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The Function of Parody in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

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Introduction

The subject matter of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) may at first glance seem rather sordid; a story about a middle-aged paedophile and his twelve-year-old stepdaughter eloping is certain to cause affront to many readers, unsurprisingly enough. Indeed, Nabokov had finished writing *Lolita* in 1953, but because of its controversial subject it took two years and five rejections from American publishing houses before the book was accepted and published, and then only by Olympia Press in Paris, which, unbeknownst to Nabokov, was notorious for publishing cheap editions of pornographic books (Vickers 47). The book went largely unnoticed until it was praised by Graham Greene in *Sunday Times*, and when *Lolita* was finally published in the U.S in 1958 it became an instant bestseller. It mainly received favourable reviews, although some reviewers accused it of being nothing more than highbrow pornography (Vickers 51). However, any reader picking up *Lolita* expecting cheap titillation would be deeply disappointed.

Lolita is a work which rewards closer examination. Nabokov himself stated that the book was about his love affair with the English language (Frosch 50), and *Lolita* is filled with linguistic games, puns, literary allusions and coinages. Aside from these word games, *Lolita* can also be interpreted as parodying a multitude of different genres and cultural practices. Most obviously, it is a parody of the Romantic Doppelgänger genre, with Clare Quilty cast as Humbert's evil double who stalks him throughout the novel. Furthermore, *Lolita* can also be seen as a parody of literary styles such as the detective story, the romance novel, the autobiography, and, importantly, as a parody of psychoanalysis. One can rightfully wonder what function and purpose all the parody, word games and literary allusions serve in the novel. Nabokov likened *Lolita* to a riddle, with an elegant solution, and warns his readers to expect “deceit bordering on diabolism” (Ingham 27).

To begin to find an answer to what the significance of parodying all of these literary forms is, it is important to first have a clear definition of what parody means. Traditionally, parody has been defined as an imitation of a literary work with the

intention of mocking or ridiculing it. However, the way parody is used has changed over time, and with the rise of post-modernism, new ways of parodying works have emerged. According to Linda Hutcheon, parody does not necessarily need to be a way of ridiculing earlier works, but rather that “parody is one of the major forms of modern self-reflexivity; it is a form of inter-art discourse” (2). Thus, parody is intimately linked with intertextuality. As parody is such a wide field within literature, there have been a number of conflicting ways of defining exactly what it entails, which will be thoroughly discussed in the background section.

The aim of this essay is to examine the function of parody in *Lolita*. In order to do this, I will start with a thorough discussion of the concept of parody within literature. This section will also bring up post-modernism, and some of its features, of which parody is one. I will then examine how three different genres or cultural practices are parodied in *Lolita*, the Romantic Doppelgänger tale, the romance novel and, finally, psychoanalysis. Within these sections, literary convention and tradition will be discussed, as well as an investigation of the intertextual links to the works which are being parodied. I will argue that parody is a form of prolepsis, a way for Nabokov to challenge the pretensions of his readers, and to show that he can predict and pre-empt their conclusions. Furthermore, I will illustrate how this is achieved by Nabokov's careful placing of “traps” throughout the novel. It is all a part of Nabokov's “diabolical” game that he is playing with his readers. Moreover, I will also show how parody is a way for Nabokov to escape the influence of his precursors; by parodying psychoanalysis and literary history he can claim originality in a world where everything has already been written or predicted by psychoanalysis.

What is Parody?

Parody as a literary genre is certainly not a recent invention. In fact, it is a term that derives from Ancient Greek, with its earliest mention recorded in Aristotle's *Poetics*, where it is used in reference to Hegemon, an earlier writer (Dentith 10). Fred W.

Householder defines the Ancient Greek parody as “a narrative poem of moderate length, in epic meter, using epic vocabulary, and treating a light, satirical or mock-heroic subject” (qtd in Rose 7). Of course, it is not surprising that a word, or term, which has been in continual use since Aristotle's time has been subject to a change in meaning. Examining what different critics have said to be the definition of parody in different eras quickly makes it apparent that it does not have a fixed definition, but rather that the definition changes in accordance to the times and prevailing trends within art and literature. Linda Hutcheon points to the fact that there are no trans-historical definitions of parody (32), meaning that parody as a literary device has not been a static concept, but has altered depending on the time and place of use.

With parody seemingly being such a fluid concept, it is a difficult task to settle on what definition to use. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines parody as “[a] literary composition modelled on and imitating another work, especially a composition in which the characteristic style and themes of a particular author or genre are satirized by being applied to inappropriate or unlikely subjects, or are otherwise exaggerated for comic effect.” Another slightly different definition is made by Simon Dentith, who argues that “[p]arody includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice” (9). Thus, a parody does not have to be based on a textual or literary source, but could be based on a variety of cultural practices such as psychoanalysis, political ideologies and popular culture to name a few. However, Dentith also concedes that “because of the antiquity of the word parody ... because of the range of different practices to which it alludes, and because of differing national usages, no classification can ever hope to be securely held in place” (6). This means that the many subjective interpretations of the term, its wide field of usage, and simply its age make parody a very difficult concept to reach a conclusive definition of.

Furthermore, Hutcheon contests the notion that parody has to include an element of ridicule or mocking of the source text (6). Instead, her focus is on the inter-textual aspects of parody; she describes parody as “a formal or structural relation between two texts” (22). However, not any two texts which relate to each other is parody, that would merely be a case of inter-textuality. As Hutcheon remarks, in addition to the relation

between the texts (or cultural practice and text), there also needs to be a clear intention from the author of parodying the other work, and that the structure implies that the parody can be “decoded” by the reader (22-23). Inter-textuality is clearly central to the genre of parody, although the source being parodied does not strictly need to be a literary work, but can, to use Dentith's words, be any “cultural production or practice” (9). Neither does the parody necessarily have to criticise the text, genre or cultural production being parodied, but can be a way to “attack, satirise, or just playfully to refer to elements of the contemporary world” by drawing on the “authority of precursor texts” (Dentith 9). In other words, parody can use the influence of its source to offer a comment on the surrounding world.

All texts have to situate themselves in relation to the texts that have come before them, the “precursor” texts. Most writers strive for originality, but the weight of the precursor texts can seem like a heavy yoke, impossible to escape. When everything already seems to have been written, originality can be difficult to claim. Additionally, there is also the problem of how parody can be original when it is an imitation of something else. Hutcheon's answer to this is that writers use parody as a “mode of emancipation” (35); it is a way for them to break free from tradition while at the same time continuing to work within that tradition. Thus, parody is a way for writers to detach themselves from the influence of their precursors by imitating their work, “through ironic recoding or, ... ‘trans-contextualizing’”, as Hutcheon puts it (101). What she means by this is that parody should stress the difference, or distance, from its source rather than the similarities.

The use of irony is central to the genre of parody. Irony is defined by Bran Nicol as “a non-literal usage of language, where what is said is contradicted by what is meant (either deliberately or unwittingly) or what is said is subverted by the particular context in which it is said” (13). This places certain demands on the reader; to understand what the text is really saying, one cannot take it at face value but is forced to decode the layers of meaning. Hutcheon argues that the “implied distance” between the parody and the source text is usually signalled by irony, but that irony is not necessarily used in a negative way. According to Hutcheon, “irony can be playful as well as belittling; it can be critically constructive as well as destructive. The pleasure of parody's irony comes

not from humor in particular but from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual ‘bouncing’ ... between complicity and distance” (32). Irony, then, is a versatile device which allows writers to link their work to earlier ones while maintaining a distance. This ironic distance is the difference which makes parody not just an imitation of the source, but sets it apart and offers a comment. Nicol states that “[i]rony enables writers to continue working within particular discourses while simultaneously managing to contest them” (32), which strengthens the argument that parody is a way for writers to break with the past, even though it is done by imitating earlier works or genres.

Irony and parody are also important features of post-modernism, a movement which, just like parody, resists a fixed definition. Some of the main features of post-modern literature are self-reflexivity, meta-fiction, and the idea that the world can only be understood through language. Meta-fiction can be described as fiction which is self-conscious, “[drawing] attention to its own status as writing” (Peck and Coyle 137). Other important characteristics of post-modernist fiction include mixing different genres, and jumbling high and low culture (137). It also represents a step away from realism and the notion that reality can, and should, be accurately reproduced in art and literature (Nicol 18). Instead, post-modernism stresses the notion that fiction is a ‘construction’, not a ‘transcription’ (Nicol 23), often using unreliable narrators. It implies that images and reality are one and the same. Charles Jencks states that to qualify as post-modernist, a work should be what he calls ‘double-coded’ (qtd in Nicol 15). Originally used in the context of architecture, double-coding means the bringing together of two spheres, old and new, and it is this mode of “doing two things at the same time” which makes it “an ironic technique” (Nicol 15). This also links in neatly with theories on parody and intertextuality, as they do exactly this, merge new and old and bring together different spheres. According to Umberto Eco, post-modernism emerges when writers recognise this:

[They] cannot go any further without lapsing into silence. They reach this point because in the pursuit of the new they have to “destroy” the past. However, art must continue, and so the only solution for those who come after the modernists is to engage with the past once again. ... The renewed engagement with the past is made possible through the use of irony, paradoxically

saying something new, but only by acknowledging that it has already been said. (qtd in Nicol 14)

This idea that the only way to move forward is to re-engage with the past through irony further indicates that parody is a vital part of post-modern fiction. Nabokov did not consider himself a post-modernist writer, largely because he was not aware of the movement after having left the United States in the early sixties (Couturier 248). However, many of his works, and particularly *Lolita*, display several post-modernist features earlier mentioned, such as unreliable narration, mixing high and low culture, double-coding, self-reflexivity and, above all, parody. The idea that Nabokov's work should be situated within post-modernist fiction is corroborated by Richard Poirier in an essay called "The Politics of Self-Parody", published in *The Partisan Review* in 1968. He links parody and post-modernism, describing the new style of fiction as "a literature of self-parody that makes fun of itself as it goes along", using Nabokov as one of his prime examples (qtd in Dentith 154).

Placing *Lolita* in relation to this discussion of post-modernism and parody, this essay will examine how Nabokov skilfully parodies genres and cultural practices in order to play his 'diabolical game', leading the reader into his "traps". These traps, which Nabokov has placed throughout *Lolita*, have been discussed by Appel, who points out that "[t]he reader, in trying to make this kind of novel conform to his vision, is continually manipulated by the book, trapped by the parodies which reveal the speciousness or superficiality of his assumptions, the commonplace qualities of his expectations" (217-218). This ties in with the post-modernist idea that literature does not represent reality, and cannot be understood or interpreted as a transcription of reality; a literary work is simply a construction, which can only be made sense of in relation to itself and other texts, not the real world. According to Appel, this meta-fictional multi-layering is connected to parody because "parody and self-parody suspend the possibility of a fully "realistic" fiction, since their referents are either other literary works or themselves, and not the world of objective reality" (216). Furthermore, the multi-layered structure of *Lolita's* parody, and the self-reflexivity of the text, hint to an outside, authorial force to have "constructed" the involuted work, and as will be shown, Nabokov finds different ways of covertly putting himself into the text. *Lolita* is set up

like a multi-layered labyrinth in which the reader gets entangled, and it is this that constitutes Nabokov's carefully crafted game, designed to challenge the reader's desire to find the “truth”, ultimately showing that there is no such thing as truth in fiction.

Doppelgänger parody

“The good reader is my brother, my double.”

(Nabokov qtd in Meyer 1)

As earlier stated, parody can allow a writer to engage with precursor texts and genres, imitating them while at the same time contesting them. Irony is a central part of parody, and essentially, it enables writers to say two or more things simultaneously, creating a layer of meaning which the reader has to transcend in order to fully understand the work. *Lolita* is undeniably a multi-layered novel, double-coded in the way that it brings together old and new in the form of parodying well established genres and cultural practices; in fact, ‘multi-layered’ and ‘double’ are two words which are central to the make-up of the novel. The novel contains a multitude of mirrorings and pairings, but most central of all devices is the parody of the Doppelgänger genre. From Humbert's first encounter with Lolita and throughout the novel, the allusions to Humbert's “double” Clare Quilty appear with increasing frequency. On the first reading of *Lolita*, these clues to the identity of Humbert's shadow may easily be overlooked; however, on closer examination and with the knowledge of the novel's ending, the references to Quilty become obvious and are found to be scattered all over the text. Just as Humbert does, the reader can retrace the appearances of Quilty, realizing that he has been enmeshed in the narrative all along.

To analyse how Nabokov (and Humbert, as he is narrating his own confession) parodies the Romantic Doppelgänger genre, it is first necessary to give a short background, explaining the key concepts and history of it. The double as a literary device has its origins in myth and folklore, and, as noted by Marcus, the concept of a

“shadow” or second self in some form can be found in almost every culture all over the world (187). He also states that traditionally, seeing one's own double was considered a bad omen, the Doppelgänger representing the pre-mature departure of the soul from the body, and as such, a harbinger of death (192). The popularity of Doppelgänger stories peaked during the Romantic period in the nineteenth century, partly due to a rising interest in the supernatural and the unconscious (Marcus 187). Fernandez-Santiago has observed that there are certain features which are commonly used in Romantic Doppelgänger narratives; for example, the protagonist is almost always male, intellectual, without strong friendships or family ties, and has ample financial means (73). As pointed out by Marcus, the Doppelgänger is not identical to his host in every respect; the differences are what cause the tensions and frictions that are always present in double narratives (191). Furthermore, Marcus highlights how these tensions are often manifested in a bitter rivalry between the host and the double, both struggling for domination over the other (192). The power struggle typically culminates in a confrontation where the original, the double, or both die as they cannot co-exist (192).

The Doppelgänger is a recurring theme in Nabokov's novels; apart from *Lolita*, he parodies the conventions of the genre in both *Despair* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, as pointed out by Meyer (3). However, none of these doubles can be said to be true examples of the Romantic Doppelgänger genre, further highlighting Nabokov's parody of it. He imitates, but keeps an ironic distance to the source, which, as earlier stated, is an important feature of parody. Humbert, the narrator and protagonist, displays all the features of the typical host earlier mentioned: He is male; he is a scholar, and regards himself as a great artist; he, although not wealthy, is financially secure; lastly, he does not have any close friendships or strong family ties. One could argue that the last criterion does not fit; after all, Humbert is married (twice) and has several friends. However, inwardly he quietly despises them all and thinks himself superior, which shows that, in reality, he is a rather lonely figure. Thus, Humbert can be said to be the typical “original” of a Romantic Doppelgänger narrative.

Even though Humbert can be considered a typical “host”, his double, Clare Quilty, does not entirely conform to the conventions of the Romantic Doppelgänger, although displaying several of its features. According to Alter, there are two different

types of doubles, the “split” and the “double proper”. The double proper, also called the alter-ego, “encounters a disturbing mirror-image in the external world” (qtd in Fernandez-Santiago 72), and is by Herdman defined as only having an existence in relation to the original (14). The double proper is often identical to the original, a “mirror-image” or duplication of the host. The other type of double, the split, is by Alter described as “a self divided inwardly” (qtd in Fernandez-Santiago 72), and may refer to divided or schizophrenic characters. In this case, the double represents the dark sides that the protagonist has repressed, often embodied in an evil and vengeful character without any resemblance to his original (Faurholt). Thus, the double proper represents absolute likeness, while the split double represents complete contrast. However, neither the “split” nor the “double proper” is applicable to Quilty. Herdman proposes a third type of Doppelgänger, the “quasi-double”. The main difference between doubles proper and quasi-doubles is that the latter have an independent and unambiguous existence, existing in their own right, but may reflect some aspect of the original “in a strengthened form”, and can be “complementary opposites” to their host, reflecting “hostility and conflict, yet at the same time mutual dependence and interlocked destinies” (Herdman 14-15). Quilty could be considered a quasi-double, having an independent existence in relation to Humbert, while simultaneously reflecting certain aspects of him, namely the darker sides of Humbert that he tries to repress. While Humbert views himself as a true artist and a poet with the power to eternalise Lolita's nymphic qualities in his art, he projects all his self-loathing and guilt onto Quilty, whom he thinks of as a mediocre playwright and a simple, sleazy pornographer; Quilty embodies the qualities that Humbert is afraid to admit to himself that he too may possess.

The link between Edgar Allan Poe and *Lolita* has been observed by Appel (221), and a closer examination reveals that Poe's works permeate *Lolita*; Nabokov alludes heavily to his precursor and parodies him throughout the novel. In particular, the short Doppelgänger story *William Wilson* largely serves as a template for the unusual doubling of Humbert and Quilty in *Lolita*. *William Wilson* is not a typical double tale, but turns the conventions of the genre around, with the alter ego serving as the protagonist's conscience instead of representing his repressed, dark sides (Appel 230).

Although Appel has touched upon these links to Poe and *William Wilson* in *Lolita*, he has not commented on the more specific similarities between the works. There are several shared features between Humbert Humbert and William Wilson, the first being the alliteration in their names (H.H – W.W). Both are writing their confessions under pseudonyms, their real names being of “unparalleled infamy” (Poe 3) because of their “unpardonable crime[s]” (3). They are both weak, selfish and morally corrupt characters, believing that they are victims of a fate which they cannot escape, a typical feature of Romantic Doppelgänger narratives, where the inability for protagonists to escape their own dark nature (embodied in a Doppelgänger), is a “literary expression of fate” (Fernandez-Santiago 72). In Humbert's case, he is sure his misfortunes are caused by “that devil of mine” (61), which he calls Aubrey McFate, after a girl on Lolita's class list. Likewise, Wilson declares himself to be “the slave of circumstances beyond human control” (3). This shows that they are both reluctant to assume responsibility for their own actions, one reason for transferring their own guilt onto a double.

Nabokov has not only parodied *William Wilson* in *Lolita*, but also weaves allusions to other works by Poe into his narrative. A rather glaring link to Poe is Humbert's story of his unfulfilled childhood love, a girl named Annabel Leigh, who dies shortly after their summer together by the French Riviera. As suggested by Appel, this passage is modelled entirely upon Poe's sentimental poem “Annabel Lee”, about adolescent love in a “kingdom by the sea”, ending with the death of Annabel (221). Humbert sees something of Annabel in Lolita, and calls their long and winding road trips a “search for a Kingdom by the Sea, a Sublimated Riviera, or whatnot” (188). Furthermore, Humbert refers to himself several times as “Edgar H. Humbert”, making his parody of Poe even more obvious. Humbert gives himself several different names, and often refers to himself in third person, indicating a separation of the self. His first name and surname are the same, Humbert Humbert, and this doubling expresses his duality, his struggle between being “good”, and the urges that threaten to ruin him.¹ The name Humbert is in itself a pun, as pointed out by Appel, on the French word “ombre” - meaning “shadow” (207). However, he does not carry the connection any further. I

1 While choosing his pseudonym, Humbert is toying with several options: Otto Otto, Lambert Lambert and Mesmer Mesmer (351), the latter being a reference to Franz Mesmer, the inventor of mesmerism (animal magnetism), a type of suggestion popular during the Romantic period.

would argue that Humbert's name suggests that even though he is being “shadowed” by his double, there is also darkness within himself. Being near Lolita, Humbert casts a shadow over her existence too: “She had entered my world, umber and black Humberland” (187).

Quilty snatches Lolita from Humbert while she is admitted to hospital, and the heartbroken Humbert resolves to search for any possible hints to the identity of his antagonist by retracing his steps and going back to all the motels he and Lolita stayed at during their road trip. In doing so, Humbert discovers that Quilty has left a plenitude of mocking clues for him, in the form of “insulting pseudonyms” (283) in the motels' registration books. After tracking down a young woman employed at one of the motels and cornering her on a dark, deserted street, Humbert, when pushing her for information about Quilty, only gets the answer: “He is your brother” (283). Mirroring the experience of William Wilson, Humbert, while initially having renounced any similarities to his persecutor, gradually becomes aware of them: “The clues he left did not establish his identity, but they reflected his 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.” (284) This mimicry and mockery further establishes Quilty as Humbert's double, and, like in the Romantic Doppelgänger narratives, they are rivals, struggling to dominate each other. Not only has Quilty taken Humbert's love away from him, but also takes pleasure in teasing Humbert, engaging him in a “cryptogrammatic paperchase” (284), challenging Humbert's scholarship. Humbert states that Quilty “succeeded in thoroughly enmeshing me and my thrashing anguish in his demoniacal game” (284). This mirrors the “diabolical game” Nabokov is playing with his reader, casting Quilty not only as Humbert's double, but also as Nabokov's alter ego within the text.

Another way Nabokov plants himself within the narrative is through Quilty's assistant, Vivian Darkbloom, an anagram of Vladimir Nabokov (Appel 216). Darkbloom is listed as Quilty's collaborator on *The Lady who Loved Lightning*, and in the foreword mentioned as having written a biography on Quilty entitled *My Cue*, after Quilty's nickname (Nabokov 2). The word “cue” can, among other things, mean a signal or direction for an actor, or “the part assigned one to play at a particular juncture” (OED). This is emphasised in the confrontation scene at Pavor Manor, where Humbert,

after having killed Quilty, states: “This, I said to myself, was the end of the ingenious play staged for me by Quilty” (348). Humbert feels as though he has been merely an actor, playing out a role scripted by Quilty, and not in control of his own fate. Quilty being called Cue also provides yet another intertextual link to *William Wilson*: “His [the doubles] cue, which was to perfect an imitation of myself, lay both in words and in actions; and most admirably did he play his part” (10). Here, it is not the host, like in *Lolita*, playing a part, but the double; a role reversal which serves to mark an ironic difference between source and parody.

Humbert, in writing his confession, skilfully alludes to Quilty throughout the story; but it is not until the end, after Humbert has received Lolita's letter and goes to see her, that the identity of the shadow that has haunted and taunted him is revealed to him: “I, too, had known it, without knowing it, all along ... Quietly the fusion took place” (310). Even after Humbert has discovered Quilty's identity, the reader is left in the dark, with Humbert teasingly saying that the name will have been guessed by “the astute reader” (310) long ago, although the clues are so obscure that hardly any reader could realistically be expected to have discovered Quilty's identity at this point. As Appel observes (233), the “waterproof” (310) flashing through Humbert's mind is a hint for the reader, who may remember an earlier scene by Hourglass Lake, where Charlotte is bragging about Humbert's new, waterproof watch, and Jean Farlow is talking about Quilty's uncle Ivor, mentioning him by first name only: “He really is a freak, that man. Last time he told me a completely indecent story about his nephew. It appears -” (100). But Jean is interrupted before she reveals Clare Quilty's name. There are several more hints to be found, in the form of puns: Quilty's name is hidden in a letter to Lolita from her friend Mona Dahl, partly written in French, “il faut qu'il t'y mène” (253), but the clue to Quilty's identity is lost on Humbert, who only comments on what a “tounge-twister” qu'il t'y is. Furthermore, as Appel has also remarked, Humbert sees “Lolita playing a double game” (268) of tennis, (unbeknownst to Humbert her partner is Quilty), not only referring to the tennis, but also alluding to the Doppelgänger parody (221). Quilty's name also points to his guilt: Quilty – guilty.

These scattered clues, and the insinuation that any observant reader will have guessed the answer already, constitutes another one of Nabokov's “games”. It is a trap,

namely what Appel calls the “detective trap” (233), echoing the name Humbert gives his shadow when he still believes he is being followed by a private detective: Detective Trapp. The trap is a form of prolepsis; Nabokov is anticipating the reader's expectations and parodies them. Humbert leading his reader into a hunt for clues to solve the mystery is yet another link to Poe; it parodies his “tale of ratiocination”, or detective story² (Appel 232). Apart from these clues, there are a number of motifs for the reader to uncover and interpret. One such recurring element is the number 342; Lolita lives with her mother on 342 Lawn Street; in *The Enchanted Hunters* Humbert and Lolita stay in room 342, and, during their road trips, they stay in a total of 342 motels and hotels. Ultimately, this does not have any symbolic value; it is just another one of Nabokov's traps. The reader on a quest to find out the significance of 342 will only lose himself in Nabokov's textual labyrinth, constructed to point out his hate of symbols, and the futility of them, as he remarks in his comment on *Lolita*: “everybody should know that I detest symbols” (Nabokov 357).

In Romantic Doppelgänger narratives, a final, fatal confrontation between the original and the double is inevitable; their struggle for domination over each other means that they cannot co-exist. After finding out Quilty's identity from Lolita, Humbert makes his way to Pavor Manor, Quilty's crumbling mansion. Humbert's description of his drive up to the house evokes Poe's “falling House of Usher” (Appel 222): “For a couple of minutes all was dank, dark, dense forest. Then, Pavor Manor, a wooden house with a turret, arose in a circular clearing” (333). Once inside the house, Humbert encounters Quilty sweeping by in a “purple bathrobe” (335), just like one of Humbert's; their similarities are becoming increasingly apparent. This also mirrors a scene in *William Wilson*, where the double appears “habited in a white ... morningfrock, cut in the novel fashion of the one [William Wilson] wore at the moment” (13). Although Quilty's and Humbert's identical bathrobes have been noted by Appel (222), he does not mention the matching bathrobes in *William Wilson*. As Humbert has projected his guilt onto Quilty, who represents all his weaknesses, it is necessary for Humbert to kill him. Humbert's confession is written as a defence, and in order to absolve himself from guilt,

2 Ratiocination = “a reasoned train of thought” (Merriam Webster). *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* was said by Poe to be his first tale of ratiocination, and by many considered to be the world's first detective story. (Merriam Webster)

he has to “exorcise” his evil self.

The confrontation is a farcical spectacle; Humbert makes Quilty read out his death sentence in the form of a poem, but Quilty refuses his role as a symbol for Humbert's wrongdoings: “I'm not responsible for the rapes of others. Absurd!” (339; Appel 231). Humbert describes the two of them wrestling: “I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us.” (340), showing that they are not clearly distinguishable, and not easily separated into “good” and “evil” (Appel 229). A wild chase through the mansion ensues, with Humbert following Quilty “with a kind of double, triple, kangaroo jump” (345), and instead of the usual serious and tragic ending of a Romantic Doppelgänger story, the scene turns into absurd comedy, with Quilty seemingly refusing to die. Every time Humbert shoots him, Quilty's face twitches “in an absurd, clownish manner”, and after shooting him in his bed at close range “a big pink bubble with juvenile connotations formed on his lips, grew to the size of a toy balloon, and vanished” (346).

After the murder, Humbert crosses over to the wrong side of the road while driving away, “that queer mirror side” (349). However, guilt is not this easy to get rid of, and even after killing him, Humbert still feels “all covered with Quilty” (349) and states that “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” (347). Here, Nabokov is finally showing the reader the over-simplicity of the idea of a “neatly divisible self” (Appel 231), and that the ambiguities of identity cannot be explained that easily, yet again pointing out the impossibility of a verifiable truth. Humbert does not achieve the anticipated release from killing his “evil self”, and thus, Nabokov once more defies the reader's expectations.

Romance parody

The romance novel may seem like a worn out genre, difficult to take seriously. This may be exactly the reason why Nabokov takes on the challenge of updating it in *Lolita*; through parody he can refresh themes which can seem trite and over-used. This has been

noted by Frosch, who claims that “*Lolita* can only be a love story through being a parody of love stories” (50). To analyse just how *Lolita* parodies the romance genre, it is necessary to define what “romance” means. In its broadest sense, Regis states, the term includes all fiction where the main focus lies on emotion, and the plot centres around a protagonist overcoming obstacles to reach his or her goal; furthermore, the story is usually set in an “idealized world” (20). This definition would encompass such different sub-genres as medieval romance, Gothic romance, and modern Harlequin romances (20). However, a more narrow definition of romance will be used for this analysis, namely the fairly modern romantic novel which centres around a love story, focussing on “love, courtship, and marriage” (Kay Mussel qtd in Regis 22). This definition still includes a wide variety of novels, ranging from *Pride and Prejudice* to the books about Bridget Jones to use an example. These novels may seem to be very different, but, as Linke has pointed out, are all based on “the same narrative archetype” (qtd in Regis 23), following a specific structure and containing certain “narrative elements” (Regis 22).

Frosch demonstrates how the plot in *Lolita* adheres to structures typical of romance novels: in essence, it is a series of “quests”, or “hunts”, and all the anxieties which these entail (39). Firstly, Humbert is on a quest to possess Lolita, in which there are “sexual obstacles” to be overcome (39). Once he has successfully won her over, the problem is to keep her, and Humbert is riddled with jealousy and fear of losing his love. Furthermore, there is also the theme of revenge, after Lolita has been snatched away from Humbert by Quilty (39). Some features of the typical romance novel are “reversed” in *Lolita*, thus resulting in the opposite of the intended effect. According to Regis, the typical romance novel always focuses on the heroine (23); in *Lolita*, the roles have been switched, and although Humbert's memoir is largely about Lolita, it is a very selfish and one-sided account. Regis emphasises that the heroine's “desires are central” in romance novels (29), but Lolita's needs are neglected by Humbert, whose desires instead take centre-stage in *Lolita*. This shows how Nabokov imitates the structures and features of romance novels, but by reversing them he stresses the differences rather than the similarities. This “ironic distance”, as earlier mentioned, makes parody parody and not just imitation.

Roughly, *Lolita* can be divided into two parts. The first part is concerned with

Humbert's romantic pursuit of Lolita, and the second part deals with the “successful quest's consequences”, as Walter puts it (124). This divide is reflected in the two-fold nature which can be found in both Humbert and Lolita: Humbert is both the abhorrent paedophile driven by selfish lust, and later the imprisoned poet, full of remorse for what he has done; in Lolita, there is the dichotomy between Humbert's idealised nymphet, and the common, sometimes vulgar, teenager. This two-part construction is also another way for Nabokov to play his game with the reader; he places a trap, builds up the reader's expectations, then pulls the mat from under his feet. As observed by Walter, the first part of the novel entices the reader with the promise of explicit, and illicit, sex scenes (130). The reputation of the book as pornography would have been a reason for some readers to pick it up; however, these expectations of titillation are what makes the reader fall into in Nabokov's trap.

After a lengthy build-up, the first part concludes with the consummation of Humbert's and Lolita's relationship at The Enchanted Hunters, but instead of describing the act, Humbert's only comment is that “these are irrelevant matters; I am not concerned with so-called “sex” at all. Anybody can imagine those elements of animality. A greater endeavour lures me on: to fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (151). Thus, Nabokov has successfully exposed the unimaginative expectations of the reader who was only there because of the promise of some steamy action. This passage also reveals what seems to be the general consensus among critics of what the book is “about”, namely art, not sex (Brenda Megerle qtd in Walter 125). The many games that Nabokov continually plays with his reader have been interpreted by Frosch as a way for him to “manipulat[e] conventions” (52), and to stray from the usually more serious tone of the typical romantic novel (52). Furthermore, Nabokov's style of writing and playful language in *Lolita*, full of puns and word-play, give the novel a comical feel which serves to “empty out myth and romance” (Frosch 51), in other words, it allows Nabokov to write a romance which is actually not romantic at all.

Nabokov was an avid butterfly collector, and it has been suggested by Appel that this interest is the source of the underlying pattern of butterflies in *Lolita* (208). The connections are clear; like a butterfly collector hunts butterflies, Humbert hunts nymphets, and like pinning and mounting a butterfly to preserve it, Humbert endeavours

to eternalise Lolita in his art. The word ‘nymphet’ also has connotations to butterflies: a nymph can be a butterfly (or any insect) undergoing metamorphosis, and as Appel points out, “everything in *Lolita* is constantly in the process of metamorphosis” (209). This applies to several aspects of the novel: Lolita transforms into a woman; Humbert’s lust turns into love; the “notes” Humbert puts together to use at his trial becomes “a redeeming work of art” (Appel 209). Nabokov also hides little hints to the butterfly theme in the text, such as one of the pseudonyms left behind by Quilty in a motel register: “Morris Schmetterling” (schmetterling meaning butterfly in German) (285).

To Humbert, Lolita had been a fantasy, but by fulfilling his fantasy, he also ruins it, like touching a butterfly may destroy its wings. In his selfish pursuit of his romantic ideal, Humbert disregards the “real” Lolita, and the consequences of his actions. As Walter describes it: “By finally acting out his fantasies with his romantic ideal, Humbert has— in effect—murdered her as well” (123). With the revelation of Quilty’s identity, Humbert also recognises his own guilt, and himself as a “pornographic exploiter ... and false artist who superimposes art on reality” (Meyer 8). It is at this moment that Humbert becomes aware that he is not much better than Quilty; he understands that he has robbed Lolita of her childhood, and that “even the most miserable of family lives was better than the parody of incest, which, in the long run, was the best [he] could offer the waif” (327). In seeing the heavily pregnant, pale, worn-out Lolita, and yet realising that he still loves her, Humbert’s metamorphosis from lustful pervert to remorseful poet takes place. Of course, Humbert has considered himself a great poet and artist all along. However, with the new awareness that Lolita has a reality beyond his fantasy, and that he not only has destroyed the idealized Lolita, but the real Lolita too, he understands that the only way to atone for his sins and give Lolita her life back is through immortalising her in his art: “And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita” (352). Humbert cannot possess Lolita in real life, but they will forever be together in his memoir.

The romance novel typically features a happy, or at least optimistic, ending (Regis 21); however, this is not the case in *Lolita*. There is no happy ending to be had for neither Humbert, nor Lolita; in the foreword we learn that Lolita has died giving birth to a stillborn girl at age 17 (2), and Humbert dies of a heart attack while awaiting

trial (1). Thus, already from the outset, the reader is aware of the impossibility of a happy ending. This deviation from the typical romance plot structure is another example of Hutcheon's idea of parody as an imitation through “ironic re-coding” (101), emphasising the difference from the source instead of the similarities. Another way in which *Lolita* differs from the traditional romantic novel is through the unconventional and shocking pair of lovers. Most readers, while condemning Humbert and his abuse of Lolita, will be manipulated into feeling sympathy for him, which can be seen as another one of Nabokov's little games, a trap for the reader to fall into when he realises that he has taken the side of a child-rapist and murderer, not exactly the typical hero of a romance novel.

Parody of Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis in general, and Freud in particular, are also targets of Nabokov's parody. Here, the parody has more of a critical edge than the Doppelgänger and romance parodies, perhaps unsurprisingly considering Nabokov's statement that he has an “old feud with Freudian voodooism” (Nabokov 357). Nabokov openly shows his disdain for the discipline, and lets Humbert voice his contempt for psychoanalysis and doctors throughout the novel. There are many references to Freud; while searching for Lolita's abductor, Humbert tells of how he “pulled the pistol's foreskin back, and then enjoyed the orgasm of the crushed trigger: I was always a good little follower of the Viennese medicine man”(313), and when Humbert first encounters Quilty at The Enchanted Hunters, he describes him as “staring at Lolita over his dead cigar” (156), an obvious allusion to Freud. Nabokov is aware that many of his readers, who, accustomed to the “standardized symbols of the psychoanalytic racket” (325), will apply Freud's theories to interpret the novel, and predicts and pre-empt their conclusions, another example of his many traps. Ultimately, Nabokov is trying to resist the idea that everything can be explained or predicted by psychoanalysis; this is emphasised in the fictional foreword which states that “a great work of art is of course always original, and thus by its very

nature should come as a more or less shocking surprise” (3), clarifying his stance that art cannot, and should not be predicted. Ingham points out that psychoanalysis may threaten “the autonomy of the artist and the magic of art” (28), and these are the limitations which Nabokov rebels against, through parody, which is a way for him to counter-act the threats that psychoanalysis poses.

The foreword predicts that *Lolita* as a case study will become “a classic in psychiatric circles” (3), and, as suggested by Appel, Nabokov parodies the case study by giving Humbert a childhood trauma (the romance with Annabel), which would be the cause of his attraction to nymphets (220). However, this “case study” is rather oversimplistic, and could be seen as a way for Nabokov to highlight what can be considered to be the reductive and ridiculous aspects of psychoanalysis. Humbert refers to “the able psychiatrist who studies my case” (188), and predicts that he will expect him to, driven by some deep urge or compulsion, take Lolita to the seaside, and there, find release from his “subconscious obsession” (188) with his unfulfilled childhood love. Humbert admits that, of course, he *did* search for a “Kingdom by the Sea”, but, making it apparent that he is always on step ahead of the reader's expectations, not because of some subconscious impulse, but that it was a completely rational decision on his part.

Humbert calls himself “King Sigmund the Second” (142), and divulges his love of fooling doctors, which he discovers when admitted to a psychiatric hospital:

I discovered there was an endless source of robust enjoyment in trifling with psychiatrists: cunningly leading them on; never letting them see that you know all the tricks of the trade; inventing for them elaborate dreams, pure classics in style (which make them, the dream-extortionists, dream and wake up shrieking); teasing them with fake “primal scenes”; and never allowing them the slightest glimpse of one's real sexual predicament. (Nabokov 36)

In this passage, Humbert can be understood to be Nabokov's stand-in, and the psychiatrists represent his readers, eager to analyse and interpret him and his text. Just as Humbert takes pleasure in playing tricks on his psychiatrists, Nabokov enjoys teasing and leading his readers on, right into his carefully placed traps. Furthermore, the invention on Humbert's part of dreams and primal scenes is not unlike the way Nabokov constructs his narrative, yet again reminding the reader of its fictionality.

Another way in which Nabokov parodies Freud and the case study has been

observed by Ingham, who has called attention to the likenesses of Freud's criticised "Dora case" and the characters in *Lolita* (42). There are certainly a number of similarities to be found. Firstly, Lolita's real name is Dolores, not entirely unlike Dora. Furthermore, Lolita was twelve when meeting Humbert, and as Mahony remarks, Dora was only thirteen when she was first sexually abused by Herr K., a family friend whose wife Dora's father was having an affair with (8). Herr K's advances persisted; however, Dora's father turned a blind eye to the situation, and Dora felt that her father was giving her to Herr K. as a kind of "consolation prize" for having taken his wife (Mahony 10). Neither did her mother intervene (12). Suffering from, among other things, depression, Dora began therapy with Freud when she was eighteen, but the therapy was not a success (Mahony 13). Shockingly enough, Mahony explains, Freud took the side of Herr K., stating that the best for everyone concerned would be for Dora to give in to Herr K's advances, and to marry him (14). Additionally, Freud also maintained that Dora was transferring her supposedly affectionate feelings for Herr K. onto Freud himself (Mahony 33). Not surprisingly, Dora terminated her therapy sessions with Freud shortly after.

In Ingham's analysis of *Lolita* as being based on, and parodying the Dora case, he puts forward the idea that Humbert represents Dora's father, Quilty Herr K., and, naturally, Lolita represents Dora (43). He also believes that Quilty not only represents Herr K., but also Freud himself, who "haunts the text" in the same way Quilty haunts Humbert (41). As evidence, Ingham brings forward Quilty's play *The Enchanted Hunters*, in which, according to Ingham, the characters not only represent the characters of *Lolita*, but also the people in the Dora case (44). As the author of the play, Quilty is like Freud, super-imposing his prurient fantasies on the characters (44). The banal message of the play, that "mirage and reality merge in love" (Nabokov 228), is seen by Ingham as Nabokov's take on "Freud's vulgar reductionism" (44); the play in itself can be considered a parody of the Dora case study.

Nevertheless, I would like to contest the notion that Humbert only represents Dora's father, and that Quilty represents Herr K. and Freud. Instead, I propose that all the male figures in the Dora case, Herr K., Freud, and Dora's father, are merged in Humbert. He takes the place of Dora's father, and just like him, Humbert fails in his

fatherly duties towards his (step-)daughter, allowing the abuse to continue. Dora nurses her father when he is ill (Mahony 7); similarly, Lolita tends to the needs of Humbert. The likeness between Herr K. and Humbert is even more striking; they are both middle-aged men, attracted to prepubescent girls, and both believe that their victims invite their advances and want their attention (Mahony 66). One incident between Herr K. and Dora is mirrored in *Lolita*; at fifteen, Dora was propositioned by Herr K. in a wooded area by a lake, an experience which traumatized her (Ingham 43; Mahony 11). Correspondingly, Humbert is scheming to lure Lolita into the woods by Hour Glass Lake with him, and have “a quiet little orgy” (58-59).

Finally, Humbert also represents Freud, who in his own way abused Dora, through writing and publishing the case history (*Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*), in which he makes her older, and forces his patriarchal, phallogocentric interpretations on her (Mahony 9,35). Furthermore, Freud seems more concerned about making Dora's case fit into his theories on hysteria than treating her, and is moulding her to suit his needs. Likewise, Humbert has an idealized picture of Lolita, which does not correspond to the real Dolores. In writing his confession, or memoir, he is subjecting her to his fantasies, and shaping her accordingly. In his pursuit to once and for all “fix” her nymphic “magic” in his art, he fails to realise the harm he is doing to her. This is again showing the multiple layers of Humbert; while fiercely attacking psychoanalysis, which he himself represents, he is in fact attacking himself. In casting Humbert as Freud, Nabokov is free to parody Freud and his practices, while simultaneously showing the conflicting nature in Humbert. Parodying psychoanalysis lets Nabokov contest the idea that everything must mean something, or have a symbolic value. It is also a way for him to rebel against psychoanalysis reducing art to a sublimation of the artist's repressed urges, which threatens the artist's creative freedom.

Conclusion

The aim of this essay has been to examine what function and significance parody has in *Lolita*; the novel is such a mix-up of different genres (and parodies of these) that it is hard to put it into a single category, and this corroborates one of the central themes of it, namely the resistance of the work to be categorised or interpreted. Although Nabokov is working within specific genres, or traditions, he manages to break free from them at the same time, through parodying them. This shows how parody enables writers to escape the influence of precursors, and to be original while still working in well-worn genres. As shown, parody always relies on imitation; however, the definition of the term which has been used for this essay builds on Hutcheon's idea that it should stress the differences instead of the similarities to its source, which is often done through the use of irony. In *Lolita*, Nabokov continuously imitates, but always keeps this ironic distance to the source of the parody.

The main idea of this essay is that parody functions as a game in *Lolita*. The game works as a form of prolepsis; in following the structure of a specific genre, the novel builds up the expectations of the reader, who tries to interpret the work accordingly. However, Nabokov is always one step ahead, and predicts and pre-empt the reader's conclusions, always introducing a twist, or marking out an ironic difference to show the over-simplicity of the reader's expectations. Parody is thus a way for Nabokov to challenge anyone who attempts to subject *Lolita* to their interpretations. In order to play this game, Nabokov has constructed *Lolita* as a multi-layered labyrinth laced with a number of traps to catch out the reader. As earlier discussed, parody does not need to criticise its source, and this mostly holds true for the parodies in *Lolita*. In parodying the Doppelgänger genre and the romance novel, Nabokov is not attacking them, but only use them as a means to play his game with the reader, and lead him into his traps. However, the parody of Freud and psychoanalysis is different; here, Nabokov uses parody to rebel against the threat that psychoanalysis poses to the artist's creative freedom, and openly mocks his precursor, as well as the reader who tries to apply Freudian theories to interpret the novel. Humbert bursts out “Darling, this is only a game!” (19), and this is essentially what Nabokov is trying to say with *Lolita*; there is no hidden meaning or symbolic value, it is all just artistic vision at play. The game is

constructed to challenge the reader's assumptions and attempts at interpretation, and to show the futility of these. In realising this, the reader finds the exit of Nabokov's labyrinth, and can become an equal participant in the game.

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