

**Tracing Lolita:
Defining the Archetype of the Nymphet in 20th and 21st Century Literature and Culture**

EDDA MARGESON

Prospectus: Since its publication in 1955, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* has faced numerous criticism, judgments and banishment from popular culture, making its very utterance unmentionable in day-to-day society and an invocation of lust, innocence, and taboo. However Nabokov is not the only writer to have written on relations between older men and what Nabokov described best as a "nymphet"—he is only the most infamous. For centuries other poets and other writers have written and experimented with the relationship between man and nymphet and not received the same negative social criticism reserved for Nabokov. Other authors such as Edgar Allen Poe and William Faulkner have capitalized on the relationship between man and nymphet to great review; so what is it that makes *Lolita* so reactionary? Nabokov first coined the term "nymphet" in 1955 in his novel *Lolita*. The term was used in reference to maidens who were deemed nymphic in nature; Nabokov initially defined the nymphet as a being "Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic."¹ However, this definition is taken from the beginning of the novel, and as the book progresses it is revealed through the actions and sentiments of the protagonist, Humbert Humbert, that this initial definition of the nymphet is neither steadfast nor completely accurate. This definition evolves throughout the novel showing that a nymphet cannot be merely determined by an age range, but rather a nymphet is defined by her relationship to her male counterpart and their difference in age being at least ten years. In addition, the nymphet does not exist outside her relationship to her male counterpart and must engage in the male's image of her. It is when nymphets are transposed into reality and believed to exist on their own that society perverts them.

Defining the Archetype: Nymphic, nympholepsy, nymphets—these are all words that derive from the alluring, entrancing, bewitching deity, the Ancient Greek nymph. The nymph was a young female mystical being, usually associate with nature that entranced lone travelers. While there are many Greek myths that tell of the nymphs and their exploits, one of the most well known tales is Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*. In an episode of their ancient epic poem *Hylas*, the son of Heracles, is kidnapped by nymphs at a spring. Hylas is sent to get water and the nymphs that live in the spring find Hylas to be so beautiful that they do not wish him to leave. So the nymphs decide to use their own beauty to entrap Hylas. When Hylas encounters the nymphs, he is so entranced with them that he succumbs to them, letting them pull him into the water, and he never returns to the Argonauts. Once a man has fallen in love with a nymph, he is never able to let go. Nymphs are not of this world; therefore, they are not something that can be entirely innocent, yet they are still mortal. This odd juxtaposition leads to a character that is cast as the enchantress, and the men that fall for them, regardless of the nymph's intent, as the nymph's victims. While the myths of Ancient Greece have faded away and to give rise to new themes and archetypes, contemporary authors, such as Vladimir Nabokov and William Faulkner have attempted to resurrect the essence of the nymph in their writing.

Nymphets are literary creations that exist with a partner paradigm. Similar to the nymph victims of Ancient Greece, contemporary characters that suffer from nympholepsy, an obsession with a nymph or nymphet, are male. However, different from Ancient Greece, nymphets do not exist in their own right. Nymphets are the product a male that projects his own image onto

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir, and Alfred Appel, *The Annotated "Lolita" Revised and Updated* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 16.

particular individuals and the individual engaging in the male's fantasy. While Nabokov asserted his own definition of the nymphet in his 1956 publication of *Lolita* as being "Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic," this definition contradicts itself later in the novel and is never amended.² While an age and age difference between the male and his nymphet is an important part of the relationship, those exact numbers are not enough to encapsulate all that defines the nymphet dynamic. What makes nympholepsy so controversial is that it hinges upon the idea of a person that would be presumed innocent by society being presented as more than human and incapable of corruption. Therefore, a nymphet could vary in age sometime between early childhood, roughly six, and the cusp of adulthood, roughly twenty, because these are commonly considered years of naivety and innocence. While the male counterpart, on the other hand, must possess a considerable age difference, at least ten years, if not more. The older age establishes the male as being in a greater position of power than the at least a decade younger and presumed innocent nymphet. It also classifies him old enough to "know better" than to corrupt an innocent, by societal standards. As for the second part of Nabokov's definition of the nymphet, "their true nature" does not exist outside the mind of those afflicted by nympholepsy. While it is possible for multiple men to be enraptured by the same nymphet, as shown in Nabokov's *Lolita* and Faulkner's *Eula*, without these male counterparts, the nymphet would cease to be, the nymphet would just be another person. Additionally, as shown in Nabokov's *The Enchanter*, it is not enough for a man to project the image of a nymphet onto someone; the subject of his desire must somehow engage and validate his perception of them. Nymphets are contingent upon the obsession, to the point of self-destruction, of men. Interestingly within literature there are no commonly known women that suffer from the same type of frantic desire and projection of fantasy that afflict men suffering from nympholepsy. It appears as though the nymphet paradigm only exists with a male partner. This may be due to the patriarchal view of men being hunters, while women are mothers and gatherers.

The analogy of the hunter can further be applied to those men suffering from nympholepsy. Just as the hunter does not go after every catch, neither does the male within the nymphic paradigm project his desire onto every being. Rather there are only particular beings that qualify as nymphets, just as there are very few prized prey on a hunt. Like a hunter stalking their prey before they take the kill shot, the male stalks the nymphet, attempting to get close over a period of time and possess them. What differs from the hunter analogy is that nymphets are incapable of being truly caught. While a man may temporarily physically dominate over the nymphet, like when Humbert Humber takes the role of Lolita's stepfather in *Lolita*, he does not truly possess her. Because nymphets are a result of their male counterpart's projection, the male is incapable of ultimately satiating their desire because they cannot possess that which does not exist. Thus the male becomes a victim of his own desire and ultimately destroys not only his psyche, but also his life.

William Faulkner's "Nympholepsy" demonstrates the best example of contemporary nymphic desire. Faulkner's "Nympholepsy" is the best example because it goes into the mindset of someone suffering from nympholepsy without a relatable nymphet. However, the sentiment expressed in "Nympholepsy" is identical to that of the work of both Nabokov and Marquez, it is the psyche of a man overtaken by the power of the nymph.

"Nympholepsy" begins with an unnamed male protagonist out on a hillside. The man catches a glimpse of something, "How he knew it was a woman or a girl at that distance he could

² Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 16.

not have told, but know he did.”³ It is presumed that what the man sees is a nymph, given the title of the short story. At this point it is made clear by Faulkner that the protagonist is unaware of the age of the female figure, but he recognizes it as being female. Yet despite not knowing the age of the figure, “his once-clean instincts become swinish got him lurching into motion.”⁴ The man is in rapture over the essence of the nymph, regardless of her age. This short story suggests that if someone suffers from instances of “nympholepsy” that age is inconsequential, that to desire a nymph is all consuming and irrational. The man in the story does not even know whether it is “copulation or companionship that he wanted” in attempting to find the nymph. His search for the nymph then leads him to falling into a stream, “You are going to die, he told his body, feeling that imminent Presence again about him.”⁵ If he died, his death would be a direct consequence of his attempt to capture “that imminent Presence.”⁶ The capitalization of “Presence” is particularly important because personifies the nymph as being something that is real in his mind and thus in need of a proper title.

There is a trope in literature of the nymph bewitching a lone traveler and leading him down a dangerous path, often ending in an untimely death. This trope is clearly shown in Faulkner’s narrative. Despite the near experience with death in the stream, the man continues on after his nymph, “There she was, in a wheat field under the rising harvest moon, like a ship on a silver sea. He plunged after her.”⁷ He risks his livelihood, just to try to catch this Presence. He does not give up his pursuit until he sees his town, remembers his bed, and sees the comforts of humanity that he finally decides to delay his chase for another night. Despite facing near death, wasting his time chasing the uncatchable, Faulkner’s protagonist knows he will continue his chase. He describes his need to chase the nymph as “his sinister shadow” implying that he knows there is an element of darkness to what he does in attempting to chase Her; and like a shadow, he knows that she is unobtainable, incapable of being caught, “Tomorrow his sinister shadow would circle him again, but tomorrow was a long way off.”⁸ By emphasizing that it is “his sinister shadow” the protagonist recognizes that he is the victim of his own desires and that he has created the nymph. It is not the nymph that compels him to chase her; rather he continues the chase by his own volition. This is a moment of clarity for the protagonist because he recognizes that the nymph is “his sinister shadow” and does not exist outside of his mind. However, despite this realization, he does not permanently cease his chase; rather he delays it, implying that he will continue the chase the next night.

Although the protagonist is able to delay his impulse to continue on searching for the nymph, ultimately he continues to search for that which cannot be obtained or even defined. His need for this creature is so consuming that he cannot even differentiate between his desire for company and his desire for coitus. Faulkner provides a good introduction to how the psychosis of a nympholeptic is not based on mortality, morality, or even reality. By giving the reader a basic protagonist and an undefined nymph, Faulkner is able to avoid social criticism for the obsessive desire that drives his nympholeptic. Due to the lack of specific details, Faulkner is not condemned because it can be written off as a dream, a figment of the protagonist’s imagination. However, once concrete details place an age (twelve), a place (Nabokov’s America), and a name (Lolita), narratives cease to solely exist in their fictional world and are immediately transposed to reality. Nympholepsy then ceases to be a dream and becomes a disease.

³ Faulkner, William, *The Uncollected Stories of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1979), 332.

⁴ Faulkner, William, *The Uncollected Stories*, 332.

⁵ Faulkner, *The Uncollected Stories*, 334.

⁶ Faulkner, *The Uncollected Stories*, 334.

⁷ Faulkner, *The Uncollected Stories*, 334.

⁸ Faulkner, *The Uncollected Stories*, 336.

The most famous case of nympholepsy in contemporary literature and culture is Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. *Lolita* has faced numerous public and literary criticism for its content describing a love affair between thirty-six-year-old European Humbert Humbert and the twelve-year-old American Dolores Haze, also known as Lolita. Initially unable to be published in the United States due to its content, *Lolita* first found a home in France with Olympian Press in June of 1955.⁹ However, unknown to Nabokov at the time, Olympian Press had taken an interest in his book due to the perverse sexuality. Nabokov was unaware of the reputation that Olympian Press had publishing perverse and pornographic novellas. Later on this would undoubtedly play a role in readers' and critics' minds on trying to classify the novel as literature or pornography.

Finding a publicist in the United States for *Lolita* proved to be exceptionally difficult despite its growing popularity in Europe and the US. While it would face being banned in France, England, parts of the US, and numerous other countries as it became translated, *Lolita* was brought to the United States in 1958.¹⁰ Finally easily accessible to the American public, *Lolita* took the United States by storm remaining on the best seller's list for over a year.¹¹ As *Lolita* became easily accessible to the American public critics became familiar with Nabokov's work. Some would argue that the critics focused too much on the beauty of his language, rather than the moral implications of his work:

While other critics took the book to the other extreme focusing on the moral implications if Humbert Humbert and Lolita were transposed into reality, not the "America" represented in Nabokov's work: "Without doubt it is the filthiest book I have ever read. Sheer unrestrained pornography."¹² While these views are radically different, it is easy to understand how a reader can interpret it either way. While Nabokov clearly does not condone the actions of Humbert Humbert in the novel, after all he is never satisfied in his relationship with Lolita and he does suffer from an untimely death, Nabokov still takes the time to create a multi-faceted character out of Humbert Humbert so that a reader can understand the root of his psychosis.

The rationale behind Humbert Humbert's psychosis in Nabokov's *Lolita* derives greatly from Edgar Allen Poe's 1849 "Annabel Lee." It is no coincidence that both childhood loves are named Annabel and their last names pronounced the same. Poe's poem begins with two children in love by the sea shore, "She was a child and I was a child, / In this kingdom by the sea."¹³ Annabel Lee dies due to illness in the poem, leaving the narrator alone. Yet, regardless of her death, the Narrator continues to profess, "our love it was stronger by far than the love/ of those who were older than we."¹⁴ The Narrator is in love with the image of a child, Annabel Lee. It is stated at the beginning of the poem that "it was many and many a year ago" showing that the narrator has aged greatly since the event of meeting and loving Annabel Lee.¹⁵ While the poem recalls the past shared between the narrator and Annabel Lee, when speaking of his love the narrator chooses to use the present tense. He no longer is a child when he says "my darling, my life and my bride" of the deceased Annabel Lee. While this poem initially is thought of as being a memory of childhood love, the tense and diction demonstrate the Narrator's now nympholeptic psychosis.

⁹ Boyd, Brian, *Vladimir Nabokov the American Years* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1991), 266.

¹⁰ Boyd, *The American Years*, 364.

¹¹ Boyd, *The American Years*, 387.

¹² John Gordon, as quoted in Boyd, *The American Years*, 295.

¹³ Edgar Poe, as quoted in Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 329.

¹⁴ Edgar Poe, as quoted in Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 329.

¹⁵ Edgar Poe, as quoted in Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 329.

In *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert also has a childhood love that dies due to illness. While Humbert Humbert did not believe that the angels envied his childhood love as the narrator of “Annabel Lee” states, he never was able to develop a fully functional relationship with a woman after the death of his childhood love. He fell in love with the image of a child and while he grew older, his memory of love remained static and perpetually stuck on his Annabel Leigh. While initially his perception of love was not nymphic in nature, “When I was a child and she was a child, my little Annabel was no nymphet to me; I was her equal, a faunlet,” his inability to move on leads to nympholepsy as he grows older.¹⁶ In recalling the memory of her and choosing to say that at the time of their youth she was “no nymphet to me” Humbert Humbert emphasizes that now he is older, he looks back on the memory of Annabel Leigh as nymphic and she as a nymphet. However, at the time of youth he did not classify her that way because they were equals. As mentioned previously part of the nympholeptic paradigm is in the sense of power that the male can exert over his nymphet. Since Humbert Humbert was equal with Annabel as a child, he could not view her as a nymphet, but as he ages and has power over the memory, he alters her into a nymphet. The memory of Annabel Leigh is ultimately idealized and the cause of his nympholepsy. In trying to capture that spark of initial love, Humbert Humbert, associates desire and passion with girls he defines as nymphic—girls that remind him of his Annabel. Even Humbert Humbert admits to the reader and jury to whom his testimony is addressed that, “there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain girl-child.”¹⁷

While Poe’s Narrator does not imply that he ever loved another or lusted after another after the passing of Annabel Lee, Humbert Humbert only differs from the Narrator in the fact that Humbert Humbert tries to rekindle his lost love by trying to find it in others. Both of these characters lust after the idea of their first love, their lost love, their childhood love and thus are doomed to want, to need what they now as grown men should never have.

Humbert Humbert though, completely ignores social convention, and attempts to possess his perfect nymphet, his “Lolita.” He projects the image of a girl in possession of “fantastic power,” whose true nature is not human.¹⁸ While he is cognizant of his desire being condemnable by society, he excuses his actions by claiming that not all children are nymphets. Ordinary children, according to Humbert Humbert, are innocent and vulnerable and this is not the target of his desire, he only lays claim to those that are without innocence, his nymphets.¹⁹ Those girls classified, as nymphets, are not children in his eyes, and thus incorruptible. While Humbert Humbert may later regret what he did to Lolita, throughout the novel he will never let nymphic image of her and even after their deaths he immortalizes his love for her in his testimony. Even in death, she will always be his Lolita.

Humbert Humbert falls for Lolita the instant that he sees her. The image of his childhood “Riviera love” is transposed onto twelve-year-old Dolores Haze and he finds any excuse possible to get closer to her.²⁰ Humbert Humbert even goes so far as to marry the widowed Mrs. Haze in an attempt to gain power of his Lolita in the position of stepfather.²¹ Surprisingly, this is not the first character Nabokov created that uses this means to obtain power over the person of their desire.

¹⁶ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 17.

¹⁷ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 9.

¹⁸ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 17.

¹⁹ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 20.

²⁰ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 39.

²¹ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 39.

Before Nabokov wrote *Lolita*, he wrote *The Enchanter*, in the autumn of 1939.²² While Nabokov admits that *The Enchanter* was “a kind of pre-*Lolita*,” and while “the basic marrying-her-mother idea” also existed in this novel, *The Enchanter*, was “new and had grown in secret the claws and wings of a novel.”²³ *The Enchanter* is told from the perspective of an unnamed middle-aged protagonist, who like *Lolita*’s Humbert Humbert, suffers from nympholepsy. While the root of his nympholepsy is never disclosed, he falls for a particular “violet-clad girl of twelve.”²⁴ His desire consumes him and while he passes other young girls:

Sometime a pretty one would catch his eye; but what the eye perceived was the senselessly smooth movement of slow-motion film, and he himself marveled at how unresponsive and occupied he was, how specifically the sensations recruited from every side—melancholy, avidity, tenderness, madness—were now concentrated upon the image of that absolutely unique and irreplaceable being.²⁵

Just like Humbert Humbert, this protagonist becomes completely consumed by his desire for his nymphet. Fueled by this unquenchable thirst, the protagonist marries the sickly mother of his nymphet, in an attempt to gain power over her. However, the mother stays alive longer than anticipated, which leads the protagonist to contemplate murder to accomplish his initial goal—possessing his nymphet. Humbert Humbert also struggles with thoughts of murder while married to Mrs. Haze. Ultimately, neither commit matricide, but their desire for their nymphets is so great that it does cause both men to seriously consider murder as a means of obtaining their nymphets.

When the protagonist in *The Enchanter* finally obtains custody of his nymphet, it is made clear that he has become completely overridden by desire. While he makes claims that “he would make no attempt on her virginity in the tightest and pinkest sense of the term,” he clearly focuses only on physical virginity, and pays no mind to the notion of corrupting her innocence.²⁶ Unlike other nymphets, the girl in *The Enchanter* cannot be classified within the nymphic relationship, as being a nymphet herself. While her male counterpart may view her as a nymphet, she does reciprocate emotionally or engage in any physical activity, unlike other nymphets in Nabokov’s works, such as Lolita in *Lolita* and Margot in *Laughter in the Dark*. While a nymphet cannot exist without her male counterpart, a nymphet must be cognoscente of the relationship between her and her male counterpart, to which this child knows nothing. She has no desire to explore sexually, nor does she recognize the protagonist’s image of her as being more than a child. While the protagonist knows already that “no matter what age she attained...her present image would always transpire through her metamorphoses,” she is blissfully unaware of his desire. However, once she is abruptly confronted with his desire, rather than give into the image of he has created or even recognizes it, she is confused, horrified, and starts to scream.²⁷ It is with this scream that the protagonist, the self-proclaimed “enchanter” is forced to confront reality outside the confines of his own mind and recognize the monster that he truly is. With that scream all disillusionment shatters and the protagonist takes off and literally runs to his death.

Inspiration for *Lolita* can be traced throughout *The Enchanter*. However, the relationship and psychosis of nympholepsy is drastically altered between these two novels. Those who cringed at Humbert Humbert’s obsession and somewhat mutual relationship with Lolita, would never

²² Nabokov, Vladimir, *The Enchanter* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Son, 1986), 15.

²³ Nabokov, *The Enchanter*, 15, 13.

²⁴ Nabokov, *The Enchanter*, 26.

²⁵ Nabokov, *The Enchanter*, 61.

²⁶ Nabokov, *The Enchanter*, 74.

²⁷ Nabokov, *The Enchanter*, 92.

have tolerated *The Enchanter*. The monster that Humbert Humbert is sometimes portrayed as cannot compare to the protagonist originally created by Nabokov in *The Enchanter*, who had no regard for his nymphet. While Humbert Humbert may make the claim that he loves his Lolita, the enchanter was fueled by nothing, but raw sexual desire and can make no such claim. The line between man and monster is clear in *The Enchanter*; the same cannot be said for *Lolita*.

The initial sexual encounter between Humbert Humbert and his Lolita can be viewed multiple ways. The facts according to Humbert Humbert are that he attempted to drug her with a sleeping agent, it fails, and Lolita is the one who seduces him into coitus. While the reader can hypothesize about what Humbert Humbert would have done if the sleeping agent had worked, it is all mere speculation. However, the reader is not forced to imagine what Humbert Humbert would have done, because Lolita engages him, thus confirming their nympholeptic relationship and her position as a nymphet. While it could be argued that Lolita is too young to understand the repercussions of what she is doing, she already has had sexual intercourse, before Humbert Humbert. While Humbert Humbert may be accused of taking her childhood, he does not take her sexual innocence. This one action, on the part of Lolita, sets the stage for the rest of their relationship.

Humbert Humbert will continually try to further possess Lolita, never being sated in his thirst for her: “My only grudge against nature was that I could not turn my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys.”²⁸ While Lolita will use their relationship as blackmail to get what she wants, until she escapes to enter a relationship with the older male writer Quilty. It is because Lolita’s attitude as described by Humbert Humbert that some critics have argued that that the book’s theme “is not the corruption of an innocent child by a cunning adult, but the exploitation of a weak adult by a corrupt child” (Robertson Davies). While other critics like Brian Boyd suggest that the emphasis should not be placed on the description of Lolita but rather the fact that the reader is only able to see everything through Humbert Humbert’s perspective, “Nabokov warns us to recognize the power of the mind to rationalize away the harm it can cause: the more powerful the mind, the stronger our guard needs to be.”²⁹

Another novel by Nabokov published in 1936, many years before *Lolita*, entitled *Laughter in the Dark* explores a nymphic relationship between a sixteen-year-old Margot and middle-aged Albinus. Just as Humbert Humbert and the enchanter, this man suffers from nympholepsy and it leads to his disgraceful fall from society and eventual death. Margot is similar to Lolita in that she recognizes Albinus’ lust and image of her. Margot is opportunistic and uses this towards her advantage, ultimately using Albinus for nothing more than his money. Albinus is enthralled with his nymphet and is so blinded by the image he has created of Margot that he eventually ends up literally blind as a result of his involvement with her. His refusal to recognize the beauty around him, his wife, his child, leads him to losing everything for someone that is unobtainable. Margot plays her role in his fantasy perfectly, but all she does is play, nothing is real with Albinus. While she lets Albinus believe that he has power over her, it is she who wields the power in the relationship. Just as in the stories of the Ancient Greeks, those who involve themselves with nymphets ultimately are destroyed by the desire.

While Nabokov brought nymphets to the attention of the literary and global community, he is not the only one who has used this archetype in his novels, he is only the most notorious. William Faulkner’s Eula from *The Hamlet* is an example of a non-Nabokovian nymphet in

²⁸ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 165.

²⁹ Boyd, *The American Years*, 232.

literature. Eula's relationship with the men of the town and particularly with Labove is what defines her as a nymphet. Eula not only demonstrates the typical physical demeanor of a nymphet, that of a young beautiful girl between the ages of six and twenty, but personality as well. While some may misconstrue her lethargic demeanor as lazy, it actually demonstrates her dominance. Eula does no more than she deems necessary and whenever possible she gets someone else to do her tasks, demonstrating Eula as cognoscente of her lure over men. Despite her age and sex, Eula is constantly in control of her situation, which is not typical of most young girls particularly during the masculine dominated era. Rather than be a victim to the men around her, Eula does what she wants with her body and her relationships. She has a greater understanding than most girls her age and she uses it to elicit what she desires. Eula's relationship with the schoolteacher Labove is a typical male to nymphet relationship; it is a one-sided relationship of rapture that inflicts the satyr. Labove is enthralled by the call of the nymphet Eula. He is a man of words, a teacher, and it is because of this he is susceptible to the call of the nymphet. While Eula did not particularly entice Labove, the call of the nymphet is something that is done without the cognitive knowledge of the nymphet. The obsession and lust for Eula that Labove experiences even though he knows it is socially unacceptable because of Eula's pre-pubescent age, is typical of the nymphic relationship. Labove imagines Eula to be more than she is, more than just an eight-year-old girl and thus in doing so is able to justify his lustful desires. Labove's rapture with Eula, sexual desire for her, attempt to dominate her, their age difference, and his tragic fall are all tropes of a nymphet relationship in literature, and it is because of these characteristics that Eula is defined as a nymphet.

Eula even as a young child enticed the men of the town. While she was growing up she had the attention of multiple men. While Eula does not take advantage of this attraction until later in life, she does nothing to dissuade the men either. Eula's lethargic nature takes precedent over everything else in her life and in doing so she omits a raw sexuality that engulfs the men around her. Eula is too lazy to cover up or conceal her sexuality and thus it attracts all the men that are around her. Eula's older brother claims, "[Eula] is just like a dog! Soon as she passes anything in long pants she begins to give off something. You can smell it! You can smell it ten feet away!"³⁰ Like a dog though Eula does not control her exuding sexuality. While she exposes herself unknowingly her brother recognizes that, "she simply did not care, doubtless did not even know it was exposed, and if she had known, would not have gone to the trouble to cover it."³¹ Thus it is because of her apathy, her lack of caring, that she acts lethargic in nature and this is partially the cause of her sexuality and appeal. However it is important to note that despite Eula's young age, she does not appear to be a child. While Eula does have a young face she has "a body of fourteen with the female shape of twenty" at age eight.³² It is at this age that she first draws the interest of Labove.

The schoolteacher Labove is enthralled with Eula. When Labove first sees Eula he is overwhelmed and there is an "instant of crossing the threshold brought into the bleak, ill-lighted poorly heated room dedicated to the harsh functioning of Protestant primary education a moist blast of spring's liquorish corruption, a pagan triumphal prostration before the supreme primal uterus."³³ These poetic versus continue on throughout the chapter whenever Labove describes Eula. For Labove he escapes reality when looking at Eula, to watch her is to be intoxicated like, "A moist blast of spring's liquorish corruption."³⁴ He recognizes she is forbidden, but when he is

³⁰ Faulkner, William, *The Hamlet* (New York: First Vintage International Edition, 1990), 110.

³¹ Faulkner, *The Hamlet*, 112.

³² Faulkner, *The Hamlet*, 126.

³³ Faulkner, *The Hamlet*, 126.

³⁴ Faulkner, *The Hamlet*, 126.

in her presence he reverts to an imaginative space in which the rules of society do not apply. Labove uses poetic language in order to validate his desire for Eula. If Labove views Eula as something beyond a child, he can justify his longing for her. In addition, describing Eula with a poetic tongue gives Labove ultimate control over her in his mind. According to Labove when Eula was “merely walking down the aisle between them she would transform the very wooden desks and benches themselves into a grove of Venus and fetch every male in the room.”³⁵ While she attracts the attention of other men, Labove is not just attracted to her; rather she consumes him. It is evident by his poetic, romantic descriptions of Eula that he craves more than just copulation. He does not just see her as a sexual object, rather he uses images of beauty, “a grove of Venus,” and to describe the way she transforms a room. It is because of his classical knowledge and training that he is susceptible to Eula’s siren call. What differentiates Labove from just another lust-filled, twisted man is that he is able to recall those images of beauty and transpose them on his beloved. In transposing those images of beauty, he creates his own version of Eula, a fantasized version of Eula, and then blurs the line between fantasy and reality. It is because of this blurring between who Eula actually is with what Labove imagines her to be that results in his obsession and eventual attempt at overtaking Eula.

Labove’s attempt to overtake Eula and make her his is a tragic fall for Labove. While he once was a respectable man with a bright future ahead of him, he falls into the ultimate temptation: Eula. Eula is representative of primal seduction and want; she is also taboo for Labove because of her age. In acting on his desires Labove chooses to ignore society’s view of morality and proper codes of conduct with a minor. This need Labove feels consummate his desire is typical of a male consumed by nympholepsy. In the nymphet relationship it is often the case that the infatuated male becomes obsessed to the brink of insanity with the nymphet of his choosing. Despite the nymphet showing no signs of wanting or even knowing the desire felt by the male counterpart, the male feels compelled to act on his desire, often resulting in physical and sexual contact between the pair. However, once that contact has occurred, it is often the case in that the male will meet with a tragic downfall. In making their desires a reality the male crosses the real world and their fantasy world, often resulting in dire situations for them because they now must face the real world consequences for acting on their fantastic desires. What differentiates the relationship between Eula and Labove from other nymphet-satyr relationships is that despite Labove’s attempt to make his fantasy come true, Eula does not seek the help of society to protect herself. Rather than use other men to beat up Labove for attempting to violate her at such a young age, Eula decides that it is not even worth mentioning. This reaction is devastating for Labove because he finally realizes that although he has made Eula his world, he does not even constitute a speck in her world. Labove downfall is therefore his own doing. In trying to make his fantasy real, Labove ends up destroying the perception he himself has built that he is even of value in Eula’s life, and that is worse than anything else for him.

The nymphic relationship between Eula and Labove goes through the typical stages of nympholepsy: poetic obsession, ignoring society’s moral rules, acting on desire, and the fall of the male counterpart. Labove develops an obsession with Eula after the first time he sees her and describes her and the world around her with poetic, romantic language, despite knowing that she is only eight-years-old. He is her schoolteacher and is cognizant of her age and development, but despite that chooses to act upon his impulse and desires to be with her. Thus he acts and is destroyed in discovering that his fantasy world and the world in which he lives are incompatible leaving him ultimately destroyed. Their relationship is typical of an older male attempting to faun over a young nymphet, and in this case demonstrates that the power in the relationship lies not upon the man that attempts to thrust himself upon a young girl, but rather the young girl. In

³⁵ Faulkner, *The Hamlet*, 127.

obsessing over the nymphet, the male counterpart makes himself weak with desire, while the young girl remains in constant control of herself and her actions. Thus Eula becomes Labove downfall and she is shown to be a true nymphet cognizant of her role in his demise.

Nabokov paved the way with *Lolita* to analyze the archetype of the nymphet. Without the notoriety and attention *Lolita* received, the subject of nympholepsy would not be nearly as well known as it is in today's society. Today "Lolita" is not just the name of a book, it is a name known worldwide from Lolita fashion in Japan to a "Lolita" make-up collection in the United States that boasts a lipstick entitled "Underage Red." However, with this notoriety, Lolita and the subject of nympholepsy have been scrutinized, criticized, and ultimately misinterpreted, as images of pornography and pedophilia become synonymous with the word "Lolita." Naming criminal cases "The Long Island Lolita" and contemporary books using "Lolita" as a universal symbol for the sexualization of youth, demonstrates not only a negative interpretation but also an incorrect interpretation of the world's most famous nymphet. Nympholepsy is not meant to exist within the real world. It is a psychosis that afflicts literary characters and the nymphets that are imagined, do not exist and cannot exist in the world. After all, you cannot depict something that only exists within the mind's eye.

Works Cited

Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov the American Years*. Princeton (N.J.): Princeton UP, 1991. Print.

Faulker, William. *The Hamlet*. New York: Vintage International, 1991. Print.

Nabokov, Vladimir, and Alfred Appel. *The Annotated "Lolita" Revised and Updated*. New York: Vintage, 1991. Print.

—. *Laughter in the Dark*. New York: New Directions, 2006. Print.

—. *The Enchanter*. New York: Putnam, 1986. Print.

