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**Humbert Humbert’s Hyperreality:**
Conceptions of Authenticity in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*

Since its publication in 1955, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* has been called “the most American of Nabokov’s works”¹ and “the supreme novel of love in the twentieth century.”² Others contend that it is not a romance, but a parodic tragedy of imitations and inauthenticity, wherein protagonist Humbert Humbert “succeeds in creating only a renewed sense of loss wherever he turns.”³ These last two interpretations appear incompatible, as Humbert’s tragedy seems to hinge upon the inauthenticity of the very romance meant to be “supreme;” the divide traditionally breaks along conflicting opinions of Humbert Humbert’s wholesale objectification, sexualization, and exoticization of Humbert’s now-infamous Lolita. Is their relationship monstrously romantic or the imagined romance of a monster? I argue that the conceptions and complications of reality and inauthenticity require further interrogation. Inauthenticity need not be the harbinger of tragedy, in the same way that a kiss does not necessarily prove supreme love. Through its subversion of these more traditional associations, *Lolita*’s inherent “Americanness” provides the key to reconciling both its romantic and parodic designations, and reformulating our prevailing interpretations of authenticity in American literature.

“Americanness” presupposes cultural and generic solubility, according to Umberto Eco in his 1975 essay “Travels in Hyperreality.” His pairing of reality and un-reality, which mirrors Humbert Humbert’s concept of Absolute Truths and Fakes, serves to exemplify what he

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¹ Parker, 82.
² White, 18.
³ Frosch, 91.
perceives as this quintessential Americanness, or the “search for glory via an unrequited love for
the European past”—the reproduction of old beauty in the absence of America’s own. However,
rather than settling for pale imitation, and thereby committing the fraud of the man who takes a
“genuine savannah and turns it into an unreal lagoon,” Eco’s theory poses a challenge to the
binary of Humbert’s Absolute Truth and the Absolute Fake by introducing the notion of
hyperreality. Hyperreality is the creation of artifice so stunning it becomes more divine—in fact
more real—than reality itself. By examining the dialogue between the works of Nabokov and
Eco, we find that as America becomes the world of the hyperreal, Lolita becomes Nabokov’s
celebration of it. Eco’s casting of America’s hyperbolic roadside attractions plays twin to
Humbert’s own descriptions of the same, and Humbert’s experience necessarily complicates the
interplay between the American fake and the European real. Even as Lolita extends Eco’s
hyperreality, the reformulation of fakery and authenticity that drives his concept also provides a
deeper understanding of Lolita and Humbert’s hyperbolic love of (the idea of) Lolita. Theirs may
be a romance of stunning artificiality, but it is exactly this artifice—Lolita the hyperreal—that
Humbert loves, and willfully constructs. Humbert’s ultimate tragedy is not that the object of his
affections is artificial, for her artifice also grants her perfection and immortality; nor is it that she
herself is lost. Rather it is that Humbert loses the ability to believe and maintain his fantasies.
Once he is confronted with his own superficial constructions and carefully lit stages, Humbert is
expelled from the realm of the hyperreal, and forfeits his dream of Lolita and her America.

Throughout the novel, Humbert’s view of Lolita’s America is one fraught with cynicism
and appreciation in turn. Stephen Jan Parker asserts that from Humbert’s “Old World

4 Eco.
5 Ibid.
perspective, the view appears jaundiced.” 6 From its dessert syrups (“synthetic”) to its “whitewashed clapboard Kabins” (denying the standard spelling), America unfurls before him as a long string of forgeries and philistine fabrications. 7 Its highways seem replete with the cheap and inauthentic, rather than the divinely hyperreal. Together Humbert and Lolita visit dank motels named for vistas their tenants will never know—“Sunset Motels, U-Beam Cottages, Hillcrest Courts, Mountain View Courts, Skyline Courts, Park Plaza Courts, Green Acre” 8—and, it seems, should be satisfied in never knowing. But if The Enchanted Hunters hotel boasts “enlarged replicas of chestnut leaves,” 9 it is only because these leaves are greater in their replication; they are larger, grander, and more extravagant than the pallid truth of them. Humbert himself takes the real and turns it into artifice when he describes the natural skyline in terms of paintings: “Claude Lorrain clouds inscribed remotely into misty azure with only their cumulus part conspicuous against the neutral swoon of the background. Or again, it might be a stern El Greco horizon.” 10 In so doing, he participates in the production of this American artifice, and accepts the allure of the Absolute Fake, even while recognizing its falseness. If his is a jaundiced view, as Parker asserts—an Old World view—it is a jaundice complicated by Humbert’s deep affection for such a sickness.

Parker’s argument holds true when Humbert, by making constant reference to his “Old-world politeness,” 11 sets his own European decorum apart from his rougher American setting. However, even as Humbert describes the garish, tacky Americana he sees both in and around

6 Parker, 82.
7 Nabokov, Lolita, 155; 146.
8 Ibid., 146.
9 Ibid., 117.
10 Ibid., 153.
11 Ibid., 38.
Lolita, he indulges in it. Contrary to Parker’s view, America is not the problem. Humbert may travel the country with Lolita, passing through a world where ART signifies American Refrigerator Transit rather than paintings, where obelisks commemorate nothing and plaques honor nameless authors of unknown poems, where log cabins “boldly” simulate Lincoln’s birthplace—each a perfect example of “the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive” that Nabokov excoriates. And indeed, perhaps these “landmarks” are symptomatic of a country that has no real legacy to claim—or is too young to have searched for and found it, in any case. But Humbert realizes, “by a paradox of pictorial thought, the average lowland North-American countryside had at first seemed to me something I accepted with a shock of amused recognition because of those painted oilcloths which were imported from America in the old days.” His reference to “the old days” implicates Europe in the same conscious production of artifice, as consumers of the touristic kitsch meant to describe America. The old, the true, and the decorous are hardly independent of the machinations Humbert observes across America’s emerging aesthetic. The question of which is the Absolute Truth and which is the Absolute Fake cannot be explained simply in terms of an old Europe and a mimetic America, for Europe is guilty of the same constructions. It is not a matter of defining authenticity and legacy in terms of “Old Europe debauching young America” or “Young America debauching old Europe.” Rather, one discovers the heart of Lolita when the integrity of this binary begins to loosen, and “induce mimic and model to blend.”

12 Ibid., 155.
13 Ibid., 313.
14 Ibid., 152.
16 Ibid., 314.
That Humbert should recognize the actual scenery as the fake, painted “America” of his half-remembered oilcloths demonstrates the inchoate stages of this transformation. Humbert’s reality is measured against the memorized truth of the painting; thus validated, his reality becomes the painting—in place of the typical pattern, where a painting is assessed in terms of the realism with which it represents its subject. The painting in turn becomes hyperreal, a fake that is more authentic than the true scenery Humbert perceives beyond his windshield. Humbert thrives on the hyperreal, replicas more divine than their originals. Even as he comments on the failings of some replicas, such as “lowly Eat with its deer head (dark trace of long tear at inner canthus),” his criticisms stem from their failure to appear real, rather than their failure to be real. When he describes The Enchanted Hunter hotel, with its enlarged chestnut leaves, he mentions his desire to redecorate its walls with “murals of my own making,” which would depict highly Orientalized scenes glutted with hyperreal representations of tigers, birds of paradise, choking snakes, and callipygian slave children, thus crafting his nympholeptic getaway into a still more extravagant image. It is not the artifice that dooms his fantasies of America, or his relationship with Lolita—artifice creates them.

Humbert himself describes the construction of a nymphet as “a question of focal adjustment,” indicating the conscious artificiality inherent in every nymphet birthed thereafter. Even as he records his bliss when Lolita greets him with a kiss, he recognizes the act as “backfisch foolery in imitation of some simulacrum of fake romance.” Of the ten words that comprise Humbert’s commentary, a full four refer to imitations upon imitations (and of the

18 Ibid., 134.
19 Ibid., 17.
20 Ibid., 113.
remaining six, four are purely grammatical). These imitations handily separate the remaining two words—“backfisch” (a German borrowing that refers to teenage girls) and “romance”—by wide margins. Humbert’s romance is structured by mirrors and reflections even at the deep level of textual form. The ephemeral quality of Humbert’s backfisch romance fails to impinge on his arousal as a result of it, however. For him, Lolita is hyperreal; his fantasy is better than her actuality, and this fantasy’s real effect on him overrides whatever she might be in truth. Though Humbert admits, “Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl. Sweet hot jazz, square dancing, gooey fudge sundaes, musicales [sic], movie magazines,” a girl who is his “own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her ... having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own,” she remains his “vulgar darling.” He constructs her out of chewing gum and comic books, sunglasses and ice-cold-drinks-as-advertised, and commits himself both to her youthfully consumerist vulgarity and to the hyperreality these baubles all aspire to create. Though again, Parker is less credulous of Humbert’s “higher reality,” he allows that “Humbert remarks with rare perception that his attraction to nymphets had less to do with their forbidden beauty than with ‘the security of a situation where infinite perfections fill the gap between the little given and the great promised.’” It follows that the nympholept exists in his willingness to believe in these infinite, fantastical perfections that fill the void, or, in Eco’s terms, to bridge the gap between the real and the hyperreal.

21 Ibid., 148.
22 Ibid., 62.
23 Ibid., 117.
24 Parker, 85.
Eco describes the hyperreal as a state outside “the grip of a neurosis of a denied past; it passes out memories generously like a great lord; it doesn't have to pursue ‘the real thing.'” The hyperreal need not aspire to the real. Humbert posits that his love for nymphets is compelled by Annabel Leigh, a spectral lover from distant childhood—or perhaps from merely a fictitious childhood, adopted from Poe. He also admits, “The days of my youth, as I look back on them, seem to fly away from me in a flurry of pale repetitive scraps.” His memories are already pale reproductions, and even in all her elaborate fabrications Lolita exists beyond this past; the past is no longer necessary, nor relevant. Still speaking of the American landscape, Eco notes that Disneyland best exemplifies the hyperreal, because rather than attempting to convince its audience that it reproduces reality exactly, it “makes it clear that within its magic enclosure it is fantasy that is absolutely reproduced.” By this same logic, Lolita inhabits Humbert’s own hyperreality as something consciously reproduced, crafted, and falsified. But she does not have to be “the real thing,” nor does Humbert initially expect her to be. He participates in her artifice just as he participates in the artifice of the country they travel together and loves (the idea of) her deeper still. It is not until Humbert departs from his own constructions of the hyperreal that fantasy turns to parodic sham and he loses Lolita forever.

If the blending of “mimic and model” delivers Lolita its fame as “the supreme novel of love in the twentieth century,” it is precisely because Humbert’s dream of Lolita outstrips Lolita, the original. Her artifice parades itself as artifice, yet becomes in Humbert’s mind the true model by which Lolita, the original, should be judged. When he loses her to Quilty, however, he

25 Eco.
26 Nabokov, Lolita, 15, 146.
27 Eco.
29 White, 18.
abandons this artifice and shifts his attentions instead to Lolita herself. He convinces himself that he alone loves Lolita truly, and by asserting this claim is trapped by its blatant falseness. Once the object of his pursuit ceases to be the site “where infinite perfections fill the gap between the little given and the great promised.” Humbert is forced to relinquish his participation in the hyperreal, and is denied his immortal fantasy. He loses his Lolita long before her age, her pregnancy or her marriage form their barriers against him; and Lolita, the original, is someone he never truly possessed. Though he claims to love her, in spite of her “ruined looks and her adult, rope-veined narrow hands... hopelessly worn at seventeen,” Humbert immediately expresses his relief that, “Thank god it was not the echo alone that I worshipped.” In light of her original, Humbert reduces his fantastical Lolita to an echo, even though she has always been “more real than Lolita.”

He returns to the binary of the Absolute Fake and the Absolute Truth, where truth is privileged above imagination. He quits his access to the realm of the hyperreal and the inversions of truth and artifice granted by it. His great romance becomes “the end of the ingenious play staged for me by Quilty,” an artifice quite separate from his earlier inventions.

Humbert’s motivation for this departure remains unclear by the end of the novel. After killing his playwright, Quilty, however, Humbert remarks that “[t]he rest is a little flattish and faded,” not unlike his recollections of Annabel Leigh. And like Annabel Leigh, by the end of the novel Humbert’s life becomes nothing but construction—the Absolute Fake. Although he takes no real objection to the philistinism of the American landscape or to his participation in

30 Quoted in Parker, 85.
31 Nabokov, Lolita, 277.
32 Ibid., 278.
33 Ibid., 117.
34 Ibid., 305.
35 Ibid., 305.
vulgar pastimes for Lolita’s sake, his interactions with Quilty suggest that Humbert’s recognition of his own artificiality prohibits his continued belief in his artificial Lolita. He names Quilty as his playwright, which subordinates his own constructions to those of another. Murdering Quilty—thereby freeing himself from Quilty’s games—offers Humbert no respite, which further suggests that Humbert himself is a construction, and that, like his Lolita, he has “no will, no consciousness,”36 and no power to create his own artifices. That Quilty’s active appearance in the novel upsets Humbert’s sense of control over his own story then becomes far more important than Quilty’s simultaneous challenge to Humbert’s sense of possession regarding Lolita the original. Nabokov describes the philistine as someone who “likes to impress and he likes to be impressed, in consequence of which a world of deception, of mutual cheating, is formed by him and around him,”37 but that deception only becomes the hyperreal if the subject takes his deception to be greater-than-real. If not, then the vulgar is simply the vulgar, a girl is a girl and not a nymphet, a man lives on a flat stage rather than a three-dimensional space. As Thomas R. Frosch argues, “All he [Humbert] can achieve is parody. When he calls himself a poet, the point is not that he’s shamming but that he fails. Authenticity eludes him,”38 either in its real or hyperreal forms. To extend Frosch’s assertion: Humbert loses the power to believe in his own shams when Quilty appears to challenge his authorial power. The shams then become pallid echoes rather than the divine perfections he once imagined.

In an attempt to rectify this, Humbert pursues Lolita the original, “the real,” though only because he has lost the hyperreal. He claims to love her because she is the model for his now-relinquished fantasy; but in truth, his affections for Lolita the original remain only a mimic of his

36 Ibid., 62.
37 Nabokov, “Philistines and Philistinism,” 315.
38 Frosch, 91.
love for Lolita the hyperreal—she who was once more real than reality. He is unable to conceive
of their potential relationship beyond his old artifices, now rendered powerless. He tells her,
“Come just as you are. And we shall live happily ever after,”\(^{39}\) invoking the falsifying language
of a storybook; he follows this with, "Carmen, voulez-vous venir avec moi?"\(^{40}\) again an allusion
to fiction rather than an invitation to truth. He continues to conceptualize their potential
relationship in terms of a hyperreal fiction even as he pursues Lolita the original, instead of
Lolita the hyperreal. The fiction that initially granted him this conception of Lolita prohibits him
from attaining her model-turned-mimic. She is not the Lolita he fell in love with and so becomes
a fraud in spite of her technical originality.

If \textit{Lolita} finds its heart in the inversion of mimic and model, then Humbert loses his own
when he submits himself to the binary that pits Quilty and himself against each other. The notion
that there can be only one version of Authenticity, as well as Humbert’s rejection of the
hyperreality that he so readily entertained previously, provoke \textit{Lolita’s} shift from the purely
romantic to the romantic-parodic. Humbert’s story becomes one of the man who destroys the
beautifully unreal lagoon—the hyperreal—in pursuit of the genuine desert, only to lose himself
entirely.

\textbf{Works Cited}

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\(^{39}\) Nabokov, Lolita, 277.
\(^{40}\) Ibid., 277.


