*Monstrous Desire: From Frankenstein to Lolita*

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## *i. Introduction*

I propose an updated reading of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* as a critique of American sex culture in the tradition of monster literature. Drawing a parallel between Humbert-Humbert and Mary Shelley's creature in *Frankenstein*, I argue that Nabokov's *Lolita,* functions as his "monster"—a disturbing and morally ambiguous creation that resists conventional categorization and serves to embody cultural fears. This reading highlights both the philosophical potentials of fiction and the complex morality of aesthetic endeavour. Rather than adopt the critiques of perversion that have haunted *Lolita's* reception since its first publication, I argue that *Lolita* intends to expose its reader's *own* inclination towards the sexualization of young girls, and in doing so, reveal how reactions to children and their sex are manifestations of a larger cultural anxiety about our complicity in mechanisms of sexualization.

By applying Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's Monster Theory, this paper argues that if Cohen's framework can be successfully applied to *Frankenstein*'s creature, then it is an appropriate and productive tool for situating *Lolita* as a monster too. Through this lens, *Lolita* becomes not just a work about an individual's monstrous desires, but a broader cultural critique, which insists readers tarry with the fabric of the cultural consciousness that gave birth to the text. Acting as a grotesque mirror, *Lolita* reflects our cultural obsession with youth as the epitome of desirability and exposes how this conviction shapes our perceptions of the "monstrous", in other words, that which is Other: that which we must not be like. *Lolita* offers a vital contribution to monstrous literature, challenging readers to engage with its unsettling moral and philosophical complexities and reconsider the function of disturbing texts.

## *ii. Two Brief Synopses*

Space does not permit a detailed synopsis of the respective texts. Here are two brief synopses to ground your reading. *Lolita* by Vladamir Nabokov: Humbert-Humbert, a middle-aged literature professor, becomes infatuated with Dolores Haze, a 12-year-old-girl he nicknames "Lolita". After marrying her widowed mother to stay close to the child, Humbert finds himself in control of Lolita following her mother's sudden death. Effectively kidnapping her, he embarks on a cross-country journey manipulating and sexually exploiting Dolores under the guise of legal guardianship. Dolers eventually escapes his grasp, marrying another man. Obsessed and unable to accept her rejection, Humbert kills his rival and is ultimately imprisoned. The novel consists

of his reflections on his actions in the form of an address to the jury who would try him for his crimes. The novel explores themes of obsession, manipulation, and the distortion of love.

*Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley: Victor Frankenstein, a scientist consumed by ambition, creates a living being from assembled body parts. Horrified by his creation, Victor abandons the creature, barring it to a life of rejection and isolation. Through secluded observation, the creature learns language and the nature of human behaviour, and grows resentful of humanity's cruelty. He demands that Victor create a companion for him, but Victor destroys the unfinished second being, fearing the consequences. Enraged, the creature vows revenge, leading to a series of tragedies, and ultimately, his flight to wilderness with a plan to end his own life. The novel examines the themes of creation ethics, intellectual hubris and empathy.

### *iii. Cohen's Seven Theses and Frankenstein*

My ambition in this section is twofold: I will offer an exegesis of Cohen's seven theses, while applying them to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. This serves to explain the theses and provide exemplary instances of their application. By demonstrating that Cohen's theses effectively distill the defining monstrosity of Shelley's seminal monster text, I will demonstrate that they are truth-tracking, quality tools for understanding monstrous literature. I define monstrous literature as any literary work that explores the concept of monstrosity in its various forms (i.e. physical, psychological, moral, cultural).

*Thesis I: The Monster's Body Is a Cultural Body.* Monsters are embodiments of a culture's values, beliefs and fears (Cohen, 1996). In the monster, we learn what a given culture perceives as threatening, and what must, therefore, be demarcated as 'Other' (read non-human, read monster). This categorical quarantine serves as a means of demarcating the impermissibility of the monster and her divergence from normalcy. In *Frankenstein*, the creation of the unholy creature embodies 19$^{th}$-century fears of the transcendence of natural limits towards the pursuit of Godliness. "Learn from me..", Victor cautions, "...how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge…" (Shelley, Chapter 4). Reminiscent of the story of Adam and Eve's exile in *Gensis*, the tale of Frankenstein's monster implores us to heed the caution that there must be limits to Man's knowledge. And that the transgression of these limits—the pursuit of a dangerous, godly science—threatens to stir-up the unknown. The fear reasons: what is unknown, threatens to be unlike, and what is unlike, ought not to be known in the first place. Through Frankenstein's

monster, Shelley points to a cultural fear of indiscernible science (read magic). Victor's catastrophic experiment indicates a cultural anxiety over scientific hubris. Frankenstein's monstrous creature, like the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden by way of a demonic snake, serves to instruct the reader on the sinister, unhuman character of excessive knowledge.

*Thesis II: The Monster Always Escapes.* Monsters resist confinement, whether literally evading defeat and restriction, or metaphorically, evading interpretation or strict control (Cohen, 1996). In a chilling threat Frankenstein's creature assures his creator, "I shall be with you on your wedding-night" (Shelly, Chapter 20), foreboding not only the physical threat of permanence, but the immaterial threat of perpetuity. In standard monster fashion, the creature promises to haunt his maker. Even when they may be physically destroyed, monsters promise to loom in the psychology of their sufferers, multiplying into new fears, new monsters, and new threats. If the creature is the fundamental monster—the source material—his threat promises his replication into a moral monster, a psychic monster and a monster of Self. He assures his creator that even his destruction will not put an end to his eternal terror. Victor will continue to wonder whether he has become a monster himself, whether other creatures like his might rise, whether he will be tried for his crimes and on and on. The monster's evasion is everlasting.

*Thesis III: The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis.* Monsters signal the fallibility and permeability of boundaries and binary categories like human/animal, male/female, evil/good (Cohen, 1996). In doing so, they pose existential and metaphysical threat to the non-monstrous. Man proves to be deeply reliant on his neat categorization for comfort; the ability to say "I am like this, and nothing like that" is morally imperative (i.e. good people do not steal; I am a good person, ergo, I do not steal). Whatever their violation may be, those who disturb the neatness of categorization challenge the critical order of the world, so challenge how we understand ourselves, our endowments and our duties.

Confronting his creator, the creature urges, "I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel...." (Shelley, Chapter 10). He draws our attention to his dualism. The creature sees himself as Victor's creation akin to God's Adam, a creation of perfection brought into existence with love and aspiration, deserving of nurture and praise for his novelty. In this line, the creature appears innocent, like a child yearning to belong and understand her place in the world. But in a moment of contrast and pensive clarity, he compares himself to God's fallen angel Lucifer, a

symbol of rejection, gross disappointment and moral failure. Our image of the creature as guileless is placed in conversation with an image of him as self-aware, and vengeful. Like a good monster, the creature demands that we confront his duality (and presents a compelling case for doing so!) imploring us to resist the illusion of simplicity that binarism offers us.

*Thesis IV: The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference.* Representing the alien and marginal, monsters embody what society deems 'Other', or non-member. Cohen instructs us that the monster embodies what society fears, rejects, or cannot reconcile, often serving as a mirror to the anxieties and prejudices of the culture that creates it (Cohen, 1996). In other words, that which colours the monster (ugliness, racialization, disabled-ness, etc.) can be taken by direct inversion as a declaration of the values projected by the society that labels it as such: if *x* is deemed a monster because it is ugly, then the culture that produced *x* privileges beauty. Thus, monsters are boundary markers, dwelling at the edges of cultural acceptability and serving as guardians of that threshold of oddity that must not be crossed by those hoping to preserve their status as normal. The monster's treatment (exile, destruction, persecution) serves to warn potential dissenters of the consequences of transgressing the gates of difference, while their existence reminds us of what we become when norms are transgressed. Frankenstein's monster knows that "...all men hate the wretched" and wonders "how, then, must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things!" (Shelley, Chapter 9). He is condemned to monitor the gates.

*Thesis V: The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible.* This thesis contains two codependent claims: monsters transcend the limits of possibility, and actualized impossibility is unacceptable (Cohen, 1996). In other words, what is impossible must stay impossible. In the case of *Frankenstein*, we find both claims. On one hand, we are meant to gather the natural limits of scientific possibility, on another, we are led to reflect on the impossibility of the integration of the Other. The monster embodies the destruction and disturbance that follows when the borders of the possible are crossed, while his maker's downfall displays the consequences in store for any apostate who may be unclear on the impossibility of creating life. That Victor successfully animates his creature does not shift the borders of the possible, it only emphasizes his transgression. Cohen's suggestion is that declarations of impossibility serve more to deter certain behaviour, than to establish what is possible. Early in the novel, Victor cautions a burgeoning scientist, "you seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did; and I ardently hope that the

gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been." (Shelley, Chapter 4). Once again, the inherent evil of forbidden knowledge is underscored with a reference to the serpent that tempts Adam and Eve. Like the Tree of Knowledge hosts a power that is incompatible with idyllic harmony, the power of God-like animation is incompatible with humanity.

*Thesis VI: Fear of the Monster Is Really a Kind of Desire.* Monsters captivate and attract us as much as they repel us. They are both the forbidden and the fascination through which we can explore or darkest impulses (Cohen, 1996). We are repulsed by the monster's otherness, and at the same time, envy the freedom she reaps in her exile from our paralyzing standards. Desire typically comes first, say the desire for the vampire's immortality, with fear close behind, say the fear of the unknown creature. Victor's lust pulls him towards the repulsive monster: "I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart." (Shelley, Chapter 5). One's fear of the monster often masks a deeper, repressed desire to engage with the very things they represent.

*Thesis VII: The Monster Stands at the Threshold … of Becoming.* "Monsters are our children", Cohen tells us (Cohen, 1996). Victor's desire to become implies his reaching for a transformation or evolution of his identity into something greater—something beyond the limitations of ordinary human existence. Stroking his budding ego he assures the reader, "a new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me." (Shelley, Chapter 4). Monsters can signify transformation and change, showing the possibility of new identities or social orders, albeit through a lens of fear and resistance. Resistance arises as an attempt to maintain the status quo and suppress the unsettling implications the monster embodies. When the creature requests a companion, his plea represents a desire for a new social order, one in which he is no longer alienated. In refusing to comply with the creature's request, Victor ultimately solidifies the destructive course of events, and in doing so, is propelled to confront the limitations of his refusal to cross the threshold of becoming. In this sense, the creature serves as a mirror to Victor's own fears, illuminating his commitment to the existing order. This is Cohen's final thesis.

I have explicated Cohen's theses in defence of their philosophical pertinence and applied them to Mary Shelley's most notorious monster novel in defence of their aptness and accuracy for explaining monstrosity and its literary function. My ambition in doing so has been to familiarize my reader with Cohen's theses and to convince her of their applicability. I have sought to demonstrate that if Cohen's theses can accurately and succinctly explain and identify the function of monstrosity in *Frankenstein*, a novel which is plainly in the canon of monster literature, then they are good theses for explaining and identifying monster literature. Having accomplished this, I turn my attention to my next premise: if Cohen's theses can be applied in a similar fashion to Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, then *Lolita* can defensibly be interpreted as monster literature.

### *iv. Cohen's Seven Theses and Lolita*

*Thesis I: Monsters are embodiments of a culture's values, beliefs and fears. In the monster, we learn what a given culture perceives as threatening, and what must be demarcated as 'Other'.*

I will address this line of thinking in two parts, first, identifying the cultural fears that are wrapped up in the reactions to *Lolita,* and second situating *Lolita* as cultural phenomenon. As a text, *Lolita* holds up a mirror to society's darkest, most taboo fascinations and the ways they are manipulated by language in narrative. On this reading, following Mark Greif's iconic essay *'Afternoon of the Sex Children', Lolita* can be read as criticism which points at an American culture that fiends youthful sex-appeal. According to Grief, we inhabit a culture that is obsessed with sex-children: societal constructions of young people that simultaneously idealize and infantilize youth while sexualizing the markers of innocence and purity. Sex children are almost always not children, that would make them morally abhorrent. Their glory is in their ability to embody all the sexual capital of children without any of the moral transgressions. Think Britney Spears: it is 1998 and Spears is one hit single away from world domination. The now unmistakable video for '…[Hit Me] Baby One More Time' comes out featuring 16-year-old Spears cosplaying a catholic school girl in a modified uniform to showcase maximum sex appeal, bending and snapping and purring the lyrics, "Oh, pretty baby, There's nothing that I wouldn't do, It's not the way I planned it, Show me how you want it to be… Hit me, baby, one more time". In response to cultural critic Chuck Klosterman's questions about the overt sexuality of her brand, Spears replied, that she doesn't "want to think about that" (Klosterman, 2008), *that,*

she insists, has nothing to do with her mission or her success. She thinks sexuality is relatively taboo, a totally deniable part of her identity. Her prerogative in her performances is to inspire young girls, to be herself and to have fun, not to titillate anyone's sexual desires. Especially not adult men's. Describing Spears as the "naughtiest good girl of all time" (Klosterman, 2008), Klosterman marvels at "her complete unwillingness to recognize that this paradox exists at all." (Klosterman, 2008). And herein lies her appeal. 16-year-old Spears is a child and so any recognition of her sexuality would be inappropriate, appreciation of the talents and entertainment value of a young starlet, however, is completely on the table. This is the phenomena of the sex child: youth as the ultimate site of desirability transforms childhood into a symbolic space for adult fantasies of desire all while maintaining the appropriate moral distance from the actual child. When distance cannot be maintained though, one turns to the adult sex-child. The 20-year-old (adult) porn actor who portrays a 16-year-old (child) having sex with an older partner dwells here. The adult sex-child permits the best of both cultural commitments: moral high standing according to which we don't engage in pedophilia and an aversion for ageing and loss of innocence according to which we desire youth.

The fear of being exposed for this cultural commitment to sex children informs the cultural reception of *Lolita*, and its monstrosity. In *Lolita,* Nabokov develops a cultural critique that asks readers to confront their culture's very own desire for youth, and the ways popular narratives, language and media amplify the fetishization of youth. Like '…[Hit Me] Baby One More Time', *Lolita* is irresistible. It is aesthetically rich and warrants engagement on these grounds alone. Like the video, it feeds the culture that craves it while also denying that the culture exists at all. If Spears gets to say, 'Sexy? What do you mean sexy, I am a young girl doing what I love!", *Lolita* gets to say, 'Glorify pedophilia? What do you mean!? This is a vile tale of a vile man doing a vile thing…unless of course you, reader, want to admit that you liked something about it…". By exposing these cultural mechanisms, *Lolita* offers an unsettling commentary on how innocence and sexuality are constructed and consumed. This reading positions *Lolita* not as a story about Humbert alone but as a critique of the culture that enables him, implicating society in the very forces it seeks to condemn. On the cultural reaction to *Lolita,* distinguished Nabokovian scholar Ellen Pifer writes, "the outrage expressed by many of *Lolita's* readers over the past fifty years may be due, in part, to the discomfort they feel at finding themselves taken in by the

narrator's rhetoric, at realizing they have unwittingly accepted—and even identified with—Humbert's perverse desire" (Pifer, 2003).

*Thesis II: Monsters resist confinement, whether literally evading defeat and restriction, or metaphorically, evading interpretation or strict control.*

*Lolita* evades confinement and interpretation. There are three points to be considered here: First, *Lolita* was created with this ambition in mind, second, *Lolita* remains indiscernible and so its creation ethic was successful, and three, *Lolita* escaped even her creator. To the first point, I turn to Nabokov's own stated intention in his creation of *Lolita.* In a letter to a colleague, Nabokov wrote, "when you do read *Lolita*, please mark that it is a highly moral affair" (Connolly, 2009) while later asserting in his essay '*On a Book Entitled Lolita',* that the book "has no moral in tow" (Nabokov, 1957). Alfred Appel Jr. suggests that we reconcile these seemingly disparate assertions by inferring not that Nabokov meant to deny any moral resonance, but to deny any didactic intention (Connolly, 2009). That is, in accordance with Cohen's thesis, Nabokov *intended* for his creation to resist confinement and clear interpretation. He did not seek clear lessons on morality, nor the expression of a specific set of values. Rather, he sought to send us on an impossible quest for meaning, like children chasing fireflies with a glass jar.

In writing *Lolita,* Nabokov did not seek to inform his readers that pedophilia is evil. His method was more subtle and complex. Leland de la Durantaye argues that *Lolita* is "a moral book in the simple sense that from its first page to its last it explicitly treats moral questions…" (Connolly, 2009) all while denying its reader moral clarity. Lolita succeeds in this ambition. Since its publication, the book's controversial moral themes have persisted in public consciousness and eluded definitive interpretation or clarity. Introducing his conversation on the merits of *Lolita*, Greif describes himself as engaging in "one of the conversation's you're not supposed to have" (Greif, 2009). Ironically aware of their own faux-pas, movie posters for Stanley Kubrick's 1962 film adaptation of *Lolita* simply featured the words "how could they ever make a movie of LOLITA?". Julian W. Connolly's chapter on *'Critical and Cultural Response'* consist of thirty pages of back and forth on the potential feminist merits of the story versus its "sheer unrestrained pornography" (Connolly, 2009). So, since its debut on the literary scene, *Lolita* has been seeped in controversy and evaded clarity.

There is also something to be said for the fact that *Lolita* evaded even her creator, multiplying into a monstrosity out of his control. Nabokov famously insisted that he was "emphatically opposed" to any representations of young girls on the cover of Lolita writing in a letter to his publishers: "I want pure colors, melting clouds, accurately drawn details, a sunburst above a receding road with the light reflected in furrows and ruts, after rain. And no girls." (Bertram, 2013). To Nabokov's posthumous demise, the book has been republished dozens, and dozens of times, each publication's cover featuring increasingly vulgar depictions of young girls. John Bertram's, *Lolita - The Story of a Cover Girl: Vladimir Nabokov's Novel in Art and Design* features 200+ pages of published *Lolita* covers with their subject-matter ranging from the naked body of a young girl sprawled on crumpled linens, to the twisted stockinged legs of a frightened schoolgirl. In fact, *most* covers of *Lolita* published in the past two decades feature such images. So, *Lolita* has figuratively and literally escaped the control of her creator. She has fled his strict supervision in favour of a vulgarized life of her own. She has become a cultural archetype, her name now ascribed to any too-young woman with avert sex appeal (see Meriam-Webster definition of Lolita as a precociously seductive young girl). She has served as the blueprint to pop-singer Lana Del Rey's notoriously hyper-sexual, infantile image, the antithesis of Nabokov's intended destiny for *Lolita*, and the epitome of Greif's sex child. In short, she has escaped Nabokov's grasp, and never once looked back.

*Thesis III: Monsters signal the fallibility and permeability of boundaries and binary categories.*

As a text, *Lolita* refuses to conform to neat literary or moral categories. Is it a critique of perversion or a complicit narrative? Is Lolita herself a person, a symbol, or a narrative construct? Are readers meant to forgive Humbert in the end? The jury remains out, leaving readers in an unending crisis of category, digging themselves deeper into their own confusion with each attempted answer. "Okay", the reader might assert, "so it's a story about bad actors". She approaches the precipice of clear categorization. "But why, then, do I like Humbert so much!? She is dragged away from the edge of understanding kicking and screaming. In all of its interpretations and adaptions, *Lolita* refuses to be neatly discerned. It makes contact with systems of classification only to break them apart. It embodies contradiction—the text is so repulsive, but so beautiful to read—while blending incompatible elements—the text is about sex,

and also children. Humbert himself serves to confuse our categories, for he is both engaged in complex moral justification, and appears ignorant to our most basic concept of morality (e.g. kidnapping bad). Dolores confuses us too; she is undeniably a victim of abuse, but at times we wonder if there isn't a whiff of seduction wafting off her. No matter how it is approached, *Lolita* exposes its reader's categorical boundaries as fragile, constructed and susceptible to exploitation. "However you gaze", Greif writes, "to accept the fantasy, or to ensure yourself you see nothing, you join in an abomination." (Grief, 2006).

*Thesis IV: Representing the alien and marginal, monsters embody what society deems 'Other', or non-member.*

Borrowing a phrase from Humbert, Stephen Butler describes *Lolita* as "an attempt to fix the borderline between "the beastly and the beautiful"" (Butler, 1986). Had the novel succeeded in this ambition, had it been clear that Humbert fell on the beastly side of the line, it would not be the site of controversy. Considering its contentiousness, one can assume the ambition failed. Nabokov provocatively draws readers to the gates of difference and then leaves them there, vulnerable and complicit. Through Humbert's seductive language and Nabokov's beautiful, lyrical prose, readers are invited to confront the uncomfortable reality that the exploitation of youth, cloaked by aesthetic charm and linguistic grace, can be deceptively alluring. Nabokov crafts a scenario where beauty and pleasure invite complicity, suggesting, with unsettling subtlety, that moral degradation comes easy when it is wrapped in such polished, pleasant illusions. Readers are left to reflect on their own susceptibility: "good people do not enjoy books about child exploitation; I am a good person, ergo…what just happened (and what sort of person does that make me?)". Whether readers find themselves grappling with the wish to believe in Humbert's redemption, or wondering if he was sentenced to death, they long for a collective moral contract that reassures them of their own ethical boundaries. They stand at the gates of difference, wondering what side they are on. If the inversion of monstrosity can be taken to indicate societal values, Humbert's monstrous attempt to moralize pedophilia indicates a cultural commitment to an asexual view of children. Thus, the readers ability to enjoy Humbert's literary company reveals an anxiety about the integrity of their values.

*Thesis V: Monsters transcend the limits of possibility, and actualized impossibility is unacceptable.*

*Lolita* sets the possibility of aesthetic endeavours aflame. In her pages, we find the limits of the possible subject-matter of a good novel crumbling. *Is it possible to write a novel about pedophilia that does not endorse pedophilia? Is it possible to enjoy the literary company of a sex offender?* Nabokov does not answer these questions, he doesn't mean to. In its refusal to answer, *Lolita* functions as an ongoing interrogation of aesthetic possibility. "The trouble with *Lolita"*, Greif writes, "is plainly its ability to describe what a sexual 12-year-old looks like." (Greif, 2006). This is supposed to be impossible. But declarations of impossibility often serve more to outlaw behaviour than to state actual limits. Herein lies the disturbance with *Lolita.* Nabokov disturbed the moral clarity that comes with impossibility, exposing readers to the falsity of their perceived limits; if something is not possible, you do not have to worry about avoiding it. If it is impossible for Britney Spears to be sexual, you can never question whether she is being sexually exploited: she doesn't have sex, so its exploitation is impossible. And if you identify sexual exploitation, it is only because *you* are a monster who crossed into the realm of impossibility and dared to sexualize a child.

*Lolita* serves to catch its readers in an act of impossibility, indicating that their ability to perceive sex children is more available than they reported. Nabokov does not pop the bubble of the possible to delight readers with the revelation that they can sexualize children after all. Rather, he wants to draw his audience's attention to an instance of cultural deception. By exposing readers to new possibilities, Nabokov gives his audience new tools to interrogate what they previously believed did not exist.

*Thesis VI: Fear of the Monster Is Really a Kind of Desire. Monsters captivate and attract us as much as they repel us.*

Nabokov's achievement lies in constructing a narrative that thrives at the threshold of attraction and repulsion; *Lolita* is fascinating because of its concurrent extreme beauty and extreme abhorrence. On one hand, readers are terrified of the monster that tells them his story of perversion and sexual exploitation. On the other, they are swept off their feet by the elegance and delight of his prose. In inciting us so, Nabokov produces a seminal monster, lacing our fear with aesthetic arousal. In her philosophical exploration of the nature of desire, Anne Carson devises

that, “people love that which melts in the hand—nothing else” (Carson, 1998). This ‘melting in the hand’ can be applied as a metaphor for the fleeting, forbidden allure of Humbert’s narrative voice—something readers might momentarily grasp, but cannot hold without discomfort. Carson continues, “this love is necessary because it’s impossible; it’s the best thing in life because it’s the worst”. According to her account, the nature of desire necessitates the absence of the object of one’s desire, and it is a fundamentally revulsive state. In this way, *Lolita* functions as a site of desire: it simultaneously draws its reader closer with its linguistic brilliance and repels them with its moral reprehensibility. Like *eros*, *Lolita* is “The Worst Masterpiece” (Horses, 2023);, we long to devour it *and* to burn it. I believe this to be one of Nabokov’s most intentional deliverances. Nabokov knew that by making Humbert’s voice so seductive, so poetically compelling, he would implicate his audience in the monstrous act of voyeurism and, in turn, expose the unsettling ease with which beauty can manipulate morality.

The intentionality of this paradoxical creation is crucial in understanding *Lolita* as a monster. A master of this sixth thesis, Nabokov reveals how language itself can become monstrous, twisting and reshaping perceptions. The text becomes an act of temptation and betrayal, drawing the reader closer only to recoil at their own proximity. If we accept this reading, *Lolita* becomes not just a controversial novel, but a philosophical experiment—a deliberate interrogation of the limits of desire: desire for understanding, desire for aesthetic pleasure. This, perhaps, is Nabokov’s greatest artistic triumph: to create a work that is as impossible to dismiss as it is to fully embrace, forever haunting the cultural imagination as a true literary monster.

*Thesis VII: The Monster Stands at the Threshold … of Becoming. Monsters can signify transformation and change, showing the possibility of new identities or social orders.*

The question of what possible transformation *Lolita* means to signal is interpretive with numerous plausible answers. The potential for the transfiguration of the forbidden into the beautiful is one possible response, largely rehearsed in the paragraph above. The potential for moral redemption is another basic consideration. I find it uncompelling. Mark Greif thinks *Lolita* is meant to signal a transformative moment in history: the dawn of the sex-child. I think he is correct and courageous in his interpretation.

I must begin with clarification of the fact that ‘sex child’ does not refer to some instance of pedophilia. The sex child is not a literal figure, but a construction generated by the social-

historical process by which children have been drawn into sexualized societal narratives, not by their own actions, but by popular fantasies (i.e. schoolgirl pornography) and commercial interests. According to Greif, "it took the whole history of postwar American culture to make the sex child" (Greif, 2006). Here, Greif is referring to at least three cultural transformations. First, he points at the Victorian and Progressive Eras and their "old prurient fantasies" (Greif, 2006). Victorians romanticized the child's innocence while imbuing it with sexual undertones. The fixation with the innocence of the child is the first step towards a voyeuristic appreciation for youth. Progressives sought to improve conditions for children emphasizing public health and hygiene, and bringing children's bodies into the domain of public discourse in the process. Second, he names the mid-century sexual liberation movement which aimed to overturn restrictive norms and taboos related to sexuality, and which inadvertently extended conversations about sexuality to include children. This did not entail explicit advocacy for child sexualization, but it did have the consequence of raising questions about childhood sexuality. *What age does sexuality start at? Should children be permitted to explore their sexuality with other children?* The liberation movement brought these questions into the light. Finally, Greif calls out the growing consumer culture that spawned after World War II and began to target children as consumers. In response to new demographic territory, consumerism did the only thing it knows how to do: "selling to kids with sex as everything is sold with sex." (Greif, 2006).

These changes had begun to ensue in Nabokov's day, were well advanced in Greif's day and have reached a boiling point in our day. According to Greif, the transformation from child to sex child is what *Lolita* meant to signal. The same transformation is signalled in philosophical journal Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl.* Similar to Greif's sex child, The Young Girl is a critical metaphor. The Young Girl is the ultimate commodity. She is the idealized subject of consumption, conformity and desirability. She need not be a girl. She is a target. Defined by her relationship to consumption and her need for societal approval, The Young Girl is a figure of the capitalist's imagination. The Young Girl reflects the ethos of neoliberalism: she is adaptable, perpetually reinventing herself to stay relevant. She commodifies herself, viewing her body, emotions and relationships as assets to be optimized and displayed for profit. She is an aestheticist, her value inseparable from the quality of her appearance, body and persona. She is a sex child.

Together, the sex child and The Young Girl indicate the commodification of the child as an object of consumption dovetailed with a belief in the centrality of sex to personal freedom. The contemporary idea that one's body is not enough on its own—that it must be perfected, consumed, and displayed—emerges in part from the same forces that commodify the child. Greif critiques the sexual liberation movement for misunderstanding freedom: rather than reducing the importance of sex, the commodification of sex makes it a central, market-driven pursuit. The idea of sexual liberation is redefined in neoliberal terms, where true freedom becomes equated with the ability to participate in and profit from the sexual economy. The sex child symbolizes a shift from a private, intimate realm to one where sexuality must be exhibited and monetized. What was once a sacred space of bodily autonomy becomes a public, commodified spectacle, driven by the demand for sexual perfection and societal validation. As Greif puts it, the sex child, restricted from the market both legally and institutionally, becomes "a fantastic commodity unattainable in its pure form." (Greif, 2006). The desire for this unattainable figure, he argues, "completes the competitive system," creating an endless pursuit of something that can never be attained. In this way, "the sex child can be a utopia personified, even as she props up the brutal dystopia to which her youth furnishes the competitive principle." (Greif, 2006). Here we find the paradox. The personified utopia is the promise that if one can be youthful enough (read small enough, naïve enough, delicate enough), they can be loved; the dystopia is the perversity of this desire and the system that permits it.

### *v. Objections*

One may be concerned that my analysis of *Frankenstein* and *Lolita* does not constitute a sufficiently strict parallel. Namely, that if *Lolita* the text is Nabokov's monster, then *Frankenstein* the text ought to be taken as Shelley's monster and so my attempted analysis rests on a false comparative proximity. While I see the merits of this concern, I would argue that it stems from a slight misunderstanding of the two texts. In *Lolita*, Nabokov avoids the traditional novel format, distancing himself from the expectation that a novel be constituted by a unified literary universe or a broad cast of characters. On the contrary, Humbert constitutes the novel, functioning as a protagonist, a perverse antagonist, and a narrator. He himself constitutes the literary universe. One can read *Lolita* as if Humbert *himself* is a text carefully crafted by Nabokov to explore the topics of desire and obsession. Nabokov's creation, the text, is

inseparable from Humbert's own constructed reality. It *is* his reality and that reality is him. Humbert's identity is an artifice that reflects Nabokov's craftsmanship. This act of creation is different from what we see in *Frankenstein*; Humbert is not merely a character within a broader narrative, but the primary mechanism by which the story is told. Therefore, in *Lolita*, the text itself becomes a monster because *it* is the function which drives readers towards Cohen's theses. Nabokov's decision to create *Lolita* as a text that forces readers to engage with Humbert's distorted version of events is a critical aspect of the novel's monstrous nature. The text itself is the vehicle and embodiment of monstrosity. In contrast, in *Frankenstein*, the relationship between author and character is more straightforward. In this sense, it is a conventional moral tale which offers its lessons in a rather didactic, character driven model. The creation of the novel itself is not intended to host Shelley's moral thrust, the characters and the mores and challenges with which she imbues them are.

One might also be concerned that this defence of *Lolita* as monster risks casting the theoretical net too far—that on the mode I have described, most any text could justifiably count as monster. I am sure that the net would not be cast so wide that *any* text could count. *Lolita* features a unique narrative presentation: the inextricability of a texts more's from its entire body is not exactly standard (hence the gravitas of Nabokov's literary feat). One can, for example, extract sufficient meaning from *The Great Gatsby* without adopting narrator Nick Carraway's moral perspective. One can scrutinize his biases, and independently evaluate the characters and their actions. There is a distinct separation between narrative voice, textual meaning, and character development that permits them to be taken independent of one another. In *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert's voice not only dominates the narrative but entangles the reader in his justifications, manipulations, and character interpretations, making it harder to extricate the story's moral framework from his narration.

Even more, I would argue that this concern misunderstands the value of a literary framework. The goal in my application and development of this framework has not been to achieve absolute novelty nor inimitability. I have presented one way to interpret *Lolita*, not the best or most correct way to interpret *Lolita.* Thus, it is not the case that if this framework is good, it should necessarily be systematized and replicated. The universal applicability of my method is not of express concern. Nor would its universalization be a problem. That most any text can be put

through a feminist critique is not to say that feminism is too generalizable to be effective. It is at best, an indication of the adaptability of feminist critique, and at least, an indication of critics' appetite for feminist insights. In short, I accept the risk of an overflow of texts-as-monster stances.

### *vi. Conclusion*

I have sought to present an updated reading of *Lolita* as Nabokov's monster. My motivation for this undertaking was born from an interest in getting to the bottom of Nabokov's work: I have found critiques of *Lolita* as justifying pedophilia unconvincing and ineffective in explaining the cultural remnants of the text's impact. They are not sufficient to explain cultural phenomena like Lana Del Rey, nor the contemporary Tumblr blogs of self-described nymphets. They also fail to articulate what is so strange about recent cultural affinities with childish dress (see 'coquette core' on any social media platform), and cannot account for the development of a beauty industry that seems to have transcended aging itself. If *Lolita* is about an insidious obsession with youth, analyses that fail to capture the remanence of this obsession in our cultural memory fall short.

I understand myself as situated at the dusk of the sex child. In my peers, I find a deep concern with the sexualization of young people. I find a rejection of the media system that permitted the exploitation of Britney Spears. And I find us criticized by forces that are threatened by our disturbance of their social order (see The Huffington Post's '*Gen Z Is Particularly Weird About Relationship Age Gaps'* for an introductory instance). My interest in rereading Lolita stems from a desire to understand what the novel was alerting us to, so we can move beyond it and develop a reconstructed perspective on youth and sexuality—one that renders the era demanding such a text as a foolish, juvenile past (Greif, 2006). As such, rereading *Lolita* becomes a crucial act not only of literary engagement but of social critique. Ultimately, an updated reading of *Lolita* is a call to question how we value, sexualize, and consume images of youth and beauty—and to imagine new cultural narratives that dismantle the exploitative cycles that Nabokov so uncomfortably exposed. This, then, is the real monster Nabokov's *Lolita* forces us to reckon with: not only the one he created on the page but the one we must address in our own collective reflections and actions

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