Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

3 | 2010

Lolita : Examining “the Underside of the Weave”

The leitmotif racket in *Lolita*—marginal notes on Nabokov’s use of motifs

Ole Nyegaard

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/1642>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.1642

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Ole Nyegaard, “The leitmotif racket in *Lolita*—marginal notes on Nabokov’s use of motifs”, *Miranda* [Online], 3 | 2010, Online since 26 November 2010, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/1642> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.1642>

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.

Miranda is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

The leitmotif racket in *Lolita*— marginal notes on Nabokov's use of motifs

Ole Nyegaard

---

1. Introduction

- 1 Brian Boyd urges us to get more thoroughly acquainted with *Lolita* (Boyd 2008, 49). We need to know the book better before we discuss it in various contexts (typically following academic formulas such as *Lolita and ...*). Moreover, we need to consider how we go about annotating and interpreting, to spend more troublesome time scrutinizing the “hows” and the “whats” in Nabokov's oeuvre, before getting lost in convenient generalizations. One can take as an example Nabokov's leitmotifs which truly challenge the reader.
- 2 First, one has to register their occurrences in the text and connect elements of the same motif which are sometimes separated by hundreds of pages. Then one has to decide whether to study the motif as it appears in various contexts *inside* a single text, or (on a more dizzying scale) to study the motif as it appears *in various contexts* across the Nabokovian oeuvre—not to mention the possibility of comparing with the motifs of other writers. One can also analyze the motif as a device on a formalistic level, in a study of how Nabokov worked as a writer; or as a symbol to interpret, a symbol that informs the way we understand the text.
- 3 The present study mostly consists in observations regarding motifs and themes, which may seem to some like skating on the surface of the text. One may call this a formalist reading.¹
- 4 The study of how Nabokov wrote requires so much attention and careful study that this paper chooses to remain at the (apparently) superficial surface of the text, and to focus on Nabokov's multifarious use of devices. This paper will thus examine Nabokov's motifs and ways of dealing with them as a reader.²

- 5 Some points in terminology need to be clarified: generally, Nabokov uses the word themes when analyzing motifs;³ I will employ the terms “leitmotif” and “motif”, relying on M.H. Abrams’s handy definition of “motif” as “a conspicuous element, such as a type of incident, device, reference, or formula, which occurs frequently in works of literature” (Abrams 121). Abrams defines “motif” and the German “leitmotif” as “the frequent repetition within a single work of a significant verbal or musical phrase, or set description, or complex of images” (Abrams 121).
- 6 The word “theme” will be applied to “a general concept or doctrine, whether implicit or asserted, which an imaginative work is designed to incorporate and make persuasive to the reader” (Abrams 121).

2. Toilets and territory

- 7 The toilet motif occurs in a number of places in *Lolita*, but for the sake of brevity I will only consider a few prominent instances. The first one is located just after Valeria has left Humbert for the taxi driver Maximovich:

Clumsily playing my part, I stomped to the bathroom to check if they had taken my English toilet water; they had not; but I noticed with a spasm of fierce disgust that the former Counselor of the Tsar, after thoroughly easing his bladder, had not flushed the toilet. That solemn pool of alien urine with a soggy, tawny cigarette butt disintegrating in it struck me as a crowning insult, and I wildly looked around for a weapon. Actually I daresay it was nothing but middle-class Russian courtesy (with an oriental tang, perhaps) that had prompted the good colonel [...], a very formal person as they all are, to muffle his private need in decorous silence so as not to underscore the small size of his host's domicile with the rush of a gross cascade on top of his own hushed trickle. (30)

- 8 Humbert is cuckolded, and even though he has no amorous feelings for Valeria, it enrages him. From the outset, the toilet motif is connected to decorum, middle-class values—note how Humbert later comments on the “pinkish cozy, coyly covering the toilet lid” in the Haze house (38)—and to the theme of home, or, rather, territory. Maximovich may have spoiled Humbert’s marital bliss; he does however still respect his turf. Thus the toilet motif suggests connotations of territory, which tinge the later occurrences—with the usual touch of Nabokovian ambiguity. The toilet motif also gives Humbert opportunity to discredit other characters. Humbert mocks Maximovich and his quaint sense of etiquette signaling middle-class values (in Nabokov’s fiction, not much, at least according to his protagonists, is worse than being middle-class)—making sure he gets the last word.
- 9 The motif recurs at another point, namely in Charlotte’s letter to Humbert, in which she writes: “Let me rave and ramble on for a teeny while more, my dearest, since I know this letter has been by now torn by you, and its pieces (illegible) in the vortex of the toilet” (68). Commenting on the letter, Humbert admits: “There is just a chance that ‘the vortex of the toilet’ (where the letter did go) is my own matter-of-fact contribution. She probably begged me to make a special fire to consume it” (69). Charlotte pours out her feelings in her letter, she shows herself as a vulnerable female, while Humbert, who not only has invaded her home and lusts for her daughter, uses the letter to his own ends and even violates its contents by inserting the phrase about the vortex of the toilet. He uses the letter to mock his victim, parading Charlotte’s love as a trophy.

- 10 Both instances are examples of mockery. Through the toilet, Humbert ridicules his targets—like Humbert's creator, Nabokov, mocking T.S. Eliot by anagrammatizing his name into Toilets in a letter to his friend Edmund Wilson (Nabokov 2001,360);⁴ Maximovich is a minor character, hence the first instance of the motif only serves as a prelude for what is to come: i.e. Humbert's substantial and ongoing satire of American middle-class values (and Nabokov's satire of "philistine vulgarity" (315)).⁵ By presenting Charlotte as a conventional American middle-class lady, underscoring all her conventional philistinism, Humbert, in contrast, appears as a refined aesthete and scholar who rubs shoulders with his (by implication) equally refined reader. Mocking Charlotte Haze is part of Humbert's rhetorical seduction of the reader.⁶
- 11 Another instance illustrates the sort of comic effect achieved by this motif. During Humbert and Dolores's second tour of various motels, they are welcomed by inscriptions:
- 'We wish you to feel at home while here. All equipment was carefully checked upon your arrival. Your license number is on record here. Use hot water sparingly. We reserve the right to eject without notice any objectionable person. Do not throw waste material of any kind into the toilet bowl. Thank you. Call again. The Management. P.S. We consider our guests the Finest People of the World.' (210)
- 12 The inscription wavers between politeness and hostile suspicion, and its attempt at well-mannered politeness fails miserably—one can't help wondering: who is the addressee, the objectionable person or the finest person? Ironically, Humbert, the person quoting it, would surely be expelled if his real nature were to be known. Moreover, what is actually to be understood by "waste material of any kind"? Again, the toilet is associated with the typical middle-class aspirations to respectability and concerns about propriety, (cf. Humbert's observations on these topics). In the latter example, we again encounter the theme of territory; the inscription reads as the law of the place, the rules which the tired traveler must obey. Inadvertently, the inscription raises the toilet bowl to the status of an almost sacred object which is not to be defiled—a carnivalesque⁷ move, which may make the toilet-motif seem quite straightforward; however, complexity builds up as the novel progresses. During the sleepless night at the Enchanted Hunters, Humbert listens to people bidding each other goodnight in the corridor:
- When *that* stopped, a toilet immediately north of my cerebellum took over. It was a manly, energetic, deep-throated toilet, and it was used many times. Its gurgle and gush and long afterflow shook the wall behind me. Then someone in a southern direction was extravagantly sick, almost coughing out his life with his liquor, and his toilet descended like a veritable Niagara, immediately beyond our bathroom. (130)
- 13 Upon rereading the novel, we learn that the "someone in a southern direction" is Quilty, who also stays at the hotel and a little earlier admitted being "pretty drunk" (127)—the word "extravagantly" not only describes the nausea, but also the person, the extravagant joker and punster Quilty. Note how the "veritable Niagara" has shrunk to a "brief waterfall"—when Humbert finally confronts him in his house, near the end of the novel:
- Speaking of bathrooms—I was about to visit a third one when master came out of it, leaving a brief waterfall behind him. The corner of a passage did not quite conceal me. (294)

- 14 Towards the end of the book, Quilty's life is nearly over, and this time Humbert plays hide and seek:
- Gray-faced, baggy-eyed, fluffily disheveled in a scanty balding way, but still perfectly recognizable, he swept by me in a purple bathrobe, very like the one I had. He either did not notice me, or else dismissed me as some familiar and innocuous hallucination... (294)
- 15 Humbert arrives at Pavor Manor, Quilty's parody of an enchanted castle, in order to fulfill his vengeful mission. Here the unsteady power balance between protagonist and antagonist is about to shift. As so often before, Humbert feels that he is losing his grip on the situation; things don't quite turn out the way he meant them to.
- 16 So far, we have seen the toilet-motif connoting decorum and middle-class values, being used for mockery gestures, and also signaling territory and shifts in the novel's unsteady power-balance. However, there is more to it. The toilet motif does not stand by itself as an isolated motif in the text; it is interwoven with other motifs which also have to be considered.

3. Telephones

3.1 Telephones and terror

- 17 After Quilty emerges from the bathroom, he notices Humbert and asks if he is Brewster; Humbert claims that he is, but fails to convince Quilty:
- 'You know,' he said, scratching loudly his fleshy and gritty gray cheek and showing his small pearly teeth in a crooked grin, 'you don't *look* like Jack Brewster. I mean the resemblance is not particularly striking. Somebody told me he had a brother with the same *telephone* company.' (295, my emphasis)
- 18 The Pavor Manor scene forms a climax, albeit an anti-climax for Humbert. Though the trapping of Quilty may be "intolerable bliss" to Humbert (295), the killing—the "whole sad business" (304)—does not turn out according to Humbert's expectations: "Far from feeling any relief, a burden even weightier than the one I had hoped to get rid of was with me, upon me, over me" (304). The real climax is in the merging of motifs. A whole series of leitmotifs come together in Pavor Manor: the simian motif, the game motif, the b-movie motif, the double motif, and so forth—including the toilet and telephone motifs. This is not the first time toilets and telephones come together. One could also spot them while Humbert was sitting in the house on Lawn Street and mentally searching for Dolores:
- I am like one of those inflated pale spiders you see in old gardens. Sitting in the middle of a luminous web and giving little jerks to this or that strand. My web is spread all over the house as I listen from my chair where I sit like a wily wizard. Is Lo in her room? Gently I tug on the silk. She is not. Just heard the toilet paper cylinder make its staccato sound as it is turned; and no footfalls has my outflung filaments traced from the bathroom back to her room. Is she still brushing her teeth (the only sanitary act Lo performs with real zest)? No. The bathroom door has just slammed, so one has to feel elsewhere about the house for the beautiful warm-colored prey. Let us have a strand of silk descend the stairs. I satisfy myself by this means that she is not in the kitchen—not banging the refrigerator door or screeching at her detested mamma (who, I suppose, is enjoying her third, cooing and subduedly mirthful, telephone conversation of the morning). Well, let us grope and hope. Ray-like, I glide in thought to the parlor and find the radio silent (and

mamma still talking to Mrs. Chatfield or Mrs. Hamilton, very softly, flushed, smiling, cupping the telephone with her free hand, denying by implication that she denies those amusing rumors, rumor, roomer, whispering intimately, as she never does, the clear-cut lady, in face to face talk). So my nymphet is not in the house at all! Gone! What I thought was a prismatic weave turns out to be an old grey cobweb, the house is empty, is dead. And then comes Lolita's soft sweet chuckle through my half-open door 'Don't tell Mother but I've eaten *all* your bacon.' (49-50)

- 19 This occurs shortly after Humbert has become a lodger. The reader—while witnessing Humbert impersonating a spider trying to catch up with his prey, going too far off in his search—derives an extraordinary effect of spatial sense from picturing several simultaneous actions in different places in the house:⁸ Humbert in his chair, his thoughts following the girl, although a little late and a little too far; Charlotte talking to other Ramsdale ladies (whereby we glimpse the situation seen from her point of view, albeit in Humbert's words)—the surprise is that the prey has been near during all that time. Dolores has a mind of her own, which constantly eludes Humbert's grasp. Thus the toilet and the phone signal Humbert's failure to take control of events and persons. Not only is he a little late, but his victims are already plotting things which interfere with his control: Dolores eats his bacon and Charlotte has feelings and hopes of her own. The spider and wizard imagery is on the one hand a fitting image of scheming Humbert; and on the other hand, it sharply contrasts with the events actually taking place, and shows Humbert to be both out of sync and touch with the reality he seeks to control. When he finally has his way with the girl during the davenport scene, the telephone comes alive as the spell subsides:

Immediately afterward (as if we had been struggling and now my grip had eased) she rolled off the sofa and jumped to her feet—to her foot, rather—in order to attend to the formidably loud telephone that may have been ringing for ages as far as I was concerned. There she stood and blinked, cheeks aflame, hair awry, her eyes passing over me lightly as they did over the furniture, and as she listened or spoke (to her mother who was telling her to come to lunch with her at the Chatfields—neither Lo nor Hum knew yet what busybody Haze was plotting), she kept tapping the edge of the table with the slipper she held in her hand. Blessed be the Lord, she had noticed nothing! (61)

- 20 The telephone enters the scene after Humbert's climax, during which, according to him, "Lolita had been safely solipsized" (60). Humbert claims to have possessed not her but his "own creation, another fanciful Lolita" which he says has "no consciousness—indeed no life of her own" (62). But the parenthetical "(as if we had been struggling and now my grip had eased)" suggests the possibility of a struggle, which is further underscored by the phrase "as far as I was concerned". Humbert is only concerned about his sexual fancy—the ringing phone and the possibility that they actually struggled lies beyond the scope of his interest.
- 21 Humbert's solipsism can be said to form a major theme of the novel. The characters often misconceive the acts and words of other characters: Dolores is not really enamored with Humbert but with a glamorous foreigner and Quilty she sees as a glamorous playwright. Charlotte sees Humbert as an exotic foreigner, a French-speaking savant; Quilty is uncertain whether Humbert is Brewster, or a foreign literary agent, or Australian, or even a German refugee (i.e. Jewish). The spell that the telephone disturbs but fails to disperse is the common illusion shared by most characters in the book: nobody is concerned with other people but only with their limited (mis)perceptions of people. After the davenport scene, wrapped in his illusory

victory, Humbert thinks Dolores has noticed nothing and fails to see how she may very well know what he was up to.

3.2 The slipper-motif

- 22 The slipper requires a separate note because it functions as a minor motif in *Lolita*. The slipper that Dolores holds in her hand at the end of the davenport scene is one half of a pair, and slippers recur throughout the novel. For instance, when Humbert has killed Quilty he briefly loses contact with reality:
- [...] a kind of momentary shift occurred as if I were in the connubial bedroom, and Charlotte were sick in bed. Quilty was a very sick man. I held one of his slippers instead of the pistol—I was sitting on the pistol. (304)
- 23 This may seem irrelevant, if one does not consider that in both scenes Humbert comes out of a trancelike state, and in both scenes he has just crossed a moral border and violated another human being.
- 24 The slipper motif is of course a Cinderella theme—even if in Nabokov's hand the tale is a tragedy, and Cinderella dies. Moreover, the slipper motif ripples throughout Nabokov's own fiction, as it prominently appears in several of his novels, from *King, Queen, Knave* to *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Pnin* and *Ada*.

3.3 Calls from beyond

- 25 As the plot proverbially thickens, the leitmotifs build up, and the telephone motif triggers a chain reaction, provoking events escalating beyond Humbert's control. At Beardsley, Humbert has allowed Dolores "to take piano lessons with a Miss Emperor (as we French scholars may conveniently call her)" (202) but then:
- [...] the telephone in my study, where I was in the act of mopping up Gustave's—I mean Gaston's—king's side, rang and Miss Emperor asked if Lo was coming because she had missed last Tuesday's and today's lesson. (202)
- 26 By invoking Flaubert's first name and the name of Emma Bovary's piano teacher, Humbert intertextually frames Dolores' attempts at skulking as infidelity, thus making her the transgressor and normalizing his tyranny, as if he were a normal father/lover. The quarrel that follows the telephone call reveals another story. Humbert and Dolores start to yell "unprintable things" (205) at each other, and Humbert lets his narrative guard down:
- She said she loathed me. She made monstrous faces at me, inflating her cheeks and producing a diabolical plopping sound. She said I had attempted to violate her several times when I was her mother's roomer. She said she was sure I had murdered her mother. (205)
- 27 The telephone call flaunts Humbert's attempts to keep up the appearance of a normal family. The quarrel turns into a fight during which Humbert grasps Dolores's wrist to keep her from breaking free, until another sound distracts him: "our voices were drowning the telephone, and when I grew aware of its ringing she instantly escaped" (205). Humbert rightly feels the hand of an interfering fate:
- With people in the movies I seem to share the services of the machine telephonica and its sudden god. This time it was an irate neighbor. The east window happened to be agape in the living room, with the blind mercifully down, however; and behind it the damp black night of a sour New England spring had been breathlessly

listening to us. [...]

'... This racket ... lacks all sense of...' quacked the receiver, 'we do not live in a tenement here. I must emphatically...'

I apologized for my daughter's friends being so loud. Young people you know—and cradled the next quack and a half.

Downstairs the screen door banged. Lo? Escaped? (205-6)

- 28 After a search through the town during the night, Humbert finally finds Dolores:

Some ten paces away Lolita, through the glass of a telephone booth (membranous god still with us), cupping the tube, confidentially hunched over it, slit her eyes at me, turned away with her treasure, hurriedly hung up, and walked out with a flourish.

'Tried to reach you at home,' she said brightly. 'A great decision has been made. But first buy me a drink, dad.' (206-7)

- 29 She tells him that she wants to give up school as well as the play, and proposes that they go on another trip: "But *this* time we'll go wherever *I* want, won't we?" (207). Humbert readily accepts.

- 30 In this manner, after three telephone calls, three interventions from the "machine telephonica" or the "membranous god", the power balance shifts—from Humbert's unsteady rule to Dolores deciding wherever they are going. The first call initiates the quarrel that shakes Humbert's hold on his prey; the second call loosens his grip; and the third call—we don't hear it, but from what happens later, we can infer that Dolores has called Quilty, and that the new trip is part of a plan they have concocted—the third call makes Humbert fall prey to his victim's machinations. Nevertheless, Humbert has not given up completely. He is now aware of something sinister about the recurring pattern of the plot in which he is enmeshed, but his grasp on what happens around him, his grip on Dolores, and his general hold on everyday reality seems to be slipping away:

We had stopped at a gas station, under the sign of Pegasus, and she had slipped out of her seat and escaped to the rear of the premises while the raised hood, under which I had bent to watch the mechanic's manipulations, hid her for a moment from my sight. Being inclined to be lenient, I only shook my benign head though strictly speaking such visits were taboo, since I felt instinctively that toilets—as also telephones—happened to be, for reasons unfathomable, the points where my destiny was liable to catch. We all have such fateful objects—it may be a recurrent landscape in one case, a number in another—carefully chosen by the gods to attract events of special significance for us: here shall John always stumble; there shall Jane's heart always break. (211)

- 31 Humbert suspects someone plotting against him (on a large scale gods, on a small scale Dolores and Quilty). If we care to read a little further, something else happens in the world around Humbert. After the car has been attended to, he observes that "the growing volume of her absence began to weigh upon [him] in the windy grayness" (211). This unsettles Humbert while he notes a series of poignant visual details and radio music coming from an open office door:

[...] and because the rhythm was not synchronized with the heave and flutter and other gestures of wind-animated vegetation, one had the impression of an old scenic film living its own life while piano or fiddle followed a line of music outside the shivering flower, the swaying branch. The sound of Charlotte's last sob incongruously vibrated through me as, with her dress fluttering athwart the rhythm, Lolita veered from a totally unexpected direction. She had found the toilet occupied and had crossed over to the sign of the Conche in the next block. (212)

- 32 Humbert is of course neither 'benign' nor 'lenient' but tyrannical, though he may be a fairly benevolent tyrant on a road trip that was suggested by his slave girl. He fears Dolores is about to escape, and rightly assumes that some "god" has carefully chosen toilets and telephones as fateful objects. The idea of an interfering god fits in the workings of these motifs; every time they occur, they suggest the erroneous nature of Humbert's solipsistic world-view.
- 33 In the world ruled by Humbert, only himself is real. In the initial stages of his sexual exploits with Dolores he claims to possess "not she, but [his] own fanciful creation, another fanciful Lolita—perhaps more real than Lolita" (62). Later on, he is aware of a person beyond his ken, but only dimly so.⁹ The ringing telephone breaks the spell; it exposes another world surrounding Humbert, a world where other people exist independently of what he thinks of them.
- 34 During the series of telephone calls at Beardsley and in the scene at the gas station, it is as if the world opened up; at Beardsley, the window was open and the anthropomorphized "damp black night of a sour New England spring had been breathlessly listening to [them]" (206); at the gas station Humbert observes a landscape where the discrepancy between the swaying vegetation and the rhythm of the music, as well as Humbert's use of the word "animated", suggest a world opening up, or being stirred by someone outside the character's vision—hence Charlotte's last sob "incongruously vibrating" through Humbert. This should be connected with Charlotte calling the house phone during the davenport scene and interrupting the masturbation scene, and with Humbert suddenly remembering Charlotte being sick in bed just as he thinks he has killed Quilty.
- 35 One could suggest that the recurring telephone and toilet leitmotifs signal the efforts of Charlotte Haze trying to interfere—from beyond the grave—with Humbert's violation of her daughter. This is not the reading this paper offers. Instead, I would see the opening signaled by the telephone motif, as described above, as scenes where Humbert feels his solipsized world beginning to crack.

4. The racket

- 36 One last motif remains to be studied. After visiting Dolores in Coalmont, Humbert writes about his life with her, about the absence of normal and healthy family affections in their relations, and turns to the reader:
- Mid-20th century ideas concerning child-parent relationship have been considerably tainted by the scholastic rigmarole and standardized symbols of the psychoanalytic racket, but I hope I am addressing myself to unbiased readers. (285)
- 37 One should recall that during the quarrel in Beardsley, after Dolores yells her version of events in Ramsdale, the phone rings and Miss East complains: "... This *racket* ... lacks all sense of..." quacked the receiver, 'we do not live in a tenement here. I must emphatically...' (206, my emphasis). The repeated use of the word racket seems at first a coincidence, but this is hardly coincidental if one considers its use both in connection with psychoanalysis above, and the occurrence of the word exactly when Humbert's attempt at keeping up appearances fails in Beardsley. The word also appears when Humbert—in order to tone down his own wickedness—presents Dolores as corrupted: "not a trace of modesty did I perceive in this beautiful hardly formed young girl whom

modern co-education, juvenile mores, the campfire *racket* and so forth had utterly and hopelessly depraved” (133, my emphasis). Moreover, the following passage also mentions the word ‘racket’:

There she would be, a typical kid picking her nose while engrossed in the lighter sections of the newspaper, as indifferent to my ecstasy as if it were something she had sat upon, a shoe, a doll, the handle of a tennis racket, and was too indolent to remove. (165)

- 38 Later, after being tricked away from a game of tennis by another phone call (235) Humbert comes back and notes: “The handle of my racket was still disgustingly warm” (236).
- 39 Humbert and Nabokov toy with the phallus as a symbol, not only as a metonymic symbol for the penis, but also as a symbol of male domination in general—a domination imposed on the girl, and which she, ultimately, more or less successfully evades, although not without being harmed. The following excerpt is what Humbert observes while dreaming of a future for his stepdaughter as a tennis champion:

She preferred acting to swimming, and swimming to tennis; yet I insist that had not something within her been broken by me—not that I realized it by then!—she would have had on the top of her perfect form the will to win, and would have become a real girl champion. Dolores with two rackets under her arm, in Wimbledon. Dolores endorsing a Dromedary. Dolores turning professional. Dolores acting a girl champion in a movie. Dolores and her gray, humble, hushed husband coach, old Humbert. (232)
- 40 Humbert’s attempt at dominating a minor results in the racket in the house in Beardsley. Dolores may succeed in escaping him, but through her experiences under his tyranny, she has lost any competitive drive; as one of her tennis coaches says, Dolores does not want to dominate others: “Dolly has a magnet in the center of her racket guts, but why the heck is she so polite?” (231).
- 41 The initial title of the novel, *The Kingdom by the Sea*, fits nicely with the Arthurian pattern pointed out by Brian Boyd in his article (Boyd 2008); it also fits with Humbert’s tendency to link sex with the imagery of kings, slaves and harems.¹⁰ In the davenport scene, Humbert transforms from a “sad-eyed degenerate cur clasping the boot that would presently kick him away” into a “radiant and robust Turk” inside his “self-made seraglio” deliberately “postponing the moment of actually enjoying the youngest and frailest of his slaves” (60).
- 42 If we see the racket as a symbol of male domination it should also be related to Humbert’s childhood experiences of sex. Humbert gives the following picture, linking sex to power: “with a generosity that was ready to give her everything, my heart, my throat, my entrails, I gave her to hold in her awkward fist the scepter of my passion” (15).¹¹
- 43 But the symbol is more than a symbol: through metonymy, through Humbert’s casual rhetorical gesture presenting Dolores as a girl “indifferent” to his “ecstasy”, the symbol becomes too much of the real thing. The racket motif stands out (no pun intended!) from the text, not as the phallic symbol of conventional psychology, but as the real palpable thing—the male organ.

5. Allusions

- 44 Nabokov alludes to a host of other writers in *Lolita*. So while examining the telephone motif one must also refer to Proust's description of Marcel's telephone call from Doncières. Proust writes of the admirable sorcery—"l'admirable féerie" (Proust 125)—which conjures up people who are invisible to our eyes but present to our senses, even though they are in another town, under another sky. Proust's text reads as an ironic hymn in praise of the telephone ladies:

Nous n'avons, pour que ce miracle s'accomplisse, qu'à approcher nos lèvres de la planchette magique et à appeler—quelquefois un peu trop longtemps, je le veux bien—les Vierges Vigilantes dont nous entendons chaque jour la voix sans jamais connaître le visage, et qui sont nos Anges gardiens dans les ténèbres vertigineuses dont elles surveillent jalousement les portes ; les Toutes-Puissantes par qui les absents surgissent à notre côté, sans qu'il soit permis de les apercevoir ; les Danaïdes de l'invisible qui sans cesse vident, remplissent, se transmettent les urnes des sons ; les ironiques Furies qui au moment que nous murmurions une confidence à une amie, avec l'espoir que personne ne nous entendait, nous crient cruellement : "J'écoute" ; les servantes toujours irritées du Mystère, les ombrageuses prêtresses de l'Invisible, les Demoiselles du téléphone ! (Proust 125-6)

- 45 In Proust's novel the telephone call gives Marcel premonitions about his grandmother's death and the fact that she will not always be there for him, shortly after this hymn to the "umbrageous priestesses of the Invisible" (my translation). Humbert's remark about the machine telephonica as a sudden god shows that he views the telephone in the same vein as Marcel. Moreover, the action of the novel sustains his belief: the telephone does provoke some major events in the plot as gods would provoke.
- 46 It would be possible to follow the intertextual threads on and on. For instance, one could mention the echoes of Joyce—who also figures prominently as an intertextual reference in *Lolita*—and especially the toilet where Bloom goes to defecate while reading in *Ulysses* (Joyce 83)¹². Since Proffer and Appel started annotating *Lolita*, numerous allusions to other writers have been spotted¹³—the list is impressive, and challenges the annotator.

6. Conclusion

- 47 The motifs this paper has traced throughout the pages of the novel suggest the following points:
- The toilet motif signals a change in Humbert's fortune, and a shift in the power balance between the novel's characters
  - The telephone motif indicates an interference from the authorial figure or from forces beyond Humbert's scope
  - These motifs are connected with other leitmotifs like the slipper motif and the racket motif; the former is tightly linked to Humbert's transgressions of morality, the latter to Humbert's dominance of others through his perverted vision of love and sex.
- 48 This paper, however, only offers a rough sketch of these motifs. Tracing Nabokov's leitmotifs is like following a constantly changing pattern. What separates Nabokov's deployment of leitmotifs from that of others (with the exception of Joyce) is the

intricate interlacing of his motifs. Nabokov's formalistic complexity challenges readers and critics alike.

- 49 One can follow one certain thread, which intertwines with another. In order to understand the workings and logic of the first motif, one then has to follow both. From there on, one will discover a number of other threads occasionally intertwining with the ones that are being traced. In the end one is reading forwards, backwards and even reading outside the book itself. For instance the fateful telephone call recurs in *Speak, Memory* (40), in the episode during which Nabokov is reading to his mother and the telephone interrupts them with the news of his father's death. Likewise, the telephone and the bathroom figure as prominent motifs in *The Gift*, and in the story "Signs and Symbols"; moreover, in his biography Brian Boyd explains that in 1966 the "entire novel" *Ada* leapt "into the kind of existence that can and must be put into words. Its springboard was *Ada's* telephone call" (Boyd 1993, 509—Boyd quoting Nabokov's diary).¹⁴
- 50 One could also recall Maurice Couturier, when he writes that "Humbert and Lolita's first trip around the United States reads as a long drawn-out version of the famous cab drive around the streets of Rouen" ("The French Nabokov" 140); indeed *Lolita* reenacts many scenes from literature. This raises the problem of how to read Nabokov. We can read his works following single motifs, or several motifs inside the text. But Nabokov invites us to read across the text, not only by rereading the novel, but reading across his entire oeuvre as one macro-text—and, I think, across the western canon as one enormous macro-text.
- 51 Therefore the reading offered in the present paper should only be considered as a sketch. It is quite likely that some other intertwining leitmotifs were overseen—more slippers (in *Pnin* for instance) and rackets. The scope of reading and studying Nabokov's leitmotifs is daunting; it will take more than one person's effort to obtain a thorough understanding of how one of the most technically skilled writers wielded his devices.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Sixth edition. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993.

Amis, Martin. "The problem with Nabokov." *The Guardian*, 14 November 2009. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/nov/14/vladimir-nabokov-books-martin-amis>)

Bahktin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. By Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984.

Boyd, Brian. "Lolita: What We Know and What We Don't" *Cycnos* 24: 1 (2007): 215-246. Also available at <http://revel.unice.fr/cycnos/document.html?id=1079>

Last visit to the website 29 October 2010.

---. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*. New York: Vintage, 1993.

- . *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- Connolly, Julian W. *A Reader's Guide to Nabokov's "Lolita"*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009.
- Couturier, Maurice. "The French Nabokov." In *Transitional Nabokov*. Ed. Will Norman et al. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2009. 135-150.
- Glynn, Michael. *Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences in His Novels*. New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1992.
- Monica Manolescu, « Voiles et caravansérails : l'Orient dans *Lolita* », *Sillages critiques*, 11 2010. (<http://sillagescritiques.revues.org/index1657.html>.)
- Makaryk, Irena R. (ed.). *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory. Approaches, Scholars, Terms*. Toronto: Toronto UP, 1995.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*. London: Penguin, 2000.
- . *The Annotated Lolita*. Ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991.
- . *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971*. Rev. and expanded edition. Ed. by Simon Karlinsky. Berkley: U of California P, 2001.
- . *The Gift*. Trans. Michael Scammell with the author, 1963. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981.
- . *Lectures on Literature*. Ed. by Fredson Bowers. Florida: Harvest Books, 1982.
- . *Selected Letters, 1940-1977*. Ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1989.
- . *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. London: Penguin, 2000.
- . *Strong Opinions*. New York: Vintage International, 1990.
- Norman, Will and Duncan White, eds. *Transitional Nabokov*. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2009.
- Nyegaard, Ole. "Uncle Gustave's Present: The Canine Motif in *Lolita*" *Nabokov Studies* 9 (2005): 133-155.
- Pifer, Ellen, ed. *Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita: A Casebook*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003.
- Proffer, Carl. R. *Keys to Lolita*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1968.
- Proust, Marcel. *À la recherche du temps perdu*. III : *Le Côté de Guermantes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1988.
- Tamir-Ghez, Nomi. "The Art of Persuasion in Nabokov's *Lolita*." In *Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita: A Casebook*. Ed. Ellen Pifer. New York : Oxford UP, 2003. 17-37

NOTES

1. For a more thorough discussion of this topic see Michael Glynn's book *Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences in His Novels*. Glynn makes a valid case against those who represent Nabokovs as a symbolist. Instead Glynn sees him as Bergsonian Formalist.
2. Previously, in an article in *Nabokov Studies* 9, I studied the dogs in *Lolita* as a multi-operational leitmotif that affects the way we read and especially reread, and as a device that relies on intertextuality—which even further complicates our reading efforts.
3. See his note on the subject in his *Lectures on Literature* (Nabokov 1980, 16)

4. Nabokov praises an article by Edmund Wilson ("T. S. Eliot and the Church of England") by writing: "Your piece on Toile, T. S is absolutely wonderful [...]" (Nabokov 2001, 360). Read forwards without the punctuation Toile, T. S becomes toilets, and backwards the writer.
5. Martin Amis observes in his article "The Problem with Nabokov": "There is a weakness in Nabokov for "partricianism", as Saul Bellow called it (Nabokov the classic émigré, Bellow the classic immigrant). In the former's purely "Russian" novels (I mean the novels written in Russian that Nabokov did not himself translate), the male characters, in particular, have a self-magnifying quality: they are larger and louder than life. They don't walk – they "march" or "stride"; they don't eat and drink – they "munch" and "gulp"; they don't laugh – they "roar". They are very far from being the furtive, hesitant neurasthenics of mainstream anglophone fiction: they are brawny (and gifted) heart-throbs, who win all the fights and win all the girls. Pride, for them, is not a deadly sin but a cardinal virtue. Of course, we cannot do without this vein in Nabokov: it gives us, elsewhere, his magnificently comic hauteur. In *Lolita*, the superbity is meant to be funny; elsewhere, it is a trait that irony does not protect".
6. The rhetorical strategies, by which Humbert hopes to make the reader see things his way, have been analyzed in Nomi Tamir-Ghez's article "The Art of Persuasion in Nabokov's *Lolita*."
7. Considering the contexts in which the toilet motif appears, I think one could argue that the toilet motif in general is an instance of Nabokov being carnivalistic. See Bakhtin's book *Rabelais and His World*, for instance this description of the medieval carnival: "We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the "inside out" (à l'envers), of the "turnabout", of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear [...]" (Bakhtin, 11). Makaryk's *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory* (516-518) also offers a valuable definition of the carnivalesque.
8. A similar almost camera-like effect is derived from the Junk setter running across the scene of Charlotte's accident (97-98). See my article on "The Canine Motif in *Lolita*", 138-140.
9. As Humbert admits when overhearing her remark: "'You know, what's so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own'; and it struck me [...] that I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate—dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me [...]" (284).
10. For a thorough elucidation of the harem motif see Monica Manolescu's paper "Voiles et caravansérails : l'Orient dans *Lolita*."
11. Nabokov often voiced his reservations about symbols: "The symbolism racket in schools attracts computerized minds but destroys plain intelligence as well as poetical sense" (Nabokov 1990, 305). For a more thorough treatment of the tennis scenes in *Lolita* see Ronald Bush's article "Tennis by the Book: *Lolita* and the Game of Modernist Fiction" in Will Norman's and Duncan White's *Transitional Nabokov*.
12. See pp. 207 and 211 for more Joycean allusions.
13. See Alfred Appel Jr's notes in *The Annotated Lolita*, and Carl. R. Proffer's *Keys to Lolita*.
14. In *Ada* there is also a motif linked to the toilet motif, namely the "perfect stool" motif.

ABSTRACTS

This is a study of Nabokov's use of leitmotifs in *Lolita*, a study of how they intertwine and interact, and the problems Nabokov's stylistic dexterity pose to the reader and critic. It traces prominent occurrences of the toilet and telephone motifs, and their connection with motifs like the slipper and the racket motif.

INDEX

Mots-clés: *Lolita*, leitmotiv, formalisme, annotation, métatexte

Keywords: *Lolita*, leitmotiv, formalism, annotation, metatext

AUTHORS

OLE NYEGAARD

Critique littéraire

University of Aarhus

conyegaard@gmail.com