

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55. Arthur Holmberg, "Through the Eyes of *Lolita*," Interview with Paula Vogel, November 17, 2009, <https://americanrepertorytheater.org/media/through-the-eyes-of-lolita/>

56. Holmberg, "Through the Eyes of *Lolita*," 92.

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60. David Harrower, *Blackbird* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 85.

61. Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, 148.

62. For more on the risks that Nabokov took by making Dolly's voice absent from *Lolita*, see Alisa Zhulina, "Queen Sacrifice: The Feminine Figure of Power and Nabokov's Strategy of Loss," *Nabokov's Women: The Silent Sisterhood of Textual Nomads*, ed. Eléna Rakhimova-Sommers (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 19–36.

63. Barron, *Dance Nation*, 51.

64. *Pathetic*, by Julia Jarcho, The Abrons Art Center, New York, NY, June 18, 2019. For more on the production, see <https://minorthheater.org/tag/pathetic/>.

65. Miriam Felton-Dansky, "Blood Sacrifice: Adolescence, Borderlands, and Love in Julia Jarcho's *Pathetic*," *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 2019, <https://brooklynrail.org/2019/06/theater/Blood-Sacrifice-Adolescence-Borderlands-and-Love-in-Julia-Jarchos-Pathetic>.
66. Clare Barron, *Dance Nation* (New York: Samuel French, 2019), 7.
67. Stacy Schiff, *Véra (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov)* (New York: Random House, 1999), 236.
68. Dwyer, "Why I Teach *Lolita*."

