

Spring 5-2-2017

# "La Belle Dame in bobby socks": Keatsian Echoes in Lolita

Heajin-Hailie Kim  
*CUNY Hunter College*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc\\_sas\\_etds](http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds)

---

## Recommended Citation

Kim, Heajin-Hailie, "'La Belle Dame in bobby socks': Keatsian Echoes in Lolita" (2017). *CUNY Academic Works*.  
[http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc\\_sas\\_etds/175](http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds/175)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Hunter College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Arts & Sciences Theses by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu).

“La Belle Dame in bobby socks”: Keatsian Echoes in *Lolita*

by

Heajin-Hailie Kim

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts, English, Hunter College  
The City University of New York

Spring 2017

Thesis Sponsor: Jeffrey Allred

May 2, 2017

Date

Jeffrey B. Allred

Signature

May 1, 2017

Date

Kelvin C. Black

Signature of Second Reader

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 3

Frigid Queens and Princesses: The Shifting Structures of Courtly Love 8

“It was the same child”: Doubles and Duality 18

Consuming Lolita: Images of Consumption and Consumerism 30

Conclusion: Desiring Narratives in Postmodernity 39

Works Cited 43

## Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* draws from key themes in Romantic poetry, particularly John Keats's otherworldly, dreamy portrayal of the impossible object of desire and his depiction of the courtly love trope in narrative poems such as "The Eve of St. Agnes," "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and "Lamia." The courtly love trope, which emerged from the notion of chivalry embedded in medieval courtly life, thematizes the idea of love of a knight for the unattainable Queen or other love object. Slavoj Žižek states that this trope involves a "kind of loop in which the (mis)perceived effect of the brutal act upon the victim [e.g., the Queen's pitiless demands that the Knight risk his life in combat] retroactively legitimizes the act." (Žižek 93). Thus courtly love plays out an inexorable, infinite masochism, one that is present in Keats's narrative poems and reworked in twentieth-century terms in Nabokov's novel. Nabokov's meditation on the courtly love trope begins in his 1921 translation of Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci," where he begins to think about how he will change the structure and trouble it. With *Lolita*, Nabokov does not merely echo Keats's portrayal of the female object of desire and her knightly pursuer, but revises and parodies the classic depictions of courtly love through Lo's voice and Humbert's painful-yet-humorous experience of trying to attain the object of desire. Humbert's self-aware references to the courtly love trope throughout the novel and his parodic placing of himself in the role of knight highlight one of the major ways in which Nabokov deviates from Keats: unlike Keats's knightly-figures, Humbert is entirely aware of the literary trope that he cannot help but parody.

The unending cycle of desire manifest in the trope of courtly love mirrors the cycle of desire and dissatisfaction found in a consumerist society, another theme that Nabokov draws on from Keats's narrative poems. While *Lolita* deals more directly with the theme of consumerism, Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "La Belle Dame sans Merci" also explore

the intertwining of these two different modes of desire through language. Nabokov draws from Keats's images of consumption and his motif of gift-giving and expands them into a paradoxically affectionate and critical portrayal of American consumerism in his novel. If for Keats consumption is a “genuine way of apprehending life,” Nabokov views the very desire to consume as entrapping, an implication he makes clear not only in *Lolita*, but also in his translation of “La Belle Dame sans Merci” (Tagore 70).

Overall, this project will explore the various Romantic influences that Nabokov simultaneously draws and draws away from in *Lolita*. By analyzing the novel in relation to Keats's narrative poems, I will show the ways Nabokov veered from traditional Romantic structures in the trope of courtly love and in images of consumption and consumerism and how he linked the two different notions of consumption in the novel. In order to do this, I will first give a brief overview of the tradition of courtly love that culminates in Romantic-era work such as Keats's and how he deploys this trope. I will then discuss what Nabokov takes from this trope and how he makes courtly love relevant in the twentieth century. I will reveal the ways that the theme of doubling throughout *Lolita* connects the courtly love theme and the theme of consumerism and the ways this theme draws on Keats's portrayal of consumption in poems such as “The Eve of St. Agnes.” The theme of doubling and mimesis connects the theme of courtly love and consumerism in Keats's poems and *Lolita* by illustrating the various effects of mass production and delves into the question of Humbert's quest for artistic authenticity. Finally, I will discuss how Nabokov draws from images of consumption in Keats's poems and modernizes those images by utilizing similar images to discuss the rise of America and consumerism in relation to courtly love and literature as a whole.

My approach to the relationship between Keats's narrative poetry and *Lolita* in this project is both psychoanalytic and Marxist-feminist. Over the last two decades, scholars have

considered the trope of courtly love independently and within the context of Keats and Nabokov. For example, in his essay on courtly love in *The Metastasis of Enjoyment*, Žižek provides a psychoanalytic reading of the role of gender and sadomasochism in the tradition of courtly love and its effect on interactions between men and women in our own time that are both romantic and masochistic. Drawing from theorists such as Lacan and Deleuze, Žižek attributes the simultaneously monstrous and idealised portrayal of women in the courtly love trope as a result of women being mere vehicles for the man's narcissistic projection onto the woman and the sadistic attitude of the male as a reaction against being reduced in the eyes of the woman (Žižek 90-93). I will apply Žižek's arguments to scenes in *Lolita* in order to reveal the various ways in which the novel draws from the courtly love trope in its depiction of daemonic female multiplicity, which presents the woman as supernatural and dual: she is at once powerful yet a victim. I will also discuss how Nabokov changes this structure by placing it in the context of commodity culture and emphasizing Lo's youth through Humbert's depiction of her daughter-lover role. This analysis of the daemonic or superhuman woman plays an important role in my discussion of courtly love because her portrayal illustrates the necessary othering of the woman by the Knight in the courtly love tradition.

Meanwhile, scholars such as Eric Goldman indirectly explore the topic of courtly love in *Lolita*, defending Lo's sexual normalcy in the face of Humbert's claims of her sexual deviancy and exploring this discrepancy. I will use Goldman's reading of Lo's sexual deviance, which correlates with her supposed daemonic nature, to argue for Lo's humanity and sexual normality in order to argue how Humbert utilizes these ideas in order to distort the power relationship between him and Lo. While Humbert presents Lo as having power over him, and while Lo does ultimately achieve autonomy from him, he constantly reminds the reader that it is he who controls Lo for most of the novel. Jeffrey Cox explores the courtly love

trope in Keats's poems, using Lacan to analyze the sadomasochistic aspects of the relationship between poet and muse in *Lamia*. His argument suggests, though it does not directly state it, the intertwining of the sexual desire inherent in the courtly love trope and the desire to consume the muse that is present in a consumerist society and in art which I argue Nabokov draws from. I will use his reading of Lycius's objectification of Lamia, in conjunction with Karen Swann's reading of the images of gift-giving in "La Belle Dame sans Merci," to discuss the way that Keats intertwines the infinite pain of courtly love and the cyclical and compulsive pleasure of consumption (distinctly evocative of Lacan's *plaisir*) and how he suggests a way to break from this cycle.

Thomas Frosch reads the novel as Humbert's striving for artistic authenticity and Humbert and Quilty's doubling as symbolic of Humbert's failure to achieve anything but parody. While I agree with Frosch's overall argument about *Lolita* as Humbert's striving for artistic authenticity with the literary past as his judges, he neglects to connect formal issues with the socioeconomic matrix from which they emerge. Thus, Humbert's parodying the courtly love tradition does not suggest a perverse refusal to take love seriously, but a necessary reworking of the trope to suit the twentieth century through irony. My disagreement with his fundamental reading of Humbert's journey will fuel my argument that while doubles, which I argue represents mass production, hinder Humbert's ability to achieve artistic authenticity, he does ultimately achieve it. In order to explore the doubling between Annabel and Lolita, I will use Daniel Thomieres's "Cherchez la femme: who really was Annabel Leigh" which discusses the doubling of Annabel and Lo. I will use Thomieres's reading of Lo as a recreation of Annabel to delve into a reading of Lo as a mass-produced version of Annabel and argue that this re-production of the object of desire is one of the ways that the structure of courtly love has shifted as a result of consumer culture.

Linda Kauffman's work explains the economic basis for what Frosch reads naively as mere "inauthenticity" or cynical "parody" of the love relationship. Kauffman explores the economic system embedded in the semi-incestuous aspect of Humbert and Lo's relationship as well as the role of consumerism. Kauffman's reading of Humbert's desire for Lo sensitively considers the way in which sexual and materialist desires intertwine in *Lolita* in her analysis of Humbert's objectifying descriptions of Lo. Using her readings of such scenes, I will argue that Nabokov has modernized the object of desire by making her a product of consumerism and mass-production. Dana Brand explores Nabokov's portrayal of consumerism in the novel and how Humbert's gifts turn Lo into a commodity, an argument that I will not only apply to *Lolita*, but to Keats's portrayal of the Knight and La Belle Dame in order to reveal the way consumerism shifts the structure of courtly love. Both Brand and Kauffman explore this relationship between Humbert's desire to consume Lo and its connection to the theme of consumerism; in this way, I will directly link this theme to the trope of courtly love, arguing that both consumerism and courtly love share the same cyclical structure that Nabokov attempts to move away from, and show how Keats draws attention to these ideas in the nineteenth century.

While Keats does not deal directly with the notion of consumerism in its present-day sense, his poems contain images of consumption that are directly linked to the knight-figure's desire to consume the muse. Prama Tagore argues that the link between the images of consuming food and sexuality in Keats lies in the voyeuristic pleasure of consumption itself. Karen Swann draws on the images of gift-giving in "La Belle Dame sans Merci," arguing that the love tokens the Knight gives to La Belle Dame are objects that are meant to entrap her and indirectly links this image of gift-giving to the notion of courtly love when she reads "La Belle Dame sans Merci" in juxtaposition with Keats's other poem about binding the muse, "If by



dull rhymes,” noticing the connection between objects and entrapment. Reading *Lolita* in respect to its nineteenth century influences, and considering how it draws from the energy of these works, provides an opportunity to consider the broader question of the novel’s unusual place in literature as a mid-twentieth century novel on the cusp of modernism and postmodernism, and the ways in which this unusual placement affects Nabokov's relationship with his literary predecessors.

### **Frigid Queens and Princesses: The Shifting Structure of Courtly Love**

Throughout *Lolita*, Nabokov troubles the traditional structure of courtly love through Humbert Humbert's self-conscious parody. He veers heavily from the spiraling structure that Keats gives the trope in “La Belle Dame sans Merci” by way of an imperfect repetition, a divergence which demonstrates Nabokov's desire to break from the destructive nature of the trope that stems from the unending cycle of masochism and frustrated desire. However, Humbert and Nabokov's echoing of these problematic aspects of the courtly love trope in the process of parodying them suggests the impossibility of ever truly breaking from this ultimately dangerous view of erotic ties and gender roles.

As a teenager living in Russia, Nabokov read and loved Keats and in 1921, he translated “La Belle Dame sans Merci” into his native language. Stanislav Shvabrin has studied this translation, reading it as a Russianized version of the original; however, there are many things revealed about Nabokov’s relationship to the courtly love trope such readings of the translation does not take into consideration. Nabokov's translation of “La Belle Dame sans Merci” emphasizes La Belle Dame's daemonic nature more so than in Keats's original, which places her in the traditional role of the unattainable woman. Keats's La Belle Dame is “a faery's child” (“La Belle Dame sans Merci [1821]” line 14) whereas Nabokov's La Belle Dame is “чародейки неведомый дочь,” an unknown enchantress's daughter (“La Belle Dame sans

Merci [1921]" line 14). La Belle Dame's shift from faery to enchantress with the added mystery of being unknown more strongly implies La Belle Dame's dangerousness and shows her as someone with whom "no relationship of empathy is possible" precisely because she is not human (Zizek 90). Nabokov emphasizes La Belle Dame's dangerousness, describing her as having "змеи-локоны" ("La Belle Dame sans Merci [1921]" line 15) or snake-curls, which associates La Belle Dame with Edenic images of temptation and duplicity (Goldman 90). The image of snakes presents La Belle Dame as inhuman and evokes another one of Keats's heroines, the snake-woman Lamia.

However, Nabokov's translation of the name La Belle Dame as прекрасная дама calls her daemonicness into question while seeming to confirm it throughout the poem, and reveals his interest in writing young female characters. While Shvabrin goes into detail about Nabokov's translation of "wretched wight" and "knight at arms" as горемыка, he does not discuss Nabokov's unusual decision to translate "belle" as прекрасная<sup>1</sup>. The word "belle" more accurately translates in Russian to красивая which, like belle, means beautiful. While прекрасная can also mean beautiful, it is a word rarely used to describe people and in the rare instances it is used as an adjective for a person rather than an event, it has the added implication of beauty that is directly related to youth (I have also, in one instance, heard it being used to describe food). This word choice becomes more interesting considering прекрасная is used as an adjective to describe the дама or lady, and the juxtaposition of words that suggest youth and maturity foreshadows the dual role that Lolita will serve as woman and child.

---

1

Shvabrin notes that Nabokov's choice of the word горемыка (goryemka) indicates a reference to Keats's "wretched wight" because of the root "gorye" which means woe, and that it also indicates a Russianization of the poem because of its allusion to indicates a Russianization of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" because of its allusion to Dmitri Grigorovich's "Anton-Goryemka."

Nabokov not only questions the extent of La Belle Dame's daemonicalness in his translation, he calls the knight's interpretation of La Belle Dame's actions into question, which in turn questions the traditional notion in courtly love of the woman as both sadist and masochist. While Keats's Knight becomes sure of La Belle Dame's love for him in lines such as "And sure in language strange she said/I love thee true" ("La Belle Dame sans Merci 1821" lines 27-28) where the word 'sure' removes any trace of doubt from the Knight's narration, Nabokov's Knight leaves much more room for doubt. Karl Kroeber argues for an uncertainty implicit in Keats's poem, writing that it is "tinged with dictional and thematic uncertainties" (Kroeber 47). However, Nabokov more directly "blur[s] the clarity of knight victimized" (Kroeber 47) when he translates these two lines as "и, казалось, в любви уверяла/на странном своем языке", "And, it seemed, assured me of love/in her own strange language" and the use of the word 'казалось' or 'seemed,' rather than "sure" as Keats does, removes all of the Knight's surety of La Belle Dame's love of him and his aggressive treatment of her ("La Belle Dame sans Merci [1921]" lines 27-28). Kroeber's reading of the uncertainty lurking within Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci" also renders Anne Mellor's reading of Swann's article as one which argues that "Keats finally allies himself with the male against the female" reductive and unconvincing (Mellor 184).

The most striking aspect of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is the repetition at the end which hints at the infinite, spiraling nature of cycle of masochism and desire that structures courtly love. The poem opens and ends with a simple interaction between the Knight and the speaker.

O what can ail thee knight at arms,  
 Alone and palely loitering?  
 The sedge has withered from the lake,  
 And no birds sing (lines 1-4)

And this is why I sojourn here  
 Alone and palely loitering,  
 Though the sedge has withered from the  
 lake,  
 And no birds sing (lines 45-48)

The opening begins as a direct question from the interlocutor to the Knight that are almost repetitions of each other, drawing attention to the infinite and cyclical nature of courtly love.

However, the perspectival and narrative shift from the interlocutor to the Knight in the final stanza provides enough difference from the first stanza to portray the form of “La Belle Dame sans Merci” less as repetition than what Peter Brooks calls “difference and resemblance,” emphasizing the tension between sameness and difference (Brooks 280). This “same but different” as illustrated in the form of “La Belle Dame sans Merci” as well as the shift in perspective between the first and final stanzas suggests a breaking from the cyclical nature of courtly love, which Nabokov draws from throughout *Lolita*.

The manner in which Nabokov mimics the spiraling structure and the journey that the Knight and La Belle Dame take in *Lolita* is indicative of the ways in which he mimics the structure of courtly love throughout the novel. When describing the trajectory of their first travels, Humbert states that “our route began with a series of wiggles and whorls in New England” which ends with a return East after much deviation, a journey that takes on the form of “secondary circles and skittish deviations...a hard, twisted, teleological growth” (Nabokov 154). While Keats acknowledges the spiral structure of courtly love through an imperfect repetition, Nabokov acknowledges its structure in this passage through the use of words as direct as “whorls” and descriptions of a “deviating” set of “secondary circles” which evokes the image of a circle within a circle which “grows” and is “twisted.” In turn, the circuitous and deviating nature of Humbert and Lo’s journey not only evokes La Belle Dame and the Knight’s journey, but Žižek’s description of courtly love which he characterizes first as a “circuit” that results from the inaccessibility of the woman before stating that “What the paradox of the Lady in courtly love ultimately amounts to is the paradox of detours” (Žižek 96). These detours exceed the same but different of the spiral and becomes rhizomatic and weblike, gesturing again towards the postmodern.

While there are hints of violence in the relationship between the knightly figures and

the women in Keats's poetry, Nabokov more clearly depicts the cycle of sadism and masochism inherent in the courtly love trope in his portrayal of Humbert's doomed relationship with Lo which indicates a more self-aware and, therefore, self-conscious depiction of this more troubling aspect of courtly love. In "La Belle Dame sans Merci," there are two suggestions of La Belle Dame's unhappiness. Early on in her introduction, La Belle Dame "make[s] sweet moan" ("La Belle Dame sans Merci 1821" line 20) and the Knight later mentions that "And there she wept and sigh'd full sore" ("La Belle Dame sans Merci 1821" line 30). The first line shows that the Knight interprets her moan as one of contentedness through the addition of the qualifier "sweet," but the mention of La Belle Dame's tears and sighs lacks such an interpretation on the part of the narrator, which suggests that the tears and sighs indicate "resistance more than love or duplicity" on La Belle Dame's part (Swann 89). Like the knight-figure of Lycius in Keats's later poem *Lamia* when he briefly and disturbingly claims that Lamia "burned, she loved the tyranny," the Knight attempts to justify his violence towards La Belle Dame (*Lamia* line 81).

Nabokov, as is so frequently the case, leaves no such room for interpretation, making it clear that Lo's frequent sighs and tears are a direct result of violence and unhappiness. In his poem for Lo, Humbert writes

Dying, dying, Lolita Haze,  
Of hate and remorse, I'm dying.  
And again my hairy fists I raise,  
And again I hear you crying ("Wanted, Wanted" lines 33-36)

and encapsulates in four lines, the essence of courtly love. The repetition of "and again" at the beginning of the final two lines seems to evoke Zizek's argument that "violence for the most part is feigned, even when it is 'real', it functions as a component of a scene, as part of a theatrical performance" (Zizek 92). However, Humbert's desperate, sadomasochistic hatred

and remorse about his relationship with Lo in the first two lines more closely aligns these four lines with Zizek's subsequent argument about sadistic acts against the woman where "when [the man] is horrified at the risk of being reduced in the eyes of the Other...in order to escape this deadlock, he resorts...to the irrational violence aimed at the other" (Zizek 93). The causal relation in the last two lines where Humbert raises his fists (presumably to hit Lo, as he occasionally does throughout the book) and makes Lo cry, directly attributes the tears and sighs of the woman in the courtly love trope to the violence enacted by the Knight. Such confessional moments break the veneer of Humbert's otherwise smooth discourse, allowing the reader to question other aspects of his constructed narrative, such as his claims of Lo's daemonic nature.

One aspect of Humbert's narrative that is thrown into question is his daemonic portrayal of Lo as well as her multiplicity, which contrasts with his own human portrayal of himself. He goes so far as to insist on her daemonic nature when describing moments where Lo grows ill, stating: "Hysterical little nymphs might, I knew, run up all kinds of temperature-even exceeding a fatal count...Her brown rose tasted of blood...She complained of a painful stiffness in the vertebrae-and I thought of poliomyelitis as any American parent would" (Nabokov 240), a telling description which contrasts Lo's "traumatic Otherness" (Zizek 90) against his own normal self. In this passage, Humbert portrays Lo as superhuman and the added note that nymphets are able to survive even fatal rises in body temperature makes the portrayal daemonic rather than merely supernatural. On the other hand Humbert, who has mostly identified with his European roots, laughably posits himself as "any American parent," lumping himself in with the 'normal,' Americanized version of the Self. Humbert's descriptions of Lo's daemonic nature and his own human nature in such scenes run parallel to his assertion of Lo's sexual deviance and his own sexual normality. This is, of course, ironic considering

Humbert describes tasting Lo's "brown rose" at this moment, portraying Humbert as the one who is "intrinsically deprav[ed]" and sexually "deviant" (Goldman 95).

Humbert, and *Lolita* as a whole, however, moves beyond Eric Goldman's binaries of normality and deviance, with Humbert utilizing these terms in ways that rob Lo of control over her own sexuality and overall agency. Humbert's portrayal of Lo as deviant and daemonic inverts the truth of who holds power in their relationship. One such example is when Humbert describes Lo's "drop" in morals, stating that "But I was weak, I was not wise, my schoolgirl nymphet had me in thrall. With the human element dwindling, the passion, the tenderness, and the torture only increased; and of this, she took advantage" (Nabokov 183). Despite the veneer, it is not Lo who has the power to take advantage of Humbert. In a previous passage, Humbert notes:

In those days, neither she nor I had thought up yet the system of monetary bribes which was to work so much havoc with my nerves and her morals somewhat later. I relied on three other methods to keep my pubescent concubine in submission and passable temper... Among these, the reformatory threat is the one I recall with the deepest moan of shame (Nabokov 148-149).

This passage draws attention to the fact that it is Humbert who keeps Lo "in submission" using the monetary bribes. While Humbert claims it is Lo who "[t]akes] advantage," it is he who clearly wields authority over Lo.

It is also interesting to note that it is Lo's voice that most directly challenges these claims, dramatizing her break from Humbert's hermetic projections. Take, for example Lo's comment on their drive away from the Enchanted Hunters and towards Lepingville where she says to Humbert "'You chump,' she said, sweetly smiling at me. 'You revolting creature. I was a daisy-fresh girl, and look what you've done to me. I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me'" (Nabokov 141). In this one sentence, she asserts that for her, their

encounter was not a seduction but rape and that in fact, she is not only sexually normal, but sexually innocent by calling herself a “daisy-fresh girl.” Humbert’s terrified response to Lo’s statement emphasizes her innocence by suggesting a guilty conscience, despite his assertion that it was she who seduced him and her “sweet” smile as she delivers these lines.

While Nabokov borrows heavily from Keats’s daemonic portrayal of women throughout *Lolita*, he does not echo Keats’s portrayal of courtly love as a whole; instead, he deviates from the overall structure of the courtly love trope by having Humbert parodize the pain of trying to attain Lo. One such example is Humbert’s description of his first night with Lo at the Enchanted Hunters, which bears a striking resemblance to the scene of Porphyro’s consummation of his relationship with Madeline in “The Eve of St. Agnes.” In Keats’s poem, the knight-figure Porphyro’s desire to seduce the sleeping Madeline is treated lightly and humorously, his plea for help winning over even Madeline’s nurse, Angela and the voyeuristic portrait of Porphyro watching Madeline undress from a closet is almost undercut by the earthy humor of the nurse hurriedly leaving the room, “with agues in her brain” (“The Eve of St. Agnes” line 189).

However, while the scene between Humbert and Lo in the Enchanted Hunters is humorous because of Humbert’s self-conscious and parodic placing himself in the role of knightly pursuer, the humor in this scene takes a dark turn; rather than merely waiting for Lo to fall asleep the way Porphyro waits for Madeline, Humbert attempts to drug Lo in his quest to take advantage of her. His furtive insistence to Lo after giving her what he believes to be a sleeping pill, telling her ““Later, Lo. Now go to bed. I’ll leave you here, and you go to bed. Give you ten minutes...Tomorrow, Lo. Go to bed, go to bed-for goodness sake, to bed”” (Nabokov 123) gives the scene an even more predatory air than the one between Porphyro and Madeline, the constant repetition of the phrase “go to bed” portraying Humbert as almost



willing Lo to fall asleep as fast as possible, as well as the constant blurring of his role as father and lover throughout the novel. What makes this scene parodic, of course, is the fact that while Porphyro's seduction of Madeline is successful, Humbert merely watches Lo sleep that night, spending the night thinking more about the clanging elevators and the "manly, energetic, deep throated" sounds of the toilets than attempting to sleep with Lo (Nabokov 130).

However, parody or mimesis in this scene, considering Humbert's successful seduction of Lo in the morning, is something not deficient or merely comedic, but preparative, evoking Stephen Halliwell's description of poetry as mimesis "where poetic mimesis encourages close identification with the figures depicted, poetry acts as a 'rehearsal' for life itself" (Halliwell 54). Read through this lens, the parodic experience of the evening and the parody of sex in their parody of a hotel room prepares Humbert for his first 'real' sexual encounter with Lo in the morning.

This is not to say that Keats was not aware of the problematic aspects of the courtly love trope and that Nabokov is the first writer aware of the tradition that he was exploring in his writing, but that Humbert is one of the few knight-figures (Don Quixote being one notable example) to be given as wide a breadth of knowledge of the literary history behind the trope he is both evoking and parodying<sup>2</sup>. Keats too makes light of the trope in *Lamia* as Georgia Dunbar notes, "cheerful[ly] mocking" Hermes's frivolous chase of the nymph in the first part of the poem (Dunbar 18). However, it is the narrator, not Hermes himself, who mocks the absurd situation he finds himself in. Humbert, on the other hand, directly conflates himself not only with writers in the courtly love tradition, but with other knightlike characters such as Lycius in *Lamia*. In the "Wanted, Wanted" poem, for example, he muses in an aside, "(I walk

---

2

Humbert's role as knight evokes Susan Wolfson's statement that, "It matters that the Knight [in "La Belle Dame sans Merci"] is not just a lover but a truant Knight at arms. There is a long history of such truancy, usually from she-enchantment" (Wolfson 84).

in a daze, I talk in a maze,/I cannot get out, said the starling)” (“Wanted, Wanted” lines 7-8), directly echoing the line in “Lamia” where Lycius wakes up after fainting at the thought of losing Lamia, and the narrator notes that Lycius awoke “into amaze” (*Lamia* line 322).

Keats expands on the idea of mockery through the image of mirrors that mock, or imitate, Lamia’s forest home, utilizing the image to draw attention to Lamia’s multiplicity. When Lamia recreates her forest home for her wedding to Lycius, the narrator notes that:

Fifty wreaths of smoke  
From fifty censurs their light voyage took  
To the high roof, still mimick’d as they rose  
Along the mirror’d walls by twin-clouds odourous. (*Lamia* lines 180-183)

The repetition of the word “fifty” in the first and second lines of the passage serves as a gentle nudge towards the next two lines which deal more directly with doubling and mirroring. The description of the wreaths of smoke which “mimick’d” each other draws attention to the connection between mimicry and doubling. In this moment, Lamia’s creation reflects her own multiplicity, achieving a “self likening” through her mimetic creation (Halliwell 75).

Unlike Keats who uses the image of mirrors to draw attention to the multiplicity inherent in the object of desire, Nabokov utilizes mirrors in order to draw attention to the comedically parodic nature of the scene at the Enchanted Hunters. Humbert remarks on the decor of their room at the Enchanted Hunters, describing a “double bed, a mirror, a double bed in the mirror, a closet door with mirror, a bathroom door ditto, a blue-dark window, a reflected bed there, the same in the closet mirror, two chairs, a glass-topped table,” self-consciously drawing attention to the mimetic quality of the room itself (Nabokov 119). Considering the juxtaposition between this passage and the one almost immediately preceding it where Humbert notes, “Parody of a hotel corridor. Parody of silence and death,” the connection between the numerous mirrors in the room, mimesis and parody becomes clear (Nabokov 119).

The doubling and mirroring in the hotel room is also indicative of the multiplying of the object of desire that is indicative of her newfound accessibility in the face of commodity culture and, paradoxically, her continued inaccessibility, which I discuss in depth in the next section.

### **“It was the same child”: Doubles and Duality**

Humbert himself notes a connection between doubling and the cyclical journey he and Lo embark on, suggesting that it is movement that helps strengthen their powers of impersonation. However, unlike the journey that La Belle Dame takes the Knight on, which is described using pastoral and natural terms, Humbert and Lo’s cyclical journey is facilitated by the very man-made system of highways. He reflects that “I seemed as implausible a father as she seemed to be a daughter. Was, perhaps, guilty locomotion instrumental in vitiating our powers of impersonation? Would improvement be forthcoming with a fixed domicile and a routine schoolgirl’s day?” (Nabokov 174). As previously noted, Humbert and Lo’s journey forms whorls and secondary loops that mimic the newly built highway systems that loop and sit atop each other and seem to overlap. It is the highway that forms these “secondary circles” and necessitates “skittish deviations” that mimic Humbert’s dual role to Lo as father and lover because it facilitates seemingly never-ending detours of desire for the driver.

The various references to doubles throughout *Lolita* create a counterpoint to the theme of courtly love. Whereas for the knight-figures in Keats’s poems the love object is purely inaccessible, for the postmodern knight Humbert, commodity culture has placed Lo in a landscape of sameness and mass production which, in a way, makes her more obtainable. Despite this newfound accessibility, for Humbert the object of desire remains irreplaceable; however, it is not only Lo who is multiplied in *Lolita*, but Humbert who is also subject to the multiplying as a result of commodity culture. While Keats uses mainly narrative frames and repetition to convey a sense of doubling (as is the case in “La Belle Dame sans Merci”),

Nabokov also uses puns and word-play to emphasize the ways commodity culture and, more specifically, mass production changed the structure of courtly love that is found in Keats's narrative poems.

The most direct way in which Nabokov references the possibility of replicating the object of desire in an era of mass production is through the various ways in which Humbert utilizes Dolores's name which symbolizes both her multiplicity and the impossible notion of replacing her, despite the replication via mass production. Take, for example, one of the first passages in the novel where Humbert begins to speak about Lo; he writes "She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita" (Nabokov 9). This passage poignantly draws attention to Dolores's various selves through the many nicknames which, despite Humbert's claims of her daemonic nature, present Lo as a perfectly ordinary child in the many iterations of the selves Humbert has created for her.

Humbert posits Lo as a mere mass-produced version of the original object of desire, his childhood sweetheart Annabel, by incorrectly labelling her merely as Annabel's double upon her introduction. On first seeing Lo, he remarks "It was the same child-the same frail, honey hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair...I recognized the tiny dark-brown mole on her side... I saw again her lovely abdomen where my southbound mouth had briefly paused" (Nabokov 39). The repetition of the word "again" emphasizes the doubling in this passage and the recognition of the birthmark on Lo's side marks her as the dead Annabel's double, a "repetition" of Humbert's childhood sweetheart as Thomieres phrases it (Thomieres 167). However, Humbert finds that Lo is not a double for his childhood sweetheart, but an entirely different entity altogether, despite their both being "nymphets."

After spending more time with Lo, Humbert devotes a greater amount of time

remarking on the many differences between Annabel and Lo rather than their similarities. This results in a scene in which Humbert attempts to recreate his incomplete childhood experiences with Annabel with Lo, but finds that he cannot. Bitterly, Humbert describes an experience in a secluded cave where the "...sand was gritty and clammy, and Lo was all goseflesh and grit, and for the first time in my life I had as little desire for her as a manatee...there was nothing but a second-rate lake" (Nabokov 167). Despite the physical similarities between Lo and Annabel, it is impossible for Humbert to recreate his childhood experience to his satisfaction; while mass-production has made it possible to replicate the object of desire, she remains as elusive as ever for Humbert because the replication is imperfect, "second rate," rendering her as inaccessible as ever to the postmodern knightly figure despite the replication and the doubling that is made possible in midcentury America. This contrasts Andy Warhol's comment on the commodity where he states that:

What's great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same thing as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it (Warhol 100-101).

Unlike a Coke or any other mass-produced object, the object of desire (in this case it is Annabel rather than Lo) cannot be replicated satisfactorily. One nymphet is not interchangeable with the other, one beach is not interchangeable with another.

Annabel and Lo's simultaneous multiplicity and inaccessibility is a direct echo of Keats's portrayal of Lamia as being inaccessible despite her multiplicity; after all, Lamia takes on many forms throughout the poem, symbolized by the multi-colored, multi-patterned body she inhabits as a serpent. Lamia is given a quite literally dazzling introduction through

Hermes's eyes

She was a gordian shape of a dazzling hue,  
Vermillion-spotted, golden, green and blue;  
Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard,  
Eyed like a peacock, and all crimson barred (*Lamia* lines 47-50)

This passage draws attention to Lamia's multiplicity by portraying her as a mosaic of colors and animals, and the rapid way that these animals and colors are listed reflects the multiple forms her body can take (serpent, goddess and human) which Nabokov echoes through his depiction of Lo's multiplicity in Humbert's description of the various Lolitas who occupy the single body of Dolores Haze.

In both *Lamia* and *Lolita*, it is male desire that necessitates the multiplicity of the object of desire. After Lycius regains consciousness, the narrator describes how

gentle Lamia judged, and judged aright,  
That Lycius could not love in half a fright,  
So threw the goddess off, and won his heart  
More pleasantly by playing woman's part. (*Lamia* lines 335-338)

This passage depicts Lamia making a successful marketing decision, determining how best to gain Lycius's desire (Lo's own marketing of herself is a topic I will reserve for later discussion). In order to make Lycius want her, Lamia must "thr[ow] the goddess off," a phrase which reminds the reader of her third form as a snake by evoking the image of a snake shedding its skin, and "play" at or mimic womanhood, and thus simultaneously becomes a snake, a goddess, and a woman. Susan Wolfson notes the word play and intrinsic multiplicity in this moment, writing, "We may want the key-code: is 'woman's part' a cultural role; an achievement in expert camelion imagination, or a bawdy Keats-joke for the male readers he'd like to court?" (Wolfson 113). The potential bawdiness of the moment aside which evokes many moments in *Lolita*, the moment illustrates a moment of duality for Lamia in respect to her agency: it is she who decides to play the woman's part, it is she who surrenders the

masculine power inherent in her phallic snake-form. Lo's multiplicity however, is tragically forced upon, rather than necessitated by, Humbert's desire for her. As Kauffman aptly puts it, Lo is "forced to imitate womanhood" in her dual role as both daughter and lover to Humbert much like Lamia is forced to imitate womanhood by her desire for Lycius (Kauffman 68). Besides the line where he reveals how he would make Lo perform her "wifely" duties in the morning before rewarding her with coffee, Humbert makes constant references to Lo as his "bride" which reinforces her premature role as woman in the text.

These references are congruent, in the mathematical sense, to Humbert's reminders about Lo's youth and through euphoric descriptions and his emphasis on her role as daughter and his as father. Humbert recalls a conversation with Lo where he tells her, "Come and kiss your old man," I would say, 'and drop that moody nonsense...you swooned to records of the number one throb-and-sob idol of your coevals [Lo: 'Of my what? Speak English']...But now I am just your *old man*, a dream dad protecting his dream daughter'" (Nabokov 149). Humbert's stress on Lo's role as daughter in this passage, emphasized by the addition of Lo's childishly insensitive, and rather exasperated, response of "Speak English" to Humbert's use of the word "coevals" which draws further attention to her youth, shows Lo's desire to stay in the role of daughter to Humbert. To her, as Humbert says, he is "just her old man," revealing that it is Humbert who forces her into the role of wife and woman.

The difference in the way Nabokov and Keats portray multiplicity lies in the extent to which the writers think multiplicity is truly possible; while Keats portrays multiplicity as being continuous and holistic, with a single body occupying multiple selves, Nabokov veers from this idea of multiplicity, rupturing it by emphasizing the differences between Annabel and Lo throughout the novel, making them two distinctly different people rather than one entity. In *Lamia*, the narrator describes Lamia's excruciating metamorphosis from serpent to woman in

grotesque detail:

Left to herself the serpent now began  
To change; her elfin blood in madness ran,  
Her mouth foamed, and the grass, therewith besprent,  
Withered at dew so sweet and virulent. (*Lamia* lines 146-149)

Here Keats shows Lamia as being able to shift into different forms rather than multiplying or doubling: there will only ever be one Lamia, and therefore there is a lack of any true doubling of the object of desire in *Lamia*, despite the heavy use of mirrors towards the end of the poem. In *Lolita*, despite the sense of continuity expressed during Lo's introduction by the constant repetition of the word "same," Lo and Annabel become different people as the novel progresses, which posits multiplicity as incohesive. For example, the constant confusion of Annabel and Lo in the passage where Humbert states "Annabel Haze alias Dolores Lee, alias Loleeta, had appeared to me, golden and brown" suggests through the mingling of Annabel Leigh and Dolores Haze's names that while the two girls almost merge with each other in Humbert's mind, they are very much two separate entities (Nabokov 167).

While for Keats, it is the irreplaceable nature of the object of desire that necessitates orbits and detours in order to capture her, for Nabokov, it is the doubleness and multiplicity of the object of desire that necessitates and encourages detours and a spiraling journey. In *Lamia*, it is Hermes's chase of the nymph that best illustrates the detours that the knightly figure makes for the object of desire. While chasing the nymph, Hermes

dove-footed, glided silently  
Round bush and tree, soft-brushing, in his speed,  
The taller grasses and full-flowing weed  
Until he found a palpitating snake,  
Bright, and cirque-couchant in a dusky brake. (*Lamia* lines 42-46)

Within the context of Hermes's search for the nymph, his thus far impossible pursuit is described as circular, with him running "round" bushes and trees to search for her. His circular



journey leads him to the circuitous figure of Lamia who, in her serpent form, is “cirque-couchant” (Keats’s invented term to describe lying in circular coils), a description which again evokes the idea of a series of circles within each other, and shows Hermes briefly deviating from his original, circuitous pursuit of his nymph.

However, Humbert’s own circuitous journey in pursuit of Quilty and Lo is plagued with multiplicity. From the hospital, Humbert makes his way back towards Beardsley where their second trip started, which characterizes this second trip as circular. Humbert describes the various pseudonyms Quilty and Lo use and “notice[s] that whenever he felt his enigmas were becoming too recondite, even for such a solver as I, he would lure me back with an easy one” (Nabokov 250). In this passage, Nabokov portrays the circuitous trip as encouraged by his desire to find the authentic identity of the various people he seems to be trailing back to Beardsley. Quilty uses this possibility of Humbert’s being able to discover his true identity to “lure” him into chasing him again, leading him in a circuitous route back to the starting point of Beardsley as Humbert later lures Lo into remaining in Humberland with him with gifts and, later, money.

The repetition of Lo’s name itself becomes more symbolic of mass production which presents it as an invigorating element. Seemingly out of nowhere, as Alfred Appel notices, Humbert gives a very strange instruction. “Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita. Repeat until the page is full, printer” (Nabokov 109). While Appel briefly mentions the “resiliently comic” nature of this sudden command, which makes up almost half the twenty-sixth chapter of the novel, the fact that Humbert suddenly directs a command to the printer to repeat the name Lolita for an entire page makes this passage less a comic moment and more a commentary on the further dehumanizing of the object of desire by attempting to mass-produce her through a mechanical means of production (Appel 211). However, in this

instance, mass-production does not strip Lo of her uniqueness, but endows her with a sense of immortality, re-animating and recreating her with each repetition of her name. This moment is insistent and obsessive as opposed to amusing, making her a series of Lolitas as opposed to one Lolita. The repetition of her name gestures back to the opening lines of the novel, where Humbert states, “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down to the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta,” relishing the feeling of her name in his mouth as he repeats it three times, one for each syllable (Nabokov 9).

It is interesting to note that the almost hysterical need to replicate that is present in this passage evokes a moment when Humbert reiterates his desire to specifically replicate Lo as one of many through the means of procreation, when he muses, “with luck and patience I might have her produce eventually a nymphet with my blood in her exquisite veins, a Lolita the Second...bizarre, tender, salivating Dr. Humbert, practicing on the supremely lovely Lolita the Third the art of being a granddad” (Nabokov 174). This second passage contains what Brooks refers to as a “compulsion to repeat,” which is congruent with an instinct for restoration, where the “organism has no wish to change; if its conditions remained the same, it would constantly repeat the same course of life” (Brooks 290). As in the previous passage, the drive for repetition is necessitated not by the natural tendency towards the “self-preservative” as Brooks suggests, but a preservation of the object of desire, that is to say a kind of ‘other-preservation,’ through repetition and replication (Brooks 290).

In *Lolita*, it is not only Lo’s name that is doubled; Humbert’s double name along with the various selves he presents to the reader shows that for Nabokov, it is not only the object of desire, but the knightly pursuer who is also multiple. Humbert’s own multiplicity becomes obvious when he first enters the Enchanted Hunters and identifies himself to the hotel

receptionist. He stutters over his own name in his nervousness, saying, “‘The name,’ I said coldly, ‘is not Humberg and not Humbug, but Herbert, I mean Humbert’” (Nabokov 118). With the exception of “Humberg,” the mistakes made with Humbert’s name in this passage lead to literary references and bears great resemblance to the scene that describes the various personalities Humbert attributes to the nicknames for Lo.<sup>3</sup> The multiplicity implied by the mistakes made with Humbert’s name is emphasized by a passage in which he calls attention to his role as both the consumer and the consumed. He writes, contemplating Lo’s consumerist attitude, “To think that between a Hamburger and a Humburger, she would-invariably, with icy precision-plump for the former” (Nabokov 166). While the courtly love tradition focuses purely on the knightly pursuer’s desire to consume the object of desire, the burgeoning language of consumerism necessitates that the language of multiplicity extends beyond the otherworldly woman and to the knightly figure who wishes to consume the object of desire and, at the same time, be consumed by her, as indicated by Humbert’s expressed wish in this passage to be consumed by Lo like a hamburger.

When examining the incorrect names attributed to Humbert in the Enchanted Hunters scene, it is the name “Humberg” that stands out because it is the only one of Humbert’s misattributed names that retains the word ‘umber’ within it, a recurring word throughout the novel that plays a significant role in the theme of doubles. The word ‘umber,’ a Middle English word derived from Latin which still means shadow in some Northern English dialects, most directly comes into play in a passage where Humbert briefly describes the way Lo is ensnared into his world. He writes that “She had entered my world, umber and black Humberland, with rash curiosity; she surveyed it with a shrug of amused distaste; and it

---

3

Humbug and Herbert are both references to Dickens, another writer that Nabokov greatly admired, Humbug most famously being attributed to Scrooge from *The Christmas Stories* and Herbert a possible reference to Herbert Pocket in *Great Expectations*.

seemed to me now that she was ready to turn away from it with something akin to plain revulsion” (Nabokov 166). In this passage, Nabokov emphasizes the murky and oftentimes dark nature of courtly love, and implies through the use of the word ‘umber’ that it is a world that is full of shadows or doubles, a fact emphasized by Humbert Humbert’s double name. Nabokov’s use of the clever name “Humberland” to describe this world also contains within it the notion of a world or “land” that is comprised of Humbert and his umber, his double. Appel focuses on the Platonic resonances in this passage, reading it as a variation of Plato’s allegory of the cave, arguing that Lo is “confined” to the lonely, cave-like world of Humberland in which Humbert unendingly chases the shadow that is Clare Quilty (Appel 207).

The references to shadows comes to a climax during descriptions of Humbert and Lo’s second road trip and after Lo’s escape with Quilty, which highlight Humbert and Quilty’s roles as each other’s doubles. In the middle of their second trip, Humbert recounts the moments where he feels that his car is being followed. He describes the “veritable ease” with which this shadow switches cars, which emphasizes the elusive, shadow-like nature of their stalker (Nabokov 227). Quilty’s knowledge of literary history rivals Humbert’s, which solidifies his role as Humbert’s double. Humbert remarks that “The clues he left did not establish his identity but they reflected his personality, or at least a certain homogenous and striking personality; his genre, his type of humor- at its best at least- the tone of his brain had affinities with my own. He mimed and mocked me” (Nabokov 249). In this passage, Humbert muses on the intellectual similarities between himself and the shadow that he is chasing in the way that he describes the physical similarities between Lo and Annabel early on in the novel. This shadow or double, however, both “mime[s]” and “mock[s]” him with his intelligence (and, outside the context of the passage and in the broader context of the novel, by kidnapping Lo), intertwining the notion of miming or mimesis with mockery or parody. The landscape of serial

production and parody that Humbert encounters serves as a roadblock on his quest for artistic authenticity throughout the novel, confining him to parody until the very end of the novel when he is free from the doubleness that consumer culture produces en masse.

In a world marked by doubles and serial production, Humbert strives for artistic authenticity despite the self-conscious parody he employs. As Frosch writes about the Romantic connection to mimesis and parody in *Lolita*, for Humbert, “To be free is to be original, not to be a parody” (Frosch 46). However, Humbert’s defense of his artistic authenticity in itself takes a parodic tone, constantly drawing attention to his own doubleness. In one charming recollection, Humbert writes that “Virginia was not quite fourteen when Harry Edgar possessed her. He gave her lessons in algebra. *Je m’imagine cela*. They spent their honeymoon at Petersburg, Fla. ‘Monsieur Poe-poe,’ as the boy in one of Monsieur Humbert Humbert’s classes in Paris called the poet-poet” (Nabokov 43) in a passage that is full of reflexives and doubles. The sentence “*Je m’imagine cela*” (“I can imagine that”) begins with the reflexive sentence structure “Je m’imagine” which, crudely translated, means “I imagine myself” and seems to suggest that as well as imagining Edgar Allan Poe with the young Virginia, Humbert also rather voyeuristically imagines himself as Poe in this scenario, portraying himself as Poe’s double which in turn posits him as a parody of Poe rather than as Poe’s poetic equal as he strives to prove in this passage. This reading of Humbert’s use of the reflexive is supported by the boy’s conflating Poe with Humbert by doubling his name and referring to him as “Poe-poe” and Humbert’s expressed pleasure at the association that the boy makes when he doubles the word “poet,” imitating the student, to conclude the sentence.

Despite his constant use of parody, Humbert ultimately succeeds in moving past irony and parody through Lo. While Frosch condemns Humbert’s quest as fruitless, nihilistically stating that “All he can achieve is parody...Authenticity eludes him, and he loses out to

history” (Frosch 47-48), Keatsian Romanticism supports a reading of Humbert as poet triumphant. On the face of it, history, and Freudian child-psychology, do seem to triumph over Humbert in *Lolita* just as Apollonius (the stand-in Platonic philosopher) seems to overpower Lamia and Lycius in *Lamia*. Certainly, the depiction of Lamia’s ‘death’ scene where

Lamia breathed death-breath; the sophist’s eye,  
Like a sharp spear went through her utterly,  
Keen, cruel, perçant, stinging: she, as well  
As her weak hand could any meaning tell,  
Motioned him to be silent; vainly so (*Lamia* 299-303),

seems to be a straightforward description of a physical overpowering where Lamia seems to grow weak under the “spear” like scrutiny of cold philosophy. However, Lamia does not die at the end of the scene but disappears, which suggests that she escapes Apollonius’s attack, allowing her, as ever, to “elude such definitional captu (Wolfson 114). In this way, Humbert concludes that art will provide a joint “immortality” for Lo and himself even after death, a passage which evokes Lamia’s immortality (Nabokov 309).

However, as with Goldman’s binaries of normality and deviance, Frosch’s binaries of authentic and inauthentic are insufficient, and the binaries turn into something more complex, in keeping with the rest of the novel. Frosch contradicts his own argument regarding Humbert’s capacity to achieve artistic authenticity. He writes that “Humbert is finally apprehended driving down the wrong side of the road...The mirror side is fantasy, and Humbert has crossed over. *Lolita* was a mental image, which Humbert translated into reality” (Frosch 48), a reading of Humbert’s drive away from Quilty’s home after killing him that suggests that at least towards the end of the novel, Humbert has managed something authentic as opposed to the fantastical and parodic symbolized by Lo’s nymphet-hood. However, Humbert soon “turn[s] off the road...there I came to a rocking stop. A kind of thoughtful Hegelian synthesis linking up two dead women” (Nabokov 307). The binary suggested by the road are gone and

there is a final veering in the journey that leads to “synthesis” or combination which symbolically takes the novel towards the postmodern, away from antiquated notions of authenticity.

### **Consuming Lolita: images of consumption and consumerism**

As in doubling, the ideas of equivalence and mimesis are essential to the Marxian notion of economic exchange. In his explanation of exchange, Goux notes the connection between symbolic economic exchange, stating that

Comparison (essential to equitable exchange) and the recognition of an abstract value despite perceptible difference institute not simply an equivalence but a privileged, exclusive place, that of the measuring object- either an ideal standard external to exchange or currency proper, which takes part in circulation. (Goux 3)

Such a description of comparison draws attention not only to the economy of language, but the circuitous nature of comparison, in the form of symbolic substitution, and economic exchange which plays an important role throughout *Lolita* and in Keats’s narrative poetry. Goux’s description of currency and exchange as circuitous suggests a correlation between the circuitous desire and pain inherent in courtly love and a circuitous desire and pleasure inherent in consumerism. The notion of exchange and equivalence in the passage too provides a way to read the way in which Humbert’s excessive gift-giving neurotically seeks to decrease the power that Lo possesses in her role as the object of desire and attaches a value to her body that equals the gifts he buys for her.

The trap of doubles throughout the novel mirrors the trap set by consumerism. A rather beautiful and unexpected example of the novel’s view of consumerism’s effect on young men and women comes towards the end of the novel when Humbert visits Lo for the first time after her escape. Bill, a friend of Lo’s husband, announces his desire to “withdraw. The simple courtesy of simple folks. Was made to stay. A beer ad” (Nabokov 273). The passage illustrates the desire to leave, and his inability to do so which is juxtaposed with the mention of

an advertisement. This quick succession of phrases suggests that it is advertisement which traps young Bill into staying against his will, “ma[king]” him stay in the house the way Humbert makes Lo stay with him.

Just as doubling and parody trap Humbert in a cycle of chasing his shadow throughout the novel, Humbert is able to ensnare Lo into staying with him in Humberland using gifts. One example of this is in Humbert’s description of his presents to Lo after he tells her of her mother’s death in a passage that juxtaposes a description of gifts with the idea of Lo’s entrapment. He writes that he bought Lo “four books of comics, a box of candy, a box of sanitary pads, two cokes, a manicure set, a travel clock with a luminous dial, a ring with a real topaz, a tennis racket, roller skates with white high shoes, field glasses, a portable radio set, chewing gum, a transparent raincoat, sunglasses, some more garments- swooners, shorts, all kinds of summer frocks...You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go. (Nabokov 141-142). The extensive list lends the passage a sense of breathlessness and emphasizes Lo’s lack of agency. Humbert’s chilling statement that “she had absolutely nowhere else to go” most directly refers to Lo’s orphaned status and her lack of a home; however, in the context of his detailed recounting of his gifts to her that day, Humbert’s comment seems to imply that the gifts he gives her following a traumatic moment also serve to trap her. Within the context of the earlier reading of Goux’s idea of exchange, this array of gifts shows what Humbert believes to be what Lo is worth at the moment.

Keats’s “La Belle Dame sans Merci” also warns about the dangers of a society that has increasingly become focused on consuming. The knight describes a dream he has in La Belle Dame’s “grot” where he sees various male figures in poses of stark suffering:

I saw their starv’d lips in the gloam  
With horrid warning gaped wide  
And I awoke and found me here  
On the cold hill’s side. (“La Belle Dame sans Merci” lines 41-44)



Here Keats seems to acknowledge that the extravagance of the fantastical experience with La Belle Dame cannot last forever, in a moment that contrasts with prior descriptions of the knight's luxurious consuming of sweet foods. While Tagore seems to view the dream as merely an "unpalatable" depiction of death and destruction, it seems that Keats does not merely warn against consumption as a whole, but excessive consumption and its addictive effects (Tagore 72). The "starv'd lips" is a depiction of decay that results from a lack of consumption, possibly after excessive consumption of La Belle Dame and the "roots of relish sweet," the "honey wild" and "manna dew" that she provides ("La Belle Dame sans Merci" lines 25-26).

Throughout "La Belle Dame sans Merci," there is a circuitous series of exchanges which ends with La Belle Dame's escape, symbolically suggesting her break from the economic and sexual exchange the Knight sets up. Take, for example, the quite aggressive way in which the Knight seems to take physical control of the direction of his and La Belle Dame's journey, "I set her on my pacing steed/And nothing else saw all day long" ("La Belle Dame sans Merci" lines 21-22). Swann's reading of the various shifts of agents notes the interesting hint of compulsion in the Knight's actions, which seem both defensive and, as was the case with Humbert's listing his various gifts to Lo, set up a system of economic exchange meant to trap La Belle Dame (Swann 89).

The notion that gifts and objects are able to trap the object of desire is a theme that Nabokov develops first in his translation of "La Belle Dame sans Merci." Take, for example, his translation of the lines "I made a garland for her head,/and bracelets too, and fragrant zone" ("La Belle Dame sans Merci" 1819 lines 17-18) as "я сплел ей запястья и пояс,/и венки из цветов полевых" ("La Belle Dame sans Merci" 1921 lines 21-22); most directly, the lines

translate to “I made her a bracelet and a belt,/And a headpiece of flowers” which seems at first glance, a faithful translation. However, the alternate meaning of the word сплел which can mean “weave” or “spun” as well as “made” suggests that the garland, bracelet and belt are objects meant to dazzle and entrap La Belle Dame and presents this idea more clearly than in Keats's original poem by evoking images of a web being spun for La Belle Dame through these objects. These images evoke the scene at the Enchanted Hunters, with Lolita walking slowly towards an open suitcase of presents from Humbert (Nabokov 120); if the knight's weaving of gifts evokes the image of a web, the open suitcase evokes the image of an open-mouthed Venus fly-trap, enticing its victim and ready to devour. La Belle Dame's entrapment in Nabokov's translation becomes even clearer when one considers that the word запястья and пояс can mean both “bracelet” and “belt” as well as the body parts these objects wrap around which, combined with the image of weaving, suggests the idea that La Belle Dame's wrists are being twisted together and limited in her movement by these objects. Already, Nabokov is beginning to play with words the way he will in *Lolita* and his interest in objects as things that entrap which he develops into a commentary on American consumerism.

In *Lolita*, Humbert's desire to consume Lo sexually is conflated with his desire to physically consume her. Take, for example, Humbert's quite earthy (and obsessive) descriptions of his bodily functions in the midst of what he finds to be an ethereal moment. Describing their night at the Enchanted Hunters, Humbert not only mentions the heartburn he suffers from as a result of his dinner, but notes that “the situation remained the same: Lolita with her curved spine to Humbert, Humbert resting his head on his hand, burning with desire and dyspepsia” (Nabokov 130). At this moment where he cannot consume Lo sexually, he cannot properly digest or consume his food. There is also, in this brief moment, the conflation between sexual desire and the desire to properly consume food. Linda Kauffman reads

Humbert's preoccupation with his body throughout the novel as a reflection of his preoccupation with and objectification of the female body, describing it as a desire to "feast on the female body," particularly Lo's, noticing the interesting conflation of food consumption, a reading which reflects a conclusion nnection between a consumerist attitude and sexual desire (Kauffman 64).

Such descriptions of the projection of male appetite onto the female body evoke Keats's sumptuous descriptions in poems such as "The Eve of St. Agnes" where chastity and fasting are placed against the rich background of a celebration. These rich descriptions reflect the burgeoning materialist attitude that results from British trade in the nineteenth century. Take, for example, the juxtaposition of Madeline's sexual surrender with her consuming the feast that Porphyro has set up for her:

In blanched linen, smooth, and lavender'd  
While from forth the closet brought a heap  
Of candied apple, quince, and plum and gourd;  
With jellies soother than the creamy curd. ("The Eve of St. Agnes"  
lines 264-267)

As Tagore notes, this passage shows Porphyro presenting to Madeline a feast that is only made possible by new advances in trade (Tagore 71). The sensuality of the description of the sheets juxtaposed with the "heap" of exotic food that Porphyro lays out for Madeline in an attempt to tempt her into consuming not only the food, but him as well.

Humbert's descriptions of a soiled or defiled Lolita which contrasts against his earlier descriptions of a Lolita whose purity seems to raise her worth in Humbert's eyes and increases his desire for her. After his masturbatory experience with Lo on the sofa, Humbert states that "I had lunch in town-had not been so hungry for years ... I had stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor. Absolutely no harm done. The conjurer had poured milk, molasses, foaming champagne into a young lady's new white purse; and lo, the purse

was intact” (Nabokov 62). The metaphor that Humbert uses in this passage of Lo as the young lady’s purse directly attaches his desire to consume her with her exchange value. The scenario that Humbert describes seems, to him, ideal: he is able to achieve orgasm while keeping her virginity intact and, therefore, preserve her exchange value.

In order to escape the cycle of consumption and consumerism as well as the spiraling structure represented by Humberland, Lo markets herself in an act which restructures the various cycles of desire in the novel, a remarkable reclaiming of agency on her part. When describing the system of monetary bribes that develops throughout Lo’s time at Beardsley, Humbert writes that

Knowing the magic and might of her own soft mouth, she managed-during one school year!- to raise the bonus price of a fancy embrace to three, and even four bucks...imagine me, on the very rack of joy noisily emitting dimes and quarters and great silver dollars like some sonorous, jingly and wholly demented machine vomiting riches. (Nabokov 184)

Here Nabokov shows Lo raising the price of her “fancy embrace[s]” because she is more acutely aware of the “magic and might,” as well as the monetary value, of her own body. Like Lamia, Lo markets herself and Humbert pays for his desire to consume Lo, not in gifts as in the previous passage, but in money. Humbert’s description of himself as a “wholly demented machine vomiting riches” creates a sense of infiniteness of resource through Humbert’s positing himself as a machine and an extravagance that coincides with the rising price of Lo’s embraces, suggesting the cyclical and unceasing nature of sexual capitalism. The image of the machine also inverts Humbert’s portrayal of Lo as a purse in the earlier: if Lo as a purse previously suggests her role as a commodity, Humbert’s spitting out coins suggests that the open purse is now in the act of consuming these coins and the entertainment that Humbert provides.

The economic nature of the exchange between Lo and Humbert becomes more evident

in the passage at Beardsley where “for sixty-five cents plus the permission to participate in the school play, had Dolly put her inky, chalky, red-knuckled hand under the desk” (Nabokov 198) which neatly illustrates how Lo barter her own freedom from Humbert. In this passage, Lo performs a sex-act not merely for money, but for freedom from Humbert in the form of performing in the school play which allows her to both physically be apart from him and gives her a chance to be seen, and more importantly heard, by others outside the lens of Humbert’s discourse. In this moment, Humbert is powerless to stop Lo from leaving him. Humbert’s desire allows Lo to reroute the economic circuit of their relationship in her favor, forcing him to pay to consume her through money that she uses to try and leave him, and the permission to perform, which allows her to use her expressive powers to attract attention that threatens Humbert’s ability to consume and control her.

There is a similar shift in agency in “La Belle Dame sans Merci” which illustrates a shift in the circuit of economic exchange between the Knight and La Belle Dame. The Knight and La Belle Dame’s exchange of gifts and purported assurances of love, which were centered around the Knight’s actions, become centered around La Belle Dame’s, shifting from “I” to “She.” The shift in agents begins with a moment where La Belle Dame seems to become domesticated, providing the Knight with “roots of relish sweet/And honey wild, and manna dew” (“La Belle Dame sans Merci” lines 25-46), repaying the debt she owes the knight for his previous gifts. However, it is when La Belle Dame exhibits the ability to shift the current of their exchange by directing the movement of their journey that the Knight again attempts to take back control. While Keats jokingly acknowledges the Knight’s final kisses as meaning to restrain La Belle Dame, the increase in numbers throughout the two lines also suggests that the Knight unsuccessfully attempts to do so through debt. The Knight simply remarks that “And there I shut her wild wild eyes/With kisses four” (“La Belle Dame sans Merci” lines 31-32). In

his attempt to domesticate or restrain La Belle Dame, the Knight must give La Belle Dame more than she can repay him, providing four kisses for her two eyes, preventing her from leaving him.

Humbert on the other hand, brings the prices of Lo's embraces down by diminishing their value in order to prevent her from leaving him. When describing an episode where he ransacks Lo's room, Humbert states that "Once I found eight one-dollar notes in one of her books...a hole in the wall yielded as much as twenty-four dollars and some change...but by that time I had brought prices down drastically by having her earn the hard and nauseous way permission to participate in the school's theatrical program...wind blowing, and the stars blinking, and the cars, and the bars and the barmen, and everything soiled, torn, dead" (Nabokov 184-185). Humbert's juxtaposition of the idea of "bringing down prices" for Lo to perform sex-acts on him with the notion of everything being "soiled, torn, dead" which shows Lo's diminishing worth and sets up a system of supply and demand in which Lo's diminishing worth as a fantasy because she is "soiled" allows him to knock down prices. Once again, Lo works to gain freedom from Humbert by way of joining the school's theatrical program in an attempt to escape the vicious cycle of sexual capitalism that Humbert introduces into their relationship.

During his final encounter with Lo, Humbert attempts to lure her back into the whirlpool of Humberland. Before handing her an envelope of money, he states, "this may be neither here nor there, but I have to say it. Life is very short. From here to that old car you know so well there is a stretch of twenty, twenty-five steps. It is a short walk. Make those twenty-five steps. Now. Right now. Come just as you are. And we shall live happily ever after" (Nabokov 278). Humbert's use of imperatives throughout the passage shows him trying to force Lo to leave with him, enacting the whirlpool. The circuitous nature of Humbert's offer

to Lo is emphasized by the mention of car that they rode for their journeys together, creating a sense of continuity imperative to circles and spirals, setting the scene up as one that could end in repetition.

Lo's decision to escape this cycle of consumerism is her greatest exercise of agency throughout the novel, and illustrates Nabokov's final, most powerful restructuring of the role of the woman in the trope of courtly love. This act, however, is undercut by Humbert's being the one to offer her the choice to break from both circuitous systems. Despite the brief glimpse of consumerism in the mention of the beer advertisement, Lo seems to have freed herself of the landscape of sameness necessitated by consumerism. Before Humbert hands Lo the envelope of money, Lo asks "You mean," she said opening her eyes and raising herself slightly, the snake that might strike, "you mean you will give us [us] the money only if I go with you to a motel. Is *that* what you mean?" (Nabokov 278). The description of Lo at this critical moment, "a snake that might strike" presents her as an animal who feels threatened, and she does not appear willing to accept the money if these are Humbert's terms. Lo metaphorically taking on the phallic form of a snake not only evokes Lamia's snake form, but illustrates the reversal of roles; it is she who decides either to continue or break the economic circuit. Her simple response to Humbert's offer after realizing that he will not force her to leave with him speaks volumes. "'No,' she said. 'No, honey, no.' She had never called me honey before" (Nabokov 279). Lo's refusal to leave with Humbert in this passage represents her breaking from the circuit of consumerism as well as Humberland, and illustrates the difference between her first journey with Humbert and the one that she rejects repeatedly. Wedged in between two of her "No"s is Lo's calling Humbert "honey," and her patronizing use of the term signals her role as woman outside the context of his narrative, which shows her as finally being equal to Humbert.

## **Conclusion: Desiring Narratives in Postmodernity**

Lo's successful escape from Humberland and Humbert's reaching artistic authenticity towards the end of *Lolita* and their journey throughout the novel mirror Nabokov's own successful restructuring and modernization of the courtly love trope, moving away from its circuitous and spiraling structures. In his own concluding remarks, Nico Israel notes that "Curiously, spirals appear rather infrequently in what might be called the high or classic postmodernism of the 1980s...blending examples of the new cultural dominant of a globally driven consumerism" (Israel 188). Read through the lens of this argument, Nabokov's push and pull away from the nineteenth century representation of spiraling forms such as courtly love and consumerism throughout the novel strengthen readings of *Lolita* as one of the first postmodernist novels which, more so than modernist novels, successfully move away from the restrictions of the literary past, creating a new literary language to express the concerns of its times. Considering this, and the vast amount of literature on the 1950s as a turning point towards postmodernity, the movement away from spiraling forms in postmodernist works does not seem so curious after all. The echos of Keats's daemonic women and knightly figures, however, remind the reader of *Lolita*'s position as a modernist novel, still struggling to escape from the shadows of the past literary century, drawing the reader (as well as its characters) into its elaborate whirlpool of desire.

"Desire" is an important word in *Lolita*, a novel which I have argued reconciles contradictory desires, and it is also important when discussing modernist and postmodernist narratives in general. First, there is desire as artistic intent, which Linda Hutcheon succinctly summarizes:

Postmodern intertextuality is a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context ... It abuses those intertextual echoes, inscribing their powerful allusion and then subverting that power through



irony. (Hutcheon 118)

The desire in *Lolita* then, is clearly postmodern. The novel desires, in its constant parody and ironic self awareness, strives to “rewrite the past in a new context” as evidenced by Nabokov’s restructuring the courtly love trope for the twentieth century. However, the overall breaking with the past, both literary and (more locally) from the earlier narrative through Lo’s escape from Humbert reveals a more modernist desire to deviate from the past.

A desire for deviation brings to mind a second, more psychoanalytic definition of desire, one that is a narrative trajectory more than intention. When describing the connection between detour, Brooks notes that this model of reading narrative “effectively structure ends (death, quiescence, non-narratability) against beginnings (Eros, stimulation into tension, the desire of narrative) in a manner that necessitates the middle as detour, as struggle towards the end under the compulsion of imposed delay, as arabesque into dilatory space of text” (Brooks 295). Brooks’s depiction of narrative desire in this passage is not only one that is necessarily deviating from its otherwise linear trajectory in the form of an “arabesque,” but one that is inherently circuitous. The dialectic picture of narrative that Brooks provides when he places endings against beginnings, emphasizes the deviation or “squiggle” as he qualifies, of narrative itself by placing two divergent aspects of narrative against the other, creating a circuit of narrative.

It seems appropriate, while speaking of the function of narrative detours and endings, to conclude with a discussion of the ending of *Lolita* and how well it serves its function. The final scene that Humbert describes before ending with final instructions for publication and good wishes for Lo is one in which he muses about how much he has damaged Lo while listening to children in the distance, he states:

Reader! What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but

that, and so limpid was the air within this vapor of blended voices...I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, and then I knew the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord. (Nabokov 308)

Lo's rejecting Humbert's request for a return to the beginning, to re-start their journey, pushes the narrative towards its ending: an entirely unironic acceptance of responsibility. There is a hearkening back to Humbert's earlier descriptions of being amongst children, evoking Brooks's notion of the narrative desire to return to the beginning. One description in particular illustrates the separateness of nymphets in his fantasy; he writes, "It happened for instance that from my balcony I would notice a lighted window across the street and what looked like a nymphet undressing before a cooperative mirror. Thus isolated, thus removed, the vision acquired an especially keen charm" (Nabokov 20). Despite this vision soon being ruined, the passage still draws attention to the isolation of nymphets, and foreshadows the isolation Lo is forced into at Humbert's hands. Humbert's final acknowledgement that Lo's voice is missing from the group places her into the concord, a genuflection which gives the passage a strong moral undercurrent.

The closing of the narrative circuit, artistic intent; it is desire that drives both. *Lolita*, in particular, is a novel driven by two very distinct desires: a desire for repetition and a desire for escape. The final arabesque of the novel, like the final stanza of "La Belle Dame sans Merci," does indeed gesture back to the beginning, but, as Brooks notes, with a difference and this final observation again argues for the salience of Keats's poetry in Nabokov's novel but, as ever, gestures towards a movement away from the spiraling forms of courtly love and consumerism depicted in the nineteenth century. From the spiraling desires in Keats to the more rhizomatic, web-like desires in *Lolita*, the presence of desire remains constant but modulates from the comparatively orderly "orbit" to something more modern, akin to what Wallace Stevens calls

“the pleasures of merely circulating” (Stevens 149).

## Works Cited

- Appel, Alfred. "'Lolita': The Springboard of Parody." *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 8.2 (1967): 204-41. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Mar. 2017.
- Brand, Dana. "The Interaction of Aestheticism and American Consumer Culture in Nabokov's 'Lolita'" *Modern Language Studies* 17.2 (1987): 14-21. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 Sept. 2016.
- Brooks, Peter. "Freud's Masterplot." *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977): 280-300. *JSTOR*. Web. 9 Apr. 2017.
- Connolly, Julian W., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. Print.
- Dunbar, Georgia S. "The Significance of the Humor in 'Lamia'." *Keats-Shelley Journal* 8.Part 1 (1959): 17-26. *JSTOR*. Web. 01 Feb. 2017.
- Frosch, Thomas R. "Parody and Authenticity in Lolita." *Vladimir Nabokov's "Lolita": A Casebook*. Ed. Ellen Pifer. Oxford: Oxford U, 2003. 39-121. Print.
- Goux, Jean-Joseph. *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2016. Print.
- Goldman, Eric. "'Knowing' Lolita: Sexual Deviance and Normality in Nabokov's Lolita." *Nabokov Studies* 8.1 (2004): 87-104. Web.
- Halliwell, Stephen. "Representation and Reality." *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002. 54-60. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.
- Israel, Nico. *Spirals: The Whirled Image in Twentieth-century Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia UP. 2015. Print.
- Kauffman, Linda S. "Framing Lolita: Is There a Woman in the Text?" *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1992. 53-81. Print.
- Keats, John. *John Keats: The Complete Poems*. Ed. John Barnard. Third ed. London: Penguin, 2006. Print.
- Kroeber, Karl. "Doubt That Is Not Denial." *Romantic Fantasy and Science Fiction*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1988. 31-50. Print.
- Mellor, Anne K. "Ideological Cross Dressing." *Romanticism and Gender*. New York & London: Routledge, 1993. 173-209. Print.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. Second ed. New York: Vintage International, 1997. Print.

Shvabrin, S. "Vladimir Nabokov's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci": A Study in the Ethics and Effects of Literary Adaptation." *Comparative Literature* 65.1 (2013): 101-22. Web.

Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Vintage, 1990. Print.

Swann, Karen. "Harassing the Muse." *Romanticism and Feminism*. Ed. Anne K. Mellor. Bloomington: Indiana U, 1995. 81-93. Print.

Tagore, Prama. "Keats in an Age of Consumption: The "Ode to a Nightingale"." *Keats-Shelley Journal* 49 (2000): 67-84. *JSTOR*. Web. 01 May 2017.

Thomieres, Daniel. "Cherchez La Femme: Who Really Was Annabel Leigh?" *Journal of Modern Literature* 23.1 (1999): 162-71. Web. 2 Feb. 2017.

Warhol, Andy. *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: (from A to B Et Back Again)*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1988. Print.

Wolfson, Susan J. *Reading John Keats*. Cambridge: Cambridge U, 2015. Print.

Zizek, Slavoj. *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*. London:

V  
e  
r  
s  
o  
,  
  
1  
9  
9  
4  
.  
  
P  
D