

From Victim to Vixen

*The Transformation of Dolores Haze Through
the Adaptations of Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita*

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Introduction

“Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.” (Nabokov 9) are the opening lines of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, widely recognized and teetering on the precipice of both fame and infamy. It comes as no surprise that these particular lines consistently emerge as a central theme in academic discourses, affirming its enduring significance and frequent invocation within critical discussions and analyses. While the opening lines of Nabokov's *Lolita* encapsulate the novel's principal themes, such as obsession and manipulation through narration, it also serves as a poignant introduction to the work's core ideas. As well as shedding light on the unrelenting fixation on the central character, Lolita, they simultaneously serve as a way to convey the novel's narrative perspective, emphasizing how Humbert Humbert, the adult male protagonist, who is also the perpetrator of sexual abuse, the narrator. With the articulation of "Lo-lee-ta" and the exposition of this pet name, it becomes evident how he symbolically dissects the authentic character of Dolores; by doing so, he engages in an act of dehumanisation, imposing his own distorted perceptions onto her. By establishing Humbert as the storyteller - granting the authority over the narrative - this excerpt perfectly sets the tone of *Lolita* and foreshadows its themes of objectification, sexualisation and power imbalances.

Lolita, due to its provocative themes, has remained a subject of controversy throughout its history. Whether we delve into the troublesome publishing journey of the novel or its various cinematic adaptations, Nabokov's story has experienced multiple resurgences, consistently thrusting itself into the centre of discourse and scrutiny on each occasion. Additionally, in conjunction with the book's more recent return to the spotlight, a parallel phenomenon unfolds - the persistent return of the *Lolita* aesthetic. The allure of the novel's vision and its central character commenced its journey on platforms such as Tumblr in the early 2010s and persists to the present day, experiencing a recent resurgence on TikTok, occasionally under the label nymphet fashion (Appendix 1). While this phenomenon also echoes the enduring cultural impact of the novel, it's important to acknowledge that these fashion trends often culminate in the romanticisation of the source material and the abuse of Dolores Haze. Nevertheless, the character chosen as a source of inspiration for personal style often appears notably distant from the figure Vladimir Nabokov originally conceived. In these social media posts, the once innocent 12-year-old Dolores undergoes a significant transformation. She is recast as a romanticised, mature iteration, embodying a seductive, femme fatale persona adorned in pastel hues, accessorised with a pair of heart-shaped sunglasses and a lollipop (Appendix 2). This

stark departure from the original character raises thought-provoking questions about how a bratty, mischievous girl was transformed into the sex symbol she is today and whether this reimagining poses real-life issues or harm for girls who choose to embrace the trend inspired by the novel but mostly by its “unfaithful” film adaptations. To gain a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, it is vital to examine the various adaptations originating from the novel and the distinct ways in which each adaptation approached the character of Dolores. It is reasonable to assume that these portrayals significantly shape our perception of the main character and contribute to the overall ambience that envelops her.

In addition to exploring contemporary interpretations of Nabokov's *Lolita*, it is crucial to closely examine the cinematic adaptations of Stanley Kubrick and Adrian Lyne. These adaptations warrant significant attention, not only for their unique character portrayals but also because they offer valuable insights into the evolving perceptions of the narrative. Given that the story predominantly unfolds through Humbert's perspective, this analysis will place emphasis on Dolores' narrative and introduce a more nuanced analysis that considers the pervasive theme of the male gaze as it manifests throughout these interpretations. This approach aims to foster a deeper understanding of the evolving perceptions and underlying dynamics within the narrative.

Beyond examining the evolution of Dolores Haze's character across adaptations, my intention is to illuminate the broader cultural impact that these portrayals have engendered. I will also examine how the misrepresentation of the character is deeply intertwined with the broader themes of child abuse and sexualisation. Furthermore, I intend to explore the possibility of exceeding the limitations imposed by these interpretations and the potential for a reclamation of Dolores' narrative.

Initial Responses to *Lolita*

The readers' perception of the central figure, Dolores, has undergone a substantial transformation since the initial introduction of the story to the public sphere. This change is, in no small part, a result of the various adaptations of the novel and the surrounding social climate of its time. Still, even with this shift between interpretations, the strong reactions that the story consistently evokes in its audience remained unchanged throughout the years. Returning to the original work, it is evident that the appeal of Nabokov's *Lolita* remained uninterrupted. Compared to the initial week of publication, during which a meagre 100,000 copies were sold,

the novel has since achieved remarkable global sales, exceeding 50 million copies.¹ What sparked this sudden surge in sales? To understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to delve into the history of its publication and explore the factors that irrevocably altered the reputation of *Lolita*.

Ironically, despite its later success, the book came perilously close to never being published. Apart from Nabokov being on the verge of burning the whole manuscript several times, another obstacle delaying its publication was the reluctance of publishers to engage with a work that tackles such a controversial theme. After secretly reaching out to friends in major American publishing houses, Nabokov was met with a series of rejections. While garnering praise from editors who read it, and recognised *Lolita*'s literary value, none were willing to undertake its publication. One of these publishers, The Viking Press claimed, 'We would all go to jail, if the thing were published', reflecting a genuine concern shared among publishers during that period. According to Edward de Garzia's book, *Girls Lean Back Everywhere: The Law of Obscenity and the Assault on Genius*, "Not until June 1959, however, did the Supreme Court make it clear that a work could not be banned for its sexual immorality" (de Garzia 250). Adding to these already troubling circumstances, we must also acknowledge that the era of McCarthyism brought about a moral crusade, resulting in the prosecution of numerous publishers and writers. Nabokov famously referred to the book as his "time bomb" a phrase that aptly captures its controversial nature and the reception that was soon to follow.

Simultaneously, in 1953 Maurice Girodias founded the Olympia Press in Paris and began compiling a catalogue of books, written by American and British authors living in Paris. These works would later gain notoriety as "dirty books" under the Traveller's Companion series. While this infamous series of small green paperbacks, typically sold and "distributed" by American servicemen and tourists, was primarily comprised of erotic titles, it also included some of the most influential works of the period. Even as these books would eventually gain recognition as some of the most important literature of the post-war era, the reputation of the publishing house left them highly controversial in the eyes of critics. Allegedly Nabokov, was unfamiliar with the reputation of the publisher, therefore when a mutual friend, Doussia Ergaz, helped him contact Girodias, he unknowingly laid the foundation the of drama that would follow the perception of the book for years to come. Although Girodias, who was the first to publish English versions of the works of Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet understood the

¹ Nicolas Valazza, Samuel N. Rosenberg. "Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov (1955)." Omeka RSS, bannedbooks.indiana.edu/items/show/36.

importance of being handed the manuscript and took on the challenge to publish the book, he doubted it would ever achieve critical acclaim. Indeed, in Issue 37 of *The Evergreen Review* he mentioned that Nabokov himself harboured doubts about the prospect of its publication in America and expressed concerns over the potential for *Lolita* becoming a “success de scandale” – a fate that would deeply trouble him (Girodias 1998). *Lolita* made its debut a few weeks later, in September 1955; however, at the time it went largely unnoticed and unreviewed, resulting in dismal sales.

Lolita went unnoticed for a while, up until one fateful interview published in the *London Times Literary Supplement*, in which Graham Greene stated that *Lolita* was “one of the three best books of the year”, thrusting it into the spotlight. Soon enough Greene was swarmed with allegations, in particular by the editor of *Daily Express*, John Gordon, who accused him of advertising pornography. The ensuing back-and-forth debate, which allegedly ended in a drunken brawl between the two, caused quite a commotion among literary consumers and in the end ultimately heightened interest in the book. Meanwhile, Girodias acted upon a rumour suggesting that two copies of *Lolita* had been seized and subsequently released by US customs without explanation and wrote to the New York Bureau of Customs. His investigation confirmed that customs authorities deemed *Lolita* admissible in the United States, thus enabling its legitimate sale without risk of legal repercussions.

Nevertheless, Maurice Girodias had to face another challenge in France, as the French government banned *Lolita* in its English version on December 20, 1959. In an effort to challenge this ban, he attempted to contact Nabokov; however, the author casually declined to respond to this call to action, which he dubbed “lolitigation” (Girodias 1998). In a letter to Girodias, he conveyed “My moral defence of the book is the book itself. I do not feel under any obligation to do more.... On the ethical plane, it is of supreme indifference to me what opinion French, British, or any other courts, magistrates or philistine readers in general may have of my book. However, I appreciate your difficulties” (Girodias 1998). Nabokov's response to the situation and the subsequent controversies surrounding the terms of agreement quickly strained his relationship with Girodias, leading to ongoing debates that spilled onto the pages of *The Evergreen Review*.

Despite the confrontation with French authorities, *Lolita*'s popularity was not stifled, and numerous copies began to circulate in the United States. Apparently, one of these small green books landed on the coffee table of Copacabana showgirl, Rosemary Ridgewell. At a gathering hosted by *New York Mirror*'s Lee Mortimer, Ridgewell crossed paths with Walter

Minton of *G. P. Putnam's Sons* and introduced him to the book she had purchased during her trip to Paris. Having heard the rumours of Nabokov's story and the many rejections it received, Minton devoted an entire night to reading the book, ultimately persuading himself of the necessity to acquire its publishing rights. *Lolita* attained instant bestseller status in the United States following its publication on August 18, 1958. As anticipated, the books received quite a backlash from critics; however, Minton took advantage of it and used announcements that it had been banned immediately following publications abroad (in France, England, Australia, Burma, Belgium and Austria) to fuel reorders and sales. Despite receiving her share of \$22,000 of the *Lolita* royalties and acknowledgement from Walter Minton, Rosemary Ridgewell found herself the subject of mockery by the press on multiple occasions. Joyce Haber, gossip columnist of the *Los Angeles Times* described her as "a superannuated (27) nymphet... a tall (5 ft. 8 in.) slithery-blithery onetime Latin Quarter showgirl who wears a gold swizzle stick around her neck and a bubbly smile on her face. Well may she bubble" (qtd. in Weinman). If anything, this unfavourable reaction foreshadows the treatment of women whom we now associate with the *Lolita* myth.

In discussions about *Lolita*, the taboos and controversies associated with it are often at the forefront. Regardless of the fact, that these factors that undoubtedly contributed to the book's sales, they also fundamentally and irrevocably reshaped the perception of the narrative and its characters. This series of events, beginning with the publication by a publishing house of questionable repute, and culminating in numerous accusations aimed at Nabokov laid the foundation that inevitably led to the misinterpretation of the story from the outset. Still, there are deeper underlying aspects at play that contribute to the romanticization and 'aestheticization' of the narrative and its central female figure.

Understanding the "Male Gaze" Phenomenon and its Impacts on Perception

To properly assess the Hollywood interpretations that shaped the *Lolita* image we know today, this chapter will be dedicated to reviewing influential works on the phenomenon of the male gaze and its key theoretical concepts. John Berger's seminal work, *Ways of Seeing*, alongside Laura Mulvey's essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, provide a critical framework, shedding a light on how broader social attitudes are reflected on the big screen, and how the visual complexities of the movies contribute to the mischaracterization of Dolores.

Adapting a heterosexual masculine perspective, the male gaze represents the world and women through its own dominating lens, primarily depicting female characters as objects of

male desire. The concept was initially introduced by Berger, who examines the portrayal of women in classical art, emphasizing the objectification and manner of depiction that was meant to cater to a male audience. In his work, Berger analyses European nude paintings of women, where the implication that the subject is aware of being observed by the viewer is a reoccurring theme. He contrasts this with non-European traditions of depiction, where nudity lacks the same sense of exhibitionism. He also observes that these notions reflect real-life social conventions, which dictate that men and women are perceived differently: women's presence being manifested through their appearance and gestures, while men's presence extends beyond their physical form. This norm becomes internalized to the extent that women, in addition to being observed, begin to scrutinize themselves as well: "A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually" (Berger 44).

According to Berger, remnants of this tradition can still be found in contemporary media, advertising, and journalism. Although the platforms have changed, the disparity in how women and men were presented remained evident, as the assumed audience whose needs were prioritized continued to be male.

In her 1975 essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey introduced the term "male gaze" into film theory. She argued that Hollywood cinema continued the tradition of objectifying women, reducing them to characters embodying a specific "to-be-looked-at-ness." The portrayal of female characters in a traditional exhibitionist role, as discussed by Berger as well, was reinforced by the cinematic devices that prompted its audience to align itself with the typically male protagonist. Although the active/passive division of roles became more predominant in screenplays, Mulvey argues that this contrast is deeply ingrained in the traditional visual apparatus of Hollywood films. Utilizing the psychoanalytical frameworks of Lacan and Freud, she examines how women are reduced to passive objects under

the dominant male gaze, fulfilling a different role than the active men who drive the narrative forward.^{2 3}

It is important that we recognise that male gaze is deeply based on and reflects real-life patriarchal and misogynistic images of gender, which continue to limit and exploit women. A closely related framework, introduced by Fredrickson and Roberts in 1997, Objectification Theory examines how social pressures lead to negative consequences for women, including the tendency to self-objectify (Calogero 16-20). The fantasy projected by the male gaze also plays a role in perpetuating harmful stereotypes, often displaying a fetishist attitude towards queer women and women of colour in particular.

This overview of the male gaze phenomenon and its impact on the portrayal of women in media is crucial for understanding the vicious cycle that describes the relationship of films and their audiences. Berger and Mulvey examined how real-life objectification permeates artistic or on-screen representations of women; in turn, these portrayals can further reinforce harmful, patriarchal dogmas among viewers, completing the cycle. This mutual relationship can also be seen in the various adaptations of *Lolita*. As the male gaze and societal attitudes towards female characters in film shifted, so did the way audiences perceived Nabokov's characters.

Understanding how the male gaze and the patriarchal point of view dominates media, especially in the case of these two movies is vital to understanding how the titular character and her story has been reframed for years. When it comes to women in media, especially those who act more openly flirtatious it is often them who are being blamed for the abuse they suffer; and this is something that is often replicated in real life as well. In the case of *Lolita*, it doesn't matter how she acts towards Humbert in the narrative, her childhood naivety is sexualised in both movies, even though it is not the responsibility of the underage girl to protect herself from the predator. Dolores is a complex, flawed character whose coquettish attitude comes to the

2 Kim Elsesser, “*Women Held Only 35% Of Speaking Roles In 2023 Films, According To Study*”, Forbes, 2024,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kimelsesser/2024/02/27/women-held-only-35-of-speaking-roles-in-2023-films-according-to-study/>

3 Douglas Broom, “*Here's how gender stereotypes are plaguing Hollywood films despite progress*”, World Economic Forum 2020,

<https://www.weforum.org/stories/2020/02/women-hollywood-starring-role-equality-diversity/>

forefront of the movies which is used to downplay the themes of her abuse as in the patriarchal narrative she does not live up to the myth of the perfect victim.

Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita*

To gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon and the evolving perception of Nabokov's titular character, we must examine the most culturally significant adaptations of the novel, starting with the 1962 movie of Stanley Kubrick. Due to its sensitive and controversial subject matter, as well as the salacious reputation the story had garnered among readers, the novel was widely regarded as unfilmable. The Kubrick-Harris duo faced significant pressure to create a screenplay that could meet the high expectations of Nabokov's admirers, who would harshly criticize any major deviations from the source material. In July 1958, the pair approached Nabokov to request a screenplay. Although he initially declined, incessant persuasion and a series of correspondence led Nabokov to deliver a 400-page screenplay. Later, the Nabokovian screenplay was changed, revised through negotiations and was further edited by Kubrick and Harris, with uncredited help from Calder Willingham. Large sections of the original script were discarded, and it became apparent that the screenplay was never truly intended for a faithful adaptation. Instead, it was a method that guaranteed they could secure Nabokov's endorsement, his "seal of approval," for the film's interpretation of the story. Kubrick and Harris's alterations to the script set the stage for the male gaze narrative to dominate, reframing the perception of Nabokov's work to align with the cultural, commercial, and patriarchal expectations of its time, and consequently altering how audiences engage with the story.

Another significant factor influencing the story was the censorship regulations of the era, which were enforced prior to the establishment of the universal rating system. Among the most notorious of these was the Hays Code. *Lolita* also received a "Condemned" rating from the Catholic Legion of Decency (LOD), a designation that was revised only after extensive negotiations with LOD representatives. Ultimately, *Lolita* was granted a "Special Classification," with the LOD asserting further authority by claiming the right to approve all advertising for the film.

One of the most controversial changes in the film adaptation is perhaps the omission of the memoir-like narration of the story. In the book, aside from the prologue, the story is composed of diary entries written by an imprisoned Humbert. The implication is that we experience the story solely through Humbert's perspective; how he recalls and interprets the events. As Monika Reid, writer for the *Far Out* magazine states: "The writing style replicates

Lolita's actual situation, that of a person silenced and forced to become what her captor perceives, her true self buried beneath this imposed façade" (Reid). This narrative device reflects the male gaze's perception of women, with Nabokov deliberately employing it to challenge the reader whether they can discern Humbert's lies and inconsistencies in his retelling of the affair. The fragmented glimpses of Dolores are deliberate because it mirrors the way abusers take control of the narrative – quite literally in this case.

The nature of literary works allows authors like Nabokov to explore the nuances and uniquely distance the narrative from the perspective of the characters. Many filmmakers attempt to replicate this narrative technique on the silver screen, yet they often struggle to convey this idea with the same intensity. In the case of *Lolita*, only 20% of Nabokov's original screenplay was utilized in the final film. As such, it remains uncertain whether the resulting changes, like the omission of the unreliable narrator, were intentional artistic choices or attempts by Stanley Kubrick to cater to the audience of the period. Unlike the novel, the film is bound by the constraints of its medium: it works with concrete events, actors, and mise-en-scène, leaving little room to imagine a different reality, beyond what unfolds on screen. Although the movie incorporates quotes from Humbert's diary to provide insight into his thought process, it ultimately loses the memoir-like quality of the book and its implications of Humbert's mastery of eloquent and manipulative writing.

The novel is a satiric literary diary seeking to ignite doubt in the reader by constantly questioning the narrator's reliability. Nabokov's imprisoned Humbert deliberately leaves "mistakes" in his diary to trick potential readers and seem more authentic when recalling his memories. Additionally, the book employs numerous wordplays – such as "Lake Climax," "St. Algebra," and "Camp Q" (the latter hinting at the menacing presence of Quilty) – to underscore the deceptive nature of Humbert's account of the story. These linguistic games of Nabokov are essential to the book's critique, yet they are entirely absent from the movie, diminishing not only the story's satirical nature but also the unreliability of Humbert as a narrator.

I believe the omission of John Ray Jr. has a similar effect on Kubrick's film. The foreword of the novel acts as an artificial distance between Humbert and the reader, anchoring us in a context that frames the journal entries as the delusions of a disturbed man, "A desperate honesty that throbs through his confession does not absolve him from sins of diabolical cunning. He is abnormal. He is not a gentleman" (Nabokov 8). Nabokov warns us not be swayed by Humbert's fancy prose but in the movie, we witness the events unfolding directly before us; no such narrative trickery is employed to challenge the viewer. It could be argued that Kubrick

choose to approach to confront the societal norms of the time and examine the concept of the male gaze; however, the film lacks any clear indication that Humbert is an unreliable narrator or that the audience should question how reliable are the events that we receive through the camera's lens.

Consciously or not, Kubrick's adaptation of *Lolita* adheres to the male gaze and introduces significant changes to the characters, fundamentally altering their dynamics. As Patrick Webster in *Love and Death in Kubrick* observes, many of Kubrick's films exhibit a homosocial nature, often prioritizing the relationships and rivalries among male characters over those involving female characters (Webster 29). This homosocial focus reflects a common trend in Hollywood films of the era, where male characters typically drive the narrative forward. We can clearly see this unfolding in *Lolita* as the relationship between Humbert and Quilty takes precedence, despite Dolores being the target of the abuse.

While Nabokov subtly foreshadows Quilty's presence throughout the novel, his role remains minor; he is mentioned three times in the novel and his identity is only completely revealed at the very end. By contrast, in the film, Quilty appears in the opening scene, marking a significant departure from the source material. This structural change, to begin the story with Quilty's murder, was deliberate and is noted in Nabokov's screenplay, which describes a drunken Humbert arriving at Quilty's residence and killing him without any exchange of words. In Nabokov's version, Quilty remains a looming threat to Humbert, yet his essential function in the narrative stays intact.

Many of the subtleties of Nabokov's screenplay were lost in translation due to Peter Sellers' portrayal of Quilty in the film. As Vincent LoBrutto notes in the biography of Stanley Kubrick, Sellers approached the script as merely a starting point for his improvisations, with Kubrick actively encouraging his creative input. This process inevitably led to the transformation of the material, redefining Quilty's role and shifting the dynamics between the characters.

Humbert, whose carefully constructed facade only occasionally slips, is neither a repulsive figure nor a pure evil pedophile. In the novel, what makes him truly unsettling is his surface-level likability — his charm and wit make him appealing to those around him, defying the conventional trope that inner evil is visibly reflected on the outside. Readers are arguably much more perplexed after experiencing Humbert's intelligence, his sense of humour, his use

of language, his self-awareness, particularly when coming to the troubling realization that he has manipulated us as well.

In both the novel and the screenplay Nabokov humanises Humbert by showing how much of a disturbed man fixated on his childhood lover, Annabel and invoking literary parallels such as Edgar Allan Poe and Dante to rationalize his obsession with young girls. Both the death of Annabel and these allusions are missing from the movie, as well as scenes that show Humbert comparing Annabel to Dolores. These story elements would have emphasised the fact that Lolita is more of an idea that Humbert projects onto someone and which had a predecessor. This omission diminishes the insight into Humbert's psyche, obscuring the fact that his infatuation with Dolores is not unprecedented and it is driven by lust rather than genuine romantic feelings.

The portrayal of the titular character required careful consideration, yet the film missed the mark in several key aspects. Under the watchful eye of the Hays Office, significant changes were made to Dolores' character to avoid violating the Production Code. The primary challenge was her age; the actress needed to appear older to prevent public backlash, and many references to her actual age were either softened or entirely omitted. Kubrick defended this choice "I think that some people had the mental picture of a nine-year-old, but Lolita was twelve and a half in the book; Sue Lyon was thirteen" (Vickers 137). In reality, Sue Lyon was already 14 years old when filming began and had turned 15 by the time production was finished. In addition to diverting attention from Lyon's age, Harris and Kubrick deliberately leaned into the "aging-up" of Lolita and her sexualization, as noted by Harris himself, "We made sure when we cast her that she was a definite sex object, not something that could be interpreted as being perverted." Lyon was deliberately made to look older and any resemblance of her being a 12-year-old, 27-23-29 figure child as Humbert painfully describes in the novel, was eradicated. Daniel DeVries noted in 1974, "Lyon appears to be a well-developed 17, and Humbert's desire for her comes off as ordinary lust" (qtd. in Green, *The troubling legacy of the Lolita story, 60 years on*). Due to the constraints of the Hays Code, the Harris-Kubrick duo had to ensure that very little explicit sexual content was actually shown, further diminishing our awareness of the abuse occurring. Although Kubrick managed to reinvent Lolita and give her a greater presence, in the process he lost Dolores Haze.

There's been numerous changes made to the relationship dynamic between Lolita and Humbert that further diminish her role as a victim. Although Humbert takes control of the narrative of the novel, Nabokov provides a few opportunities for the reader to get a glimpse of

the true Dolores, her childlike nature that contrast sharply with the “nymphette-goddess” her captor desperately tries to create. While many sexually explicit aspects of the affair, such as Humbert bribing her for sex and drugging her, had to be cut, the complete exclusion of these scenes, combined with Kubrick's portrayal of Humbert in a more subservient role within their relationship, serves only to make him appear more sympathetic to the audience. As Humbert is given more focus, Lolita is reduced to a one-dimensional figure designed to satisfy the male gaze and her complexities from the novel vanish entirely.

In one scene from the screenplay, Nabokov sought to convey Humbert’s domineering presence by threatening to send Dolores to a juvenile delinquent asylum if she did not comply and tried to escape. In the film, however, it is Lolita who fears such a fate and is desperate to keep Humbert from abandoning her. Another example of how Lolita’s personality is stripped away occurs in the scene where she learns of her mother’s death. In the novel, we witness the little girl’s grief, her sobbing, and Humbert’s futile attempts to console her with gifts. The movie skips this emotional moment entirely, as Susan Bordo notes, “In Kubrick's film, one good sobfest and dead mommy is forgotten. Humbert, to calm her down, has promised her a brand-new hi-fi and all the latest records. The same scene in the novel ends with Lolita sobbing, despite Humbert having plied her with gifts all day.” As the movie progresses, Humbert weirdly assumes the role of a nagging housewife, akin to Charlotte, while Lolita, clearly revelling in her power over him, transforms into a seductress.

At the climax of the story, the changes in the relationship between Humbert and Lolita become especially apparent. Both in the original novel and the screenplay Dolores refuses to go with Humbert and we only get to know her fate when the voice of Dr Ray reveals it to the audience. In contrast, the film depicts a confrontation between Humbert and Lolita, where she becomes irritated and regrets writing to him. When Humbert demands answers, he fails to connect the dots about her abductor, and it is Lolita who ultimately reveals the name of Clare Quilty. Kubrick’s Lolita here shifts from an indifferent figure to a heartless mistress. As the weeping Humbert hands her the money she requested, with a sudden change in tone, she apologizes for cheating, “Oh come on now, don’t cry, I’m sorry. Try to understand. I’m really sorry that I cheat so much, but I guess that’s just the way things are” (Kubrick, 2:31:26-2:31:45). If there was any lingering doubt about the film's total disregard for Dolores, it is confirmed by the fact that her fate remains unknown after this confrontation. The only evidence of her presence in the story are the bickering men left in her wake.

Overall, when reflecting on Kubrick's film, it is clear that multiple factors influenced his decision to make these unfaithful changes, including technical limitations, censorship restrictions, the director's ambition and pride, and the prevailing notions of the male gaze in cinema. Regardless of the reasons for Kubrick's omissions, their impact on the interpretation of the story and its characters is undeniable. Before Kubrick's film, many viewed *Lolita* as a love story; however, his adaptation further highlighted Humbert as a somewhat clumsy yet sympathetic protagonist and Lolita as an eager seductress. With these changes, the Kubrick-Harris duo transformed Humbert – and even Quilty to some extent – into a more sympathetic character, but at the cost of sacrificing Dolores's character and her perspective, effectively silencing her just as Humbert did in the novel.

Adrian Lyne's *Lolita*

Following Kubrick's moderate success with *Lolita*, another filmmaker undertook the challenge of creating a more faithful adaptation of Nabokov's novel years later; however, public apprehension arose immediately upon the revelation that the director was Adrian Lyne – notorious for his provocative, sexually-charged films such as *Flashdance*, *Fatal Attraction*, and *Indecent Proposal*. The production of *Lolita* progressed at a sluggish pace; as scholar Christopher C. Hudgings notes, no fewer than four scripts were commissioned by Lyne. Beginning with James Dearden in 1991, the screenplay underwent revisions by Harold Pinter, David Mamet, and ultimately Stephen Schiff, whose version was selected for the final film. While Schiff was aware of the story's controversial nature, the production team unanimously regarded Kubrick's adaptation as a cautionary example of what not to replicate.

One notable challenge the production team encountered during the creation of the film was addressing the implications of the Child Pornography Prevention Act of 1996. This legislation targeted photography, film, video, and illustrations in which minors appeared to engage in sexually explicit conduct. An unnamed legal advisor, referred to by Schiff as 'Larry,' was brought in to assist Schiff and Lyne with the script, resulting in the removal of several elements, including explicit shots of crotches and breasts. Nevertheless, the writers managed to retain certain scenes, such as the infamous comic sequence, by identifying a legal loophole. As Schiff explains in the companion book to the film, "If there 'appears to be' a child engaged in sexually explicit conduct we're in trouble. But since there is no sexually explicit conduct in this scene, whether the person engaged in it appears to be a child or not doesn't matter. If there's no explicit sex, we haven't broken any law" (Schiff 33).

Despite Stephen Schiff and Adrian Lyne's efforts to distance their adaptation of *Lolita* from Kubrick's version and draw more directly from Nabokov's novel, they succumbed to some of the same pitfalls – most notably when it comes to the pervasive characteristic of the male gaze of Hollywood films. A primary concern for Lyne, as outlined in his thirty-five-page document titled *Preparatory Notes on Nabokov's Novel*, was making Humbert a character with whom the audience could identify. From the outset, Lyne seemed intent on crafting an arc for Nabokov's protagonist, stating, "If the audience understands that Humbert is paying his dues, it may help our case" (qtd. in Vickers 211). This approach of moralizing Humbert's actions was also echoed by Schiff, when it came to creating his vision: "Humbert is thoroughly equipped for greatness, and yet he winds up in an ignominy of his own making. Part of his tragedy - and a large part of his comedy - is that his enormous intelligence is always defeated by his obsession" (Schiff 24). The screenwriter sought to externalize and simplify Humbert's world, in order to make the character more accessible to the audience. Regarding Nabokov's original, intricate language, Schiff remarked, "...in the mouth of a flesh-and-blood actor they would sound pretentious, precious, or absurd" (Schiff 24). However, in the novel, Nabokov's use of this language was deliberate, serving to highlight Humbert's attempts to obfuscate his intentions and the abuse he commits. These deviations, among others – such as the loss of the unreliable narrator, once again – ultimately undermine the central themes of the original work.

By taking a different approach to the story, with significantly less humour than Nabokov's original, Lyne and Schiff reimagined Humbert, portrayed by Jeremy Irons, as a more tragic figure haunted by his past. In this adaptation, Humbert's obsession with Annabel Leigh is mentioned; however, instead of emphasising his recurring fixation, it is reframed as vulnerability that makes him susceptible to Lolita's supposed manipulation. While Nabokov did craft a complex and layered Humbert, he never sought to justify his paedophilia or moralize his actions. Humbert is clearly described as "horrible" and a "shining example of moral leprosy" (*"Lolita: A Screenplay"* 3).

It is crucial to remember that in the original novel, Humbert not only physically abuses Dolores but also emotionally and mentally tortures her, and by the novel's final third, his obsessive jealousy drives him to acts of physical violence. In contrast, Lyne presents Humbert as a character who, as Schiff describes, "grows from the tormented, needy soul he is at the beginning to someone who has learned how to love - and who, in the end, is profoundly remorseful for what he has done to Lolita" (Schiff 26). His arc culminates in the final confrontation with Quilty, in a scene that mirrors the novel. In both versions, Quilty serves as Humbert's doppelgänger

and shadow; however, as Quilty rambles and antagonizes Humbert, the film seems to position Quilty as the true paedophile, contrasting him with Humbert whose fixation on Lolita only seem to be rooted in her resemblance to his lost love, Annabel. At no point in the movie does Humbert show interest in other young girls who appear around him, thus the murder of Quilty is presented as an act of vengeance. Although this scene is directly lifted from the novel, including Humbert's claim that Quilty "cheated him of his redemption" (Nabokov 283), the film's resolution feels like a complete redemption arc. This effect could only be achieved by omitting the elements of the unreliable narrator and reminders of the abuse, as well as Humbert's true intentions (such as his plans to drug Dolores and murder her mother) that are central to the novel. This is a choice that allows the audience to sympathize with Humbert without questioning his motives for recounting the story. In contrast, the story provides no moral uplift for Humbert, nor does it excuse or absolve him of the abuse he committed.

When crafting the perfect Lolita, to cope with the lack of information about her in the novel, Schiff chose to reinvent the character. Drawing on his own and Lyne's recollections, the image of Lolita was crafted with distinctive quirks, such as her fixation on food, echoing a tradition of archaic sexuality, by expressing sensuality through the symbolism of food and eating. As Schiff explains, "I began thinking about the uniquely twisted and passionate relationships American girls often have with food; hence all the scenes with Oreo cookies and Wonder Bread and bananas and jawbreakers - none of which are in Nabokov's book (and many of which, sadly, were cut from the final film)" (Appendix 3). Swain is often shown in outfits that further emphasize her youth, such as short shorts, crop tops, and pigtails – clothing that otherwise would be ordinarily for a young girl. Yet, within the context of the film, these elements are deliberately stylized to appeal to the male gaze, subtly transforming markers of innocence into instruments of over-sexualization, thereby playing into the character's objectification. From Lyne's perspective, it was a deliberate decision to lean further into this interpretation of the character, a choice reflected in the casting of Dominique Swain, who, despite being only fourteen at the time, was described as being "at once a seductress and a little girl" by Schiff (Schiff 28).

In an interview with Vouge, Jeremy Irons somehow perfectly captions this discrepancy from the novel: "In the popular imagination, Lolita is this stupendous little kitten. And in the film, we certainly paint her so. But in the book, she's absolutely ghastly – cheap, not pretty, bad teeth, bad skin, smelly – that's the drama, that he's besotted by this awful girl" (qtd. in Wurtzel, para. 8). In their quest to recreate Lolita from scratch, Lyne's nymphette acquires a complex

personality of partial, often contradictory, characteristics. Her personality jumps from being a mischievous little girl, to a flirtatious adolescent, a helpless victim then back to being a conscious manipulator of her situation and Humbert.

Comparing the movie adaptations we see a pattern, somewhat different in intensity but a pattern, nonetheless. Kubrick's *Lolita* from the first moment of the movie displays a sexuality that is consistent throughout the movie. When it comes to the *Lolita* drawn up by Lyne, we see her possessing this sexuality too, but similarly to Humbert we can observe an arc as the movie goes on. In the latter movie, we see the young girl displaying sexual awareness which evolves into erotic perversion. Lolita is able to physically intimidate Humbert, she learns to map out his desires and at certain points become a wily prostitute. As Barbra Ann Churchill notes, "Lolita, moreover, is not presented as simply a passive object of Humbert's erotic desire. She, in fact, possesses a sexuality that is alert, aware, and knowing" (Churchill 23). The nymphet in Lyne's adaptation acquires characteristics of the heartbreaker femme fatal archetype and becomes the tormentor that knowingly plays on Humbert's desires.

In contrast to the novel, where Nabokov alludes to that many of the "flirtatious acts" of the young girl which are probably the projections of her captor, here Lolita's actions are suggestive from the get-go. Her childish behaviour and the elements of her childhood are no longer something that Humbert sexualises but they become active devices for her endeavour and the objective reality of the story. This role reversal in which Lolita often initiates flirting and sexual acts, and in which Humbert often seems like an abject supplicant, someone who can't deny her charms, is a wink to the audience that means to convey that Humbert's actions are excusable. To justify his actions to the audience, Lolita's capacity and willingness for seduction had to be highlighted.

Because of her outwardly sexual attitude one might argue that Lolita is not subordinate to the male gaze because she becomes an active character in this adaptation. In the novel, Nabokov left room for Lolita's thoughts to be considered by the reader, whereas in Lyne's adaptation the viewer counts only on Humbert's perspective until the very end when Lolita gives her account, provoking the idea that she is an active participant of this affair. However, we should consider that her sexual advances and change in attitude only serves to perpetuate Humbert and the viewer's conception of her. Thus, even as Dolores is subjected to Humbert's manipulative actions, she remains relegated to the role of an object within the narrative. This dismissive portrayal reflects real-life scenarios where the experiences of abuse victims are downplayed or, worse, their perceived complicity is used to suggest they were 'asking for it.'

Hypersexualisation is generally an issue when it comes to movies with seductresses and potential female manipulators who control (older) men to their downfall. This genre of movie often puts underage women in these sexual situations not to highlight a power imbalance as with Nabokov but to communicate toward the audience how the male protagonist is helpless in these situations and to somewhat get them off the hook. Having movies where women or young girls fill in the role of the villain is not a faulty concept in itself; however, we should question why these types of movies are fixated on putting these teenage actresses in situations where they are going to be hypersexualised. This effect of the male gaze opens up a whole new conversation about why the blame is being put on the adolescents' shoulders for being flirtatious and renders these men who are all too eager to engage in sex with a minor as helpless victims who at no point could help themselves.

The name Lolita nowadays is thus associated with a flirtatious teen, a sex-kitten, a "fille fatale", a girl who pretends to be innocent when she's not. This is a far cry from the original Dolores, who bears the blame for her abuse despite every adult in her life failing to intervene or help her. Throughout history, we see many illustrations for corrupt women who actively manipulate righteous, innocent men; this interpretation is not something that started with or ends with *Lolita*. However, along with Nabokov's little girl, the many misinterpretations of the character and all the aesthetics of the movies continue to flood popular culture's common knowledge of the story. This can be seen through songs or even in fashion where the word "nymphette" and "coquette" are heavily inspired by this romanisation of Lolita. Just as she is a product of Humbert's imagination, Lolita becomes a product of pop culture as well.

Lana Del Rey and "Coquette-Culture" Surrounding *Lolita*

Although debates about the authenticity of the movie adaptations persist, it is undeniable that the image and aesthetic of the silver screen Lolitas remain deeply embedded in today's cultural zeitgeist. This influence spans advertising, photography, cinematography, internet memes and trends, and even music. Since Stanley Kubrick's film, Lolita herself has frequently been mentioned in song lyrics, along with other elements of the novel, such as "the old man in that book by Nabokov," as famously referenced by The Police or by the Red Hot Chili Peppers in the chorus of "Funny face": "You're my angel baby / You're my darling / You're my star / Lo lo lo Lolita / Let her see me deep in love." To better understand this impact, here is a list of songs that reference Lolita in some form or another: "Quasi una dona" (Joan Manuel Serrat, 1970), Histoire de Melody Nelson (Serge Gainsbourg, 1971), Lolita Go Home (Jane Birkin,

1975), “Don’t Stand so Close to Me” (The Police, 1980), “Shame on You” (Aerosmith, 1985), “Lolita (trop jeune pour aimer)” (Céline Dion, 1987), “No Man’s Land” (Billy Joel, 1993), “Whose Bed Have Your Boots Been Under?” (Shania Twain, 1995), “Tierna y dulce historia de amor” (Ismael Serrano, 1998), “Moi...Lolita” (Alizée, 2000), “Carolina” (M-Clan, 2001), “Ghetto Model” (Master P., 2004), “Funny Face” (Red Hot Chili Peppers, 2006), “Lolita” (Prince, 2006), “Shakey Dog Starring Lolita” (Ghostface Killah, 2006), “Scandalous” (Cobra Starship, 2007), “One of the Boys” (Katy Perry, 2008), “Lolita” (Belinda, 2010), “Lolita” (MC Lars, 2011), “Permanent December” (Miley Cyrus, 2012), “Lolita” (The Veronicas, 2012), “Versace Hottie” (Wavy Spice, 2013), “Nokia” (Father, 2014).

One notable artist missing from this list is Lana Del Rey (Elizabeth Grant), who not only references the titular nymphet but also draws heavy influence from Nabokov’s novel and its movie adaptations in crafting her persona. Del Rey’s aesthetic is heavily rooted in the nostalgia of 1950s–1970s Hollywood and Americana, with a femme fatale twist. This is a deliberate artistic choice; she describes herself as “Lolita got lost in the hood” and a “gangster Nancy Sinatra” (Berman) (Swash).

In Del Rey’s discography, *Lolita* references appear most prominently in songs recorded and released between 2008 and 2012. These references to Nabokov’s novel and its movie adaptations include direct quotations in lyrics that tell the stories of Lolita-like characters, as well as visual cues in music videos that draw inspiration from the films of Kubrick and Lyne. Del Rey does not depict Dolores as the young girl of the novel; instead, her interpretation portrays the titular character as a young adult woman who often finds herself in problematic relationships, frequently with significantly older men. Through songs that emphasize themes of sinfulness, hedonism, and a romanticized version of Hollywood, Lolita is reimagined as a femme fatale and an alluring mistress to the Humbert Humberts of Del Rey’s lyrics.

As previously noted, Lana Del Rey frequently draws inspiration from Nabokov’s *Lolita*, incorporating direct allusions to the text in her work. One such example is her song “Carmen”, with the title itself referencing one of the nicknames Humbert uses for Dolores in the novel. Another example is “Queen of the Gas Station”. While gas stations play a significant role in *Lolita*’s narrative as transient spaces tied to Humbert’s manipulation of Dolores, this analysis focuses on the recurring theme of renaming and identity within the story. The lyrics, “What’s your name, little buttercup? / That’s for me to know and you to make up”. echo Humbert’s habit of giving nicknames to Dolores, an important aspect of the novel that underscores his manipulation and control of the narrative that starts with something as seemingly simple as her

name. However, “Queen of the Gas Station”, subverts this dynamic through a role reversal: the woman holds the power, withholding her real name and inviting the man to invent one instead, which can symbolise the reclamation of agency. This reversal aligns with the femme fatale reinterpretation of Dolores in Stanley Kubrick’s and Adrian Lyne’s film adaptations, where her portrayal shifts from a victim of manipulation to a figure of enigmatic power.

Although the heart-shaped glasses never actually appear in the movie or in the novel, they have become inseparable from the image of Lolita. Del Rey also evokes this iconic symbol in “Diet Mountain Dew”, with the line “Baby, put on heart-shaped sunglasses / 'Cause we gonna take a ride.” The motif resurfaces in one of her later songs in 2016, “Every Man Gets His Wis”: “He loves my heart shaped sunglasses.” Del Rey herself is also frequently seen wearing heart-shaped glasses in marketing materials and social media posts.

Many of Lana Del Rey’s songs depict problematic, sometimes even abusive age-gap relationship and her interpretation of Lolita is especially evident in these tracks. In “Put Me in a Movie”, another recurring theme emerges where the narrator adopts a submissive position, playing into her partner’s controlling nature. The title, along with the lyrics “Come on, you know you like good little girls, / You can be my daddy” and “Lights, camera, acción / If he likes me, takes me home” seems to reference Quilty, him kidnapping Lolita, while also serving as a critique of the exploitation and mistreatment of child stars in Hollywood.

Lana’s version of *Lolita* fully takes centre stage in her song “Off to the Races”, where she describes her relationship with her “old man.” In this track, the references to Nabokov’s novel become even more direct, with the pre-chorus quoting Humbert’s iconic opening line (“Light of my life, fire of my loins”) and then twisting it into “Light of his life, fire of his loins” and “Light of your life, fire of your loins,” reflecting the reversed dynamic between this Lolita and Humbert. Following the pattern established in the films, Lolita is portrayed as a more active participant, one who is manipulative and conscious of her role as a seductress: “I’m your little scarlet, starlet.” To further emphasize this role reversal in their “sugar relationship” (a term used for transactional relationships, often involving older, wealthier individuals offering financial support to younger individuals in exchange for companionship, affection, or intimacy), Del Rey again references the novel with the lines, “Gimme them gold coins, / gimme them coins.” This reinterpretation highlights how Lolita has been transformed within popular culture, frequently shifting the emphasis from the novel’s critique of exploitation to a more ambiguous narrative centred on female agency and allure.

Her version of *Lolita* gets fully embraced in her “Born to Die” era with the track “Lolita.” This iteration portrays a seductress, fully aware of her power over Humbert, reflected in lyrics, rich with sensual imagery, evoking food and sweets, much like Lyne’s adaptation, where Dolores’s youthful allure is stylized and exaggerated: “Could be kissin’ my fruit punch lips in the bright sunshine.” The refrain, “Hey Lolita, hey, hey Lolita, hey / I know what the boys want, / I’m not gonna play,” reveals a duality: the singer acknowledges her sexual power but asserts control over it. This mirrors Humbert’s obsessive control in the novel, where he isolates Dolores and restricts her interactions with boys, reframing her agency to fit his narrative. Del Rey’s interpretation reflects a broader cultural trend of reimagining *Lolita* as a symbol of confident sexuality rather than an exploration of exploitation, highlighting the tension between the novel’s critique and its pop-cultural adaptations (Appendix 4).

Although Del Rey frequently incorporates direct quotes from Nabokov’s novel, it’s clear that her portrayal of *Lolita* is primarily influenced by the movie adaptations. Consequently, many of the motifs linked to the character as a result of the male gaze in cinema are repurposed and perpetuated in her music. While the vintage Hollywood glamour evoked through cinematic references remains a key element of her image, Lana Del Rey has faced criticism for romanticizing female passivity and submissiveness in her songs. One *Vulture* article even refers to her as “the patron saint of Hollywood sadcore” (Jones) reinforcing her connection to the genre known for its melancholy and sombre tones. To better understand where her depiction of a femme fatale *Lolita* fits within the coquette/nymphet aesthetic that is central to Del Rey’s persona, her broader portrayal of women in her discography must be examined.

When examining pop music from the early to mid-2010s, particularly with Del Rey’s albums *Born to Die* and *Ultraviolence* – both of which prominently tackle the themes of vulnerability and complex femininity – it becomes evident that her melancholic, introspective style sharply contrasted with the high-energy empowerment anthems that defined the era. Artists like Rihanna, Beyoncé, Kelly Clarkson, P!nk, and Katy Perry helped fuel the rise of the “girlboss” ethos within fourth-wave feminism, celebrating independence, confidence, and resilience.

However, many critics felt that this empowerment trend was superficial, even empty. As Pitchfork writer, Lindsay Zoladz notes about Katy Perry’s “Roar”, “I like the song, but I also sort of feel like a Pavlovian dog for liking it; a kind of exquisite corpse of already-proven stadium bangers, “Roar” feels like it was drawn up from focus groups and genetically engineered in a laboratory for the sole purpose of EMPOWERING ME” (Zoladz). In this cultural context, it is easy to imagine why Lana Del Rey’s melancholic music, which seemingly

embraces submissive femininity, prompted harsh reactions. While some critics accused her of romanticizing abuse and objectifying women, many listeners felt represented by her music and lyrics which reflected the disillusionment, disappointment, injustice and feelings of hopelessness that they experienced in womanhood. (Davis, 2017: 44).

Del Rey's music filled a niche for women who felt disconnected from the empowerment culture of the 2010s; and as French writer, Catherine Vigier notes "she is representing and speaking to a contradiction facing thousands of young women today, women who have followed mainstream society's prescriptions for success in what has been called a postfeminist world, but who find that real liberation and genuine satisfaction elude them" (Vigier 1) In an interview, writer and social media influencer, Audrey Wollen also discusses the significance and necessity of "Sad Girl Theory", which argues that activism excludes women who throughout history have used their sorrow to disrupt systems that limited them. Reflecting on the disappointment of women struggling to empower themselves, she states, "Feminism needs to acknowledge that being a girl in the world right now is one of the hardest things there is – it is unimaginably painful – and that our pain doesn't need to be discarded in the name of empowerment. It can be used as a material, a weight, a wedge, to jam that machinery and change those patterns" (qtd. in Watson).

In May 2020, in a *Facebook* and (now deleted) *Instagram* post, Del Rey responded to claims accusing her of romanticizing abuse and grooming, stating, "I'm fed up with female writers and alt singers saying that I glamorize abuse when in reality I'm just a glamorous person singing about the realities of what we are all now seeing are very prevalent abusive relationships all over the world." While it's true that many of her songs are narrated from the perspective of someone in an abusive or toxic relationship, these characters often demonstrate self-awareness about their circumstances. For instance, her portrayal of Lolita in the opening lines of "Diet Mountain Dew" ("You're no good for me") – acknowledge the inherent pitfalls and destructive nature of such relationships, adding layers of complexity to her narratives.

Despite everything, Del Rey's interpretation of Lolita as a femme fatale is still up for debate. The singer doesn't attempt to embody Dolores' age, but instead focuses on the complexities of her story, emphasizing the paradoxical emotions women experience in similar relationships. The *Lolita* image she has cultivated; however, is heavily dependent on the visual aesthetic of Kubrick and Lyne's films. As a result, this interpretation continues to perpetuate and, to some extent, contribute to the oversexualization of the character through the male gaze, whether it functions as an objectifying or self-objectifying gaze.

Although Del Rey's minimal presence on social media, her carefully curated image led many of her fans to associate symbols, such as the aforementioned heart-shaped sunglasses, with the singer. As Xiao suggests, *Tumblr* emerged as an ideal platform for teenagers to freely express themselves, making it no surprise that communities inspired by Del Rey's aesthetic also gained popularity. In her honour's thesis, Rachel E. Davis attempts to map the overlap between *Tumblr* communities cantered around *Lolita*, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture. Her research found that blogs like *NymphetsLife*, one of the top contributors to both the *Lolita* and Sugar Culture communities, posted content linking these communities, while often featuring Del Rey as well. For example, posts included Del Rey singing "You can be my full-time daddy," tagged with keywords like "nymphet" and "sugar daddy," reinforcing the connection. Davis further observes that personal blogs within the *NymphetsLife* community showcased recurring symbols of femininity, such as pink, heart-shaped sunglasses, lollipops, cherries, flowers (particularly pink roses), lingerie, and feminine bodies. Alongside these symbols, recurring motifs of violence and sadness, including knives, tears, fire, blood, and bruises, were also prevalent. Many of these blogs were sexually explicit, and some even romanticized Lolita's relationship with Humbert, removing it from its abusive context. (Appendix 5) Davis notes that these combined symbols of femininity, violence, and melancholy serve not only as expressions of desire to embody a certain aesthetic but also as a critique of the postfeminist, neoliberal social conditions in which these individuals live.

Lolita as the Embodiment of the Nymphet and Coquette Aesthetic

Around the same time, with the rise of blogs that made collages and vision boards of Del Rey's clips and lyrics intertwined with other elements of the sugar community, a new type of blog began to emerge. These blogs took a direct approach to make Del Rey's Lolita-esque world their own, creating guides, *Wattpad* articles, and posts detailing the clothing that a Nabokovian nymphet should wear. This is when the nymphet aesthetic gained traction on *Tumblr*, remaining popular up until the so-called "Tumblr Purge" of December 2018, which specifically targeted NSFW content⁴. As a result, searches for tags like "Lolita" and "nymphet"

4 NSFW being an acronym often used on social media platforms and blogs to indicate content that is "not safe for work" or "not suitable for work".

("NSFW". Merriam-Webster.com. Merriam-Webster, January 2025.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/NSFW>)

yielded no results, forcing the community to adopt alternative names such as coquette, dollette, nymphet, loleeta, and others.

Though the purge stifled some aspects of the community, the nymphet culture, which later merged with the coquette aesthetic or “coquette-core,” did not fade away. By 2020, it was revisited by teenagers on platforms like *Pinterest* and *TikTok*. The aesthetic has since evolved, with many subgenres emerging, such as the “vintage americana coquette.” On *TikTok*, the hashtag “#coquetteaesthetic” now has millions of views, with creators showcasing coquette-inspired outfits, makeup routines, accessories, and other lifestyle elements they consider fitting within the soft-pink boundaries of the aesthetic.

Although the coquette aesthetic has grown and evolved into a broader trend with each new iteration, its core elements have remained consistent: vintage, hyper-feminine fashion that embraces all things pink. Followers of this movement favour cheeky lace, satin, and ribbons, which become staples of their style. However, it’s not all bows and frills in this community as online content related to the coquette lifestyle frequently delves into themes of promiscuity, age-gap and sugar relationships, mental illness, and drug use – echoing the same duality that permeated nymphette-core *Tumblr* blogs during the Del Rey era. This juxtaposition of innocence and darker themes remains a defining characteristic of the aesthetic.

Moving away from the stereotype that female empowerment requires masculinisation, women who embrace the coquette aesthetic choose to find empowerment by being unapologetically feminine. Growing up, women recall developing a sense of aversion to anything deemed “too girly” as a result of internalized misogyny from a young age; as influencer Amira Mohamed, hyper-feminine fashion influencer and author of the *Girly World* magazine notes, “I and a lot of young women my age were often warned against being too overt in our love for all things stereotypically feminine. We were told that enjoying “girly” things like makeup, rom-coms or dressing in all pink was frivolous and immature and would make us less respected by men and society” (Mohamed). This, combined with society's tendency to sexualize girls from an early age, is why many turn to this playful, elegant yet self-aware style as a form of protest. Dr. Selena Dyer, fashion historian and professor at De Montfort University, claims, “It’s partly about women’s agency over their bodies, they are presenting what they want and how they want to be presented, and while that might be a sexual gaze, there’s no sense that’s necessarily a heterosexual gaze” (qtd. in Brown). Although many find joy and empowerment through both the *Tumblr* community and fashion side of coquettecore it is important to acknowledge some criticisms that have been raised about it.

When we examine the "ideal coquette" as defined by the trend, it becomes abundantly clear that images associated with this aesthetic predominantly feature young, thin, light-skinned women. The hyper-feminine subculture has faced criticism for its failure to include people of colour and a range of body types, thus creating a less inclusive space for those who do not fit these hegemonic characteristics. This issue can be traced back to the *Tumblr* nymphet community, which was also dismissive of POC bloggers and overlapped with the pro – Ana/thinspo communities – a group of blogs that glamorized thinness and promoted eating disorders.

It is almost inevitable that anything inherently feminine will eventually fall victim to sexualization or even infantilization. Coquette-core posts often depict childlike petiteness, feigned innocence, and a focus on looking youthful as valued traits. Many argue that this aesthetic panders to paedophilic desires and perpetuates a harmful infantilization of women.^{5 6} This concern points to the tension between innocence and sexuality, with the latter often becoming the dominant force in how femininity is presented.

Lastly, since Lolita's entire existence is overshadowed by the male gaze, it is important to note that this phenomenon follows modern-day Lolitas into platforms like *TikTok*. As Iustina Roman of Cherwell highlights, "Conversely, some believe that hyper-feminine fashion caters too much to the male gaze, and that women cannot be themselves by trying too hard to appear beautiful and appealing to men, especially since being a 'coquette girl' is not just about appearance, but also personality and interests." Just like with other trends, such as the cottagecore aesthetic, the coquette aesthetic inadvertently attracts both objectifying and self-objectifying gazes because within the community, hobbies like cooking or the emphasis on natural or no-makeup looks often receive excessive focus. While these practices can be seen as expressions of personal empowerment or self-care, they can also be interpreted as a fulfilment of societal expectations of femininity, which may unintentionally reinforce the objectification of women.

⁵ Sood, Tavisha. "The Infantilization of Women in Mainstream Media and Society." *Verdict Magazine*, 11 Jan. 2021, www.theverdictonline.org/post/the-infantilization-of-women-in-mainstream-media-and-society.

⁶ Policy, Simon. "'Coquette' eroticizes childlike innocence." *Berkeley High Jacket*, 23 Sept. 2022, <https://berkeleyhighjacket.com/2022/entertainment/coquette-eroticizes-childlike-innocence/>

We have come a long way from Nabokov's original depiction of the young girl, Dolores, and as we can see, the myth of Lolita keeps evolving, to the point that it is uncertain where the image will ultimately end up. From the novel to the film and musical adaptations, to the contemporary portrayal of this innocent girl transformed into a seductress, we observe a recurring theme of Lolita being reimagined to fit the narratives of those who seek to use her image – ironically, much like Humbert did. With each reincarnation, pop culture adds new layers of complexity, often by imbuing the character with motifs and symbols, such as the iconic heart-shaped sunglasses, which might never have been linked to her otherwise. Although we may never truly know the real Dolores, the ongoing domino effect initiated and perpetuated by the male gaze, which continues to dominate each re-interpretation, takes us even further away from understanding the complexities of the silenced victim.

Conclusion

Lolita has undergone numerous iterations since the novel's publication; however, it is essential to acknowledge that her story is not without precedent. Throughout history, the male gaze and the grooming of young girls have left their mark. In the novel, Humbert himself references literary examples of notable figures such as Dante, Petrarch, and Edgar Allan Poe in an attempt to justify his actions and normalize such behaviour, emphasizing that similar relationships have existed even among notable men (Nabokov 17-18) (Nabokov 100). Whether these young girls were real or fictional, a clear pattern emerges of women being ensnared by the male gaze, even in the earliest artistic representations.

In *Chasing Lolita*, Graham Vickers outlines a detailed timeline of Lolita-like characters in Hollywood, demonstrating how this archetype of the young girl has existed since the medium's earliest days (Vickers 72). The portrayal of young girls as objects of older men's desire is evident throughout cinema history, dating back to D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919), which features young Lucy Burrows, a girl subjected to abuse by her adoptive father, then being rescued by Cheng Huan, a Chinese immigrant who falls in love with her. Vickers observes that Griffith's "fondness for playing the little-girl-in-distress card" remained a hallmark throughout his career (Vickers 73). This trend persisted with directors like Alfred Hitchcock and Eric von Stroheim. The "child-star syndrome" beginning in the 1930s – when relationships between middle-aged men and much younger women were normalized –, underwent a slight shift and by the 1940s, attention shifted toward figures such as Elizabeth

Taylor, Judy Garland, and Deanna Durbin, who embodied the "older-child stereotype" (Vickers 83).

Sue Lyon herself became a victim of the very phenomenon depicted in *Lolita*. Following the movie, she was frequently cast in roles where her characters were involved in abusive or sexual relationships with older men. This typecasting as a seductress, driven by the male gaze, extended beyond cinema and into the media's treatment of her which not only continued to sexualize her but also antagonized her for her portrayal of Lolita. In an interview from 1987, archived on the Stanley Kubrick Appreciation Society *YouTube* channel, Lyon recalled a cruel encounter: "I was once on a television show, a talk show. My brother had just died two days before that. The interviewer opens his show by saying – and now I was 16 years old – he said, 'Did your brother kill himself because you played Lolita?' I didn't say a thing. I got up and I walked off. I couldn't even dignify that. I had no words. That's typical of the reason that I can't be a movie star. I never could" (9:27–10:10).

When creating promotional material for Kubrick's film, the decision to depict Lolita with a red lollipop and heart-shaped sunglasses may well mark the point where her image began to transcend the confines of the silver screen. Dieter E. Zimmer's archive of *Lolita* covers – featuring 210 items from 40 countries – captures this evolution of her image within pop culture. When asked about the ideal cover design, Nabokov expressed a different vision: "I want pure colours, melting clouds, accurately drawn details, a sunburst above a receding road with the light reflected in furrows and ruts, after rain. And no girls" (qtd. in Lyons). However, it is clear that these instructions were ignored most of the time.

Furthermore, the aesthetic of *Lolita*, shaped by the male gaze, frequently permeates advertising campaigns. For instance, Marc Jacobs' fragrance *Oh, Lola!* features Dakota Fanning dressed in a pastel polka-dot dress, suggestively posing with an oversized perfume bottle between her legs, evoking the coquette imagery associated with *Lolita* (Appendix 6). Similarly, a double-page spread, *Sunny and Sexy* from the May 2011 issue of *Vogue Italia* draws connections between model Ashley Smith and *Lolita* through accessories like sunglasses, cropped tops, a hula hoop, or even props such as a lollipop and a Coca-Cola bottle (Appendix 7). While these depictions borrow heavily from the novel and its film adaptations, Smith's portrayal leans more toward the Vintage Americana coquette style, reminiscent of Lana Del Rey's influence.

There have been attempts to reshape the public's understanding of *Lolita*, as evidenced by projects like iHeartRadio's *Lolita Podcast* or John Bertram's initiative, which enlisted 80 renowned graphic designers and illustrators to create more authentic cover designs for Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, freed from commercial influences of the publishing industry. (Appendix 8) However, it remains a subject of debate whether it is possible to reimagine these images of Dolores and Nabokov's novel, which has been deeply shaped by the male gaze for decades.

It is essential to acknowledge that, with few exceptions, the early decades of *Lolita* criticism were dominated by male critics, some of whom accepted Humbert's narrative at face value, framing the story as a tragic love tale in which the protagonist is consumed by his desires. Yet, even a shift toward "Lolita-centric" criticism may not offer a perfect solution, as such interpretations often risk oversimplifying and underplaying Lolita's agency. Dolores is not a mistress which is a fact overlooked by most adaptations; however, her moments of more or less subtle flirtation with Humbert should not be entirely dismissed. Because we only see the story through Humbert's narrative, we can never truly know her perspective. What is indisputable though, is that as a child, Dolores becomes a victim of her abuser, unaware of the power imbalance that shapes their interactions.

Due to its heavy and complex subject matter, many seek to experiment with ways to bring the novel and the culture surrounding it into conversations or even educational settings. In *Teaching Nabokov's Lolita in the #MeToo Era*, Eléna Rakhimova-Sommers presents innovative methods, such as student assignments, creative writing exercises and new critical approaches to encourage contemporary analysis of the story. Her pedagogical approach aims to encourage students to engage with the novel actively, in order to hopefully bypass the "helpless bystander" syndrome often reported by readers. Similarly, Meenakshi Gigi Durham's *The Lolita Effect* examines how media-driven sexualization has shaped women's lives and provides strategies to help pre-adolescent and adolescent girls navigate these influences in a healthy way. She writes, "Because the Lolita Effect is designed to appeal to girls, we can't (and shouldn't) force them to be critical or reject it outright (though many girls do, anyway). What we can (and should) do is provide safe spaces where alternative viewpoints can be discussed, where ideas that counter the Lolita Effect can be expressed and explained, where values can be evaluated" (Durham 176).

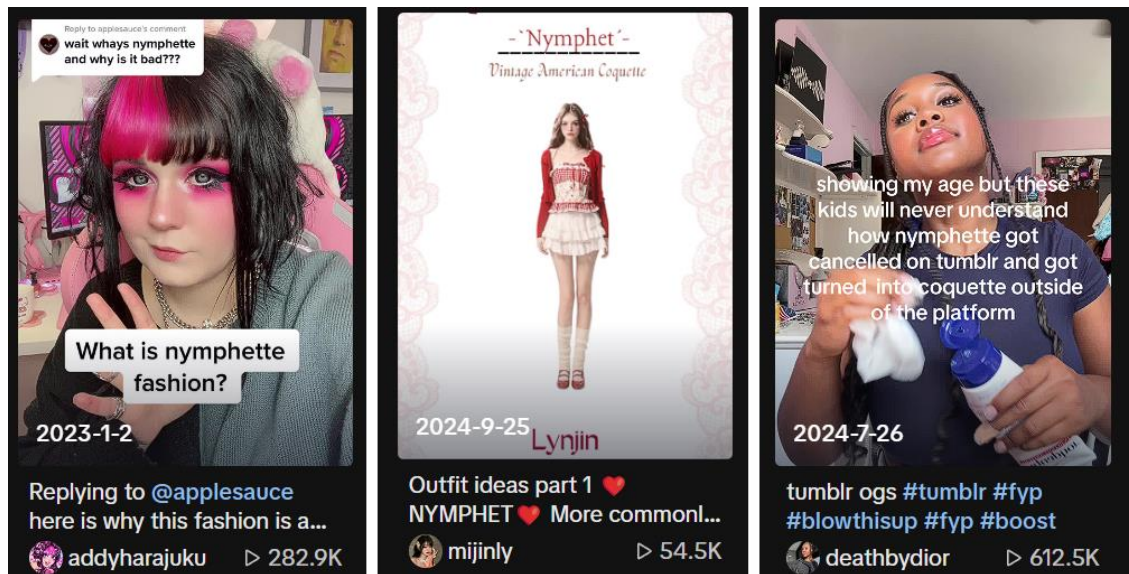
It is long overdue for *Lolita* to be reclaimed as a narrative that resonates with many women's lived experience, following years of misrepresentation and critical avoidance. This a sentiment that was echoed by Véra Nabokov herself:

I wish, though, somebody would notice the tender description of the child's helplessness, her pathetic dependence on monstrous HH, and her heartrending courage all along culminating in that squalid but essentially pure and healthy marriage, and her letter, and her dog. ...They all miss the fact that "the horrid little brat" Lolita, is essentially very good indeed—or she would not have straightened out after being crushed so terribly, and found a decent life with poor Dick more to her liking than the other kind (qtd. in Schiff 311).

Dolores' story and its treatment in media reflect a broader societal issue: the mistreatment of women and survivors of sexual abuse. Beyond sexual assault, the novel addresses grooming, kidnapping, economic and domestic abuse, and statutory rape – issues that have sadly remained quite relevant even today. In the era of the Me-Too movement and fourth-wave feminism, *Lolita* has the potential to serve as a cornerstone for discussions, particularly because its themes resonate deeply within communities across the internet and social media. However, society must first dismantle the harmful stereotypes and tendencies that perpetuate the romanticization of youth, innocence, and the sexualization of women – issues rooted in the longstanding dominance of media and art by the male gaze.

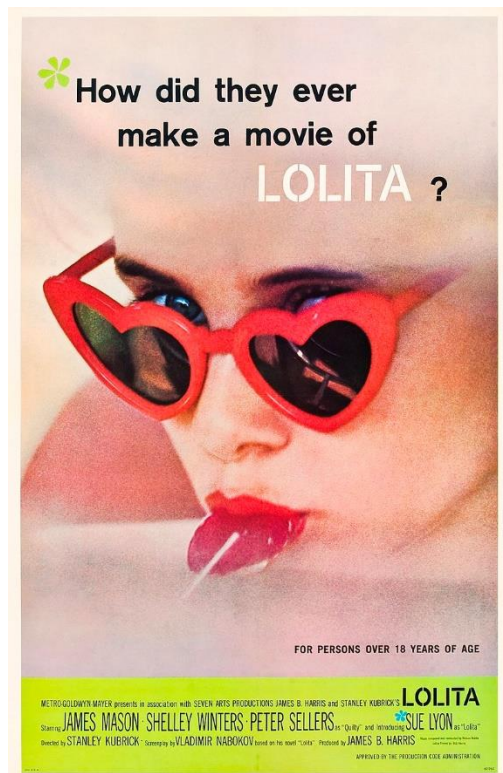
Appendix

Appendix 1



A collage featuring some of the most popular posts under the hashtag "#nymphet" on TikTok. (January 14, 2025)

Appendix 2



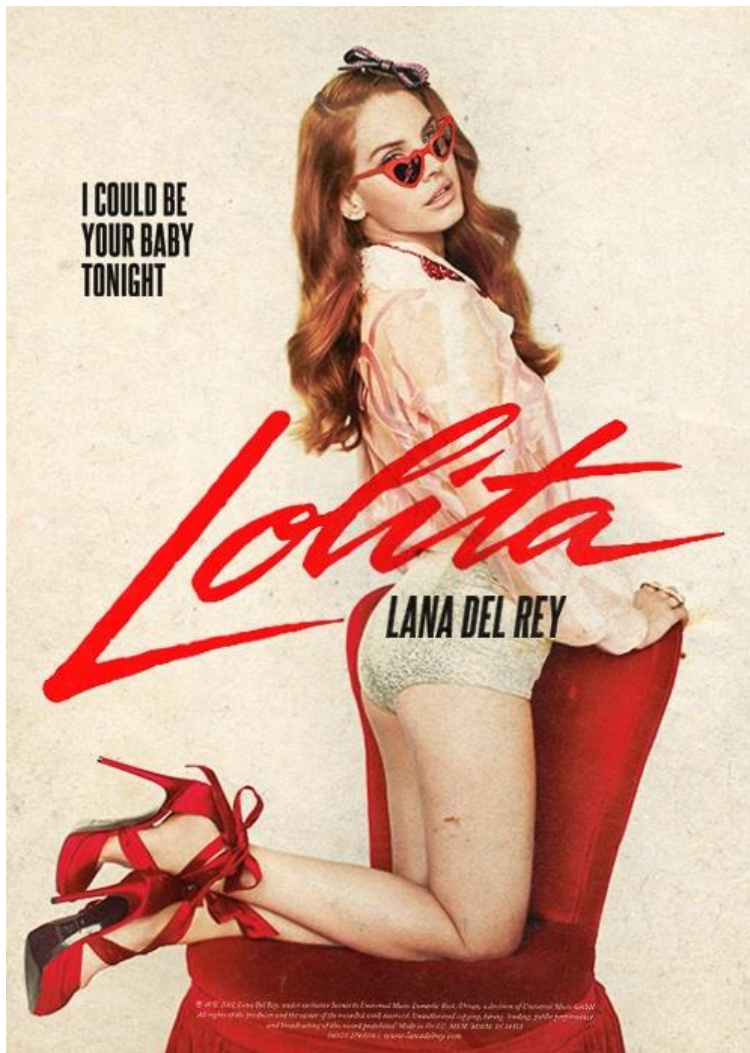
Bert Stern's poster for Stanley Kubrick's film, showcasing the iconic heart-shaped sunglasses, which do not appear in the original novel.

Appendix 3



Stills from Adrian Lyne's film, featuring Dominique Swain's portrayal of Lolita, where she exhibits suggestive behaviour with food.

Appendix 4



Promotional material for Lana Del Rey's song, with her embodying the role of Lolita.

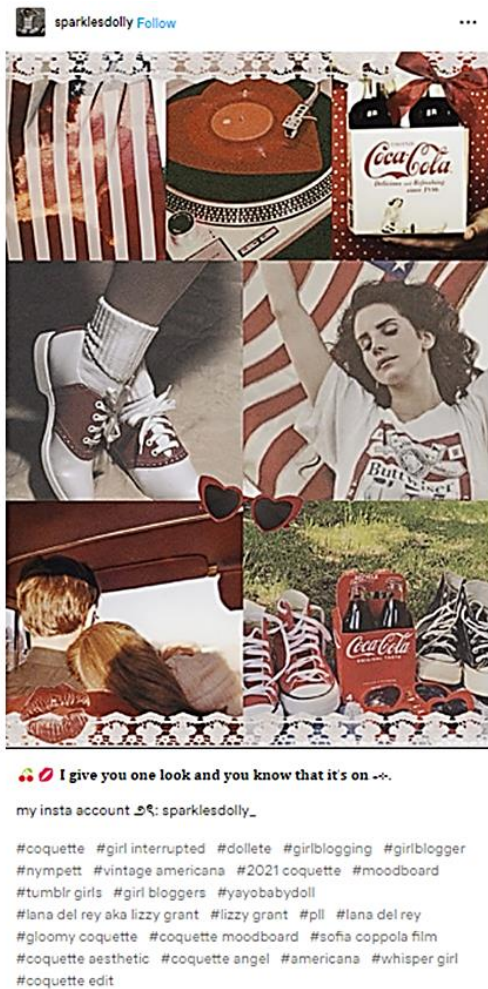
 justcallme1anangel [Follow](#) ...

#americana aesthetic #lisa rowe #preachers daughter #americana
#amy dunne #lana del rey #girlblogging #nympette
#girl interrupted #tumblr girls #preachers daughter aesthetic
#the right person will stay #sylvia plath #this is what makes us girls
#ultraviolence #girl interrupted syndrome 🌸 #ethel cain
#lana del rey aesthetic #western gothic #autumn
#american gothic #coquette americana #coquette aesthetic
#coquette girl #coquette #black swan #cinnamon girl
#lizzy grant aesthetic #catholicism #alana champion

🕒 1 YEAR AGO ON SEPTEMBER 30, 2023 AT 5:28 AM

📌 original post

💡 moodboard, mb, coquette, dollette, nymptt, pink aesthetic, dead academia, giriblogging, french girl, aesthetic, female manipulator, mitski, lana del rey, vintage americana, americana coquette, vintage coquette, coquette moodboard, soft aesthetic, °♡ moodboards.



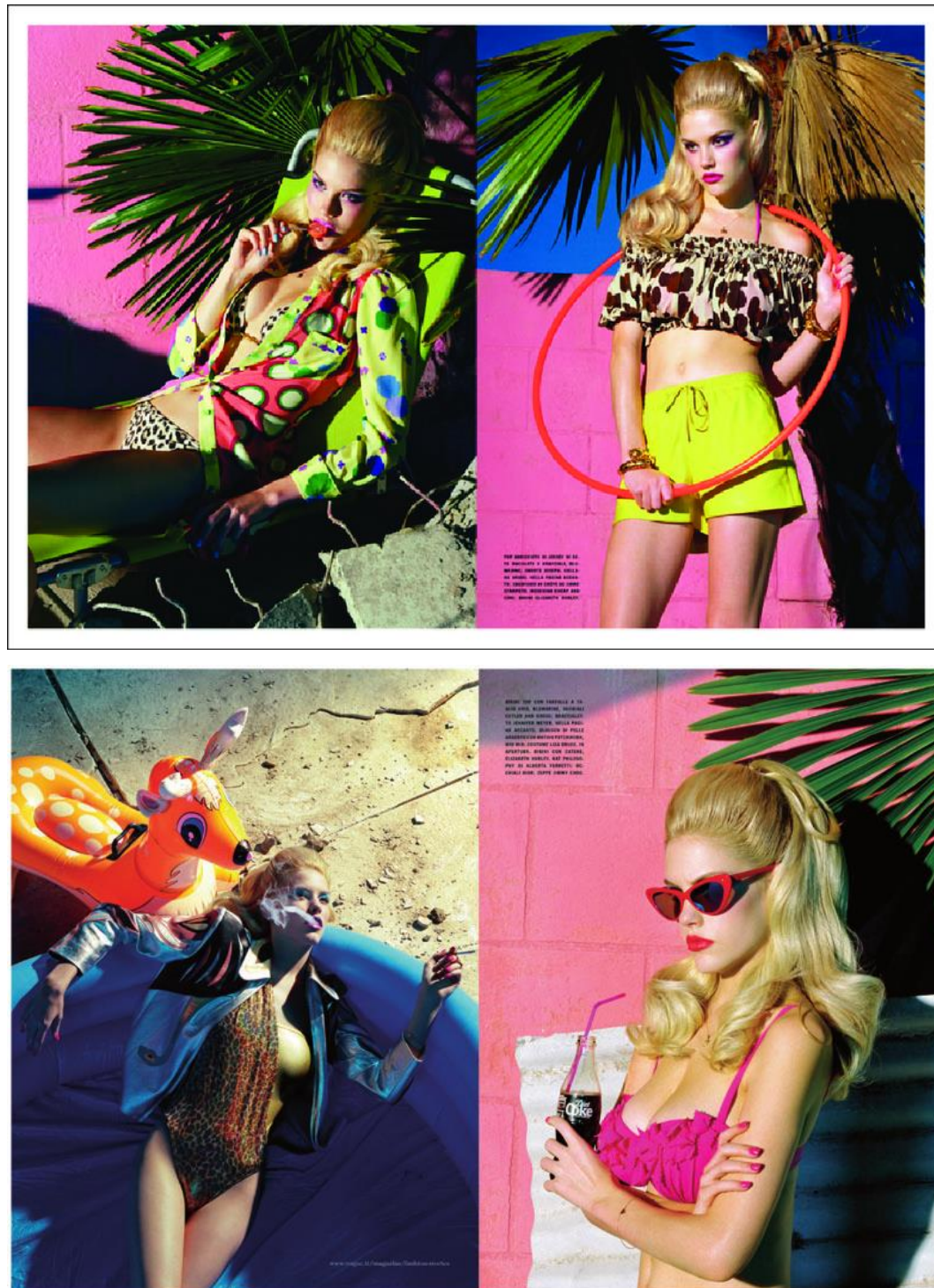
Screenshots of a Tumblr moodboards with accompanying hashtags depicting the nymphet or coquette aesthetic.

Appendix 6



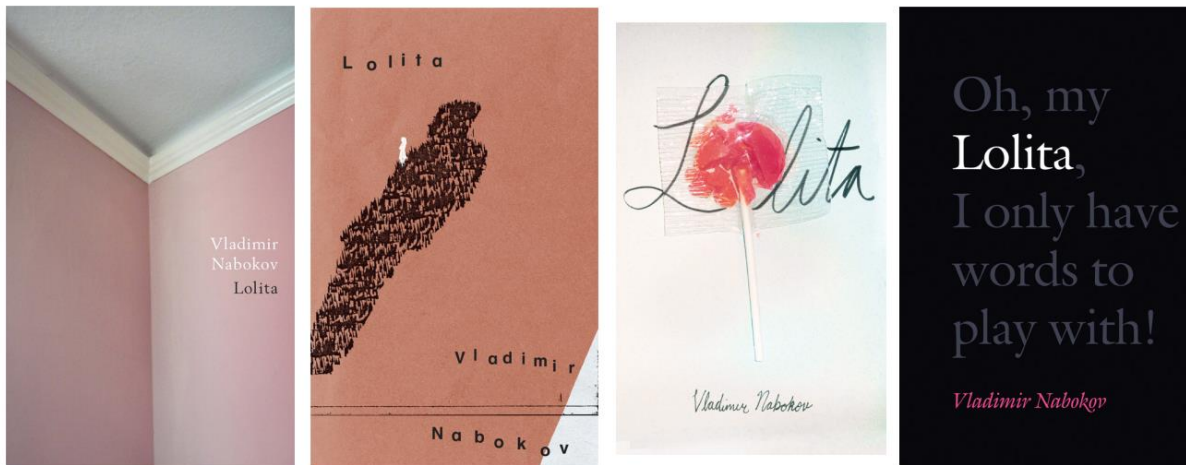
Marc Jacobs campaign, featuring Dakota Fanning in suggestive poses.

Appendix 7



Sunny and Sexy campaign featuring Ashley Smith, channelling Lana Del Rey-inspired coquette aesthetic

Appendix 8



Designs created for the project by artists Jaime Keenan, Oliver Munday, Jennifer Heuer, and Philip Kelly.

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