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The American Dream: The Consumption of Consumers

America, perhaps more than any other country, idolizes the notion of the open road. By virtue of its very phrasing, the concept suggests a welcoming expanse, free to all who seek to pursue it and their dreams. Yet, as with so many things, the only part of the “American Dream” that is free is its inception; to pay its price one must permanently assimilate into the capitalism that keeps it. Like so many before them, Vladimir Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert and his little Lolita quested for freedom from monotony, for a vacation that would revitalize them with escapist escapades. In the process, however, the promises of the hegemonic billboards surrounding them waylaid the adventure with income-eating anchors. The point became expenditure for fleeting smiles and ceaseless miles alike. Slowly but surely, the persistent patterns of rubber and road wove them into the decaying dreamscape of the United States, ensuring the perpetuity of its capitalistic ideology. Buying the happiness, which would keep that overindulgent existence in motion, seemed a plausible plan and so they purchased the delusion of an eternal summer by selling themselves.

Guided by the skilled hand of its authors (fictional and literal), *Lolita* simultaneously laments and glorifies capitalism. After Humbert Humbert absconds from Camp Q with Lolita, the duo creates a mini-infrastructure within their road-based world. Despite detesting the

bourgeois attitude of his adoptive country, Humbert harnesses its tit-for-tat exchange system to bridle Lolita with allowances, knickknacks, food and cinema, which she must earn with obedience and sexual acts. This micro-economy is accomplished via the commodification of Lolita's body, which once objectified, prompts the dwindling of Humbert's bank account. Yet, Lolita paradoxically holds dual roles in the story, serving not just as the commodity but also the proletariat, in that H.H. essentially owns her body—the instrument of his pleasure. As such, Lolita must still “sell” her labor, physically pleasing him with it, in order to gain items she covets. In one sense, the equivalent form unwittingly acknowledged by the actions of the pair is desire rather than money. The first party controls the price by virtue of the second party's desire. When H.H. grovels “and literally crawl[s] on [his] knees” (Nabokov 192) to her, Lolita can successfully raise the price of her physical affections, but when the girl cries, ““please! I'll do anything you want, oh, please...”” (157), Humbert gains the power to extort hours of promised pleasures from the youth. Power itself is the seed of the journey's inception, and the possibility of its possession drove Humbert to action the moment Charlotte died.

Humbert, victim by virtue of society's suppression of his paraphilia, strives to reclaim power by oppressing his Lo with the price tags attached to her whims. This in turn makes the road her prison and his playground, and while caging a concept like the American Dream is impossible, obsession can still quickly decay it, especially when it wears the fragility of youth. Humbert illustrated this as his gaze, ever-fixated on Lolita, slowly withers the nymphet and the idealistic dream she embodies. Yet, oblivious of this, he continues to subvert her, utilizing not just her wants, but the societal notions of what a good girl *should* be to keep Dolly in line. By promising persecution for her implied sins should she turn on him, Humbert ensured that “Lolita had been safely solipsized” (60). Thus, fear keeps her in a cell formed of motel walls and car

doors while the road signs that hail her to cathartic consumerism satiate a longing to disassociate from her reality and join the supposed normalcy of another. “Lolita’s experiences as an object serve to highlight one of the main spurs to consumption in the novel: the need to compensate loss or ravage, to recuperate an idealized past or prospect. Lolita’s consumptive habits, obsessive for even a preteen, are a response to the loss of her sexuality... Her consumption is part of her quest for authenticity, her attempt to have a real childhood” (Mizruchi 648). Her need for the faux-fulfillment of consumption creates an obligation in H.H. to satisfy it, lest their sedan-encapsulated economy collapse.

Deep within the hegemony of capitalistic reverie, Humbert Humbert, contrary to his own beliefs, dwells side-by-side with Lolita. While “she believed, with a kind of celestial trust, any advertisement or advice that appeared in *Movie Love* or *Screen Land*” (Nabokov 148), he catered to those beliefs and supplied them for “consumption is the only means of comfort he knows” (Mizruchi 648). As such, H.H. saw no other way to deal with the child’s moodiness and sorrow, save for further expenditures, which ultimately still cost her body. Thus, the capitalistic system, which created the means for the victimization of the young Miss Haze, ironically, also offers her only source of solace. Lolita, in an attempt to liberate if not her body, then her mind from the circumstances of that portable prison, constantly reaches through its bars and collects the contents of every sales sign. “She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster” (Nabokov 148). The baubles, food, and pieces of pop culture she amasses throughout the novel distract from her father-figure’s coveting caresses and the situation as a whole. However, the price she pays in order to obtain them is the very reason she needs them in the first place, illustrating the cruelly cyclical nature of the story.

A road trip's roundabout purpose is usually to bring one home again. By prolonging their destinationless journey, H.H. attempts to escape anyone who could threaten his prize, a role that due to the illicitness of the situation, everyone they encounter plays at least once. However, the alluring chirps of their "Vacancy" signs summon him like sirens, beckoning the wayward widower and his ward again and again into the rocky shallows of capitalism in search of simulacrum of the home they lack. This absence of a home removes the possibility of an actual end to the trip, for the beginning was erased. The vehicular manslaughter of Mrs. Haze served as the unexpected starting gun for the duo's doomed race and echoed the impossibility of a winner without her. Lacking the familial stability to return to or the tangibility of a final objective, the difference becomes clear: they are not actually going anywhere. To prevent Lolita from realizing this, Humbert did his "best for hours on end to give her the impression of 'going places,' of rolling on to some definite destination, to some unusual delight" (152), repeatedly instilling hope of a *raison d'être* despite knowing that any "destination was in itself a perfectly arbitrary one" (139). Humbert, however, did in fact have a personal goal, namely to keep Dolly Haze and that progressively eroding American Dream to himself. Yet, the longer they drove, the less visible that finish line became because what H.H. was chasing, already rode beside him in the passenger seat. Through the "hundreds of scenic drives, thousands of Bear Creeks, Soda Springs, [and] Painted Canyons" (157) his obsession with the notion of keeping and experiencing her ultimately prevented him from ever having her.

Regardless of criticisms about *Lolita's* poshlust dispersions on the American lifestyle, it remains a truly American novel, displaying an intimate understanding of capitalism and the initially neutral nature of its participants. However, by virtue of the book's portrayal of road culture's vices and the ways in which the freedom of the open road can be abused, it is most

assuredly a darker take on where streets paved with wanton dreams can lead. Humbert mocks the bourgeois while donning the velvet garb of a self-proclaimed viscount and wonders aloofly at the slavish nature of capitalism, but satirical gems like “children under 12 free, Lo a young captive” (157) denote the character’s crystal clear hindsight. The narrator Humbert Humbert, if not occasionally his autobiographically portrayed past self, held onto a pained awareness of his follies throughout the tale and most acutely when dealing with his American Dream because “whether or not the realization of a lifelong dream had surpassed all expectation, it had, in a sense, overshot its mark—and plunged into a nightmare” (140). Neither Lolita nor her stepfather were happy with the results of that year long summer vacation, and Humbert never actually escaped it, but by writing their story, chose instead to immortalize and repeatedly relive everything from the cost of food and lodging to the miles melted and gas guzzled. The true tragedy of a family held together solely with the threads of money and desire was stated best by Humbert himself: “We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing...our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep” (175-176).

Works Cited

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