

## **“I Get Sort of Carried Away, Being So Normal and Everything”: The Oscillating Sexuality of Clare Quilty and Humbert Humbert in the works of Nabokov, Kubrick and Lyne**

Emerson Storm Fillman Richards, University of Florida

***Abstract:** This paper compares and analyses the differences between *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov (1955) and filmic versions by Stanley Kubrick (1962) and Adrian Lyne (1994), focusing on the respective characterisations of Clare Quilty, as mediated through his encounter with Humbert Humbert at a pivotal scene at the Enchanted Hunter’s Lodge. Following an in-depth analysis of the scene in question, the article then examines Kubrick’s *Lolita*, exploring the homosocial undertones of Peter Sellers’s Quilty, and the attendant commentary on heteronormative culture of late 1950s/early 1960s America. Finally, Lyne’s interpretation of this encounter will be analysed to discern how a menacing Quilty alters the narrative and deviates from the previous representations, updating the social commentary to incorporate a distinctly 1990s milieu in the process. Treating the two films as iterations and/or mutations of the original literature, the article proposes a comparatist-driven analysis to discern each artist’s intentions toward the narrative as exemplified by this crucial meeting of minds.*

### **Introduction**

The publicity byline of Stanley Kubrick’s *Lolita* (1962) asks, “How did they ever make a movie of *Lolita*?”. By appropriating Humbert Humbert’s sexuality onto Clare Quilty, to make a socially acceptable narrative from Nabokov’s original text—that is how they made a movie of *Lolita*. Though the film adaptations vary from Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Lolita* and his own screenplay of it, directors Stanley Kubrick and Adrian Lyne (*Lolita*, 1997) both incorporate the encounter between Humbert Humbert, the literary scholar with a long-term obsession for young girls, and Clare Quilty, the man who *Lolita* claimed to have loved, at the Enchanted Hunters Lodge. In this scene, Quilty attempts to elicit a confession of lust from Humbert. In the cinematic versions, Quilty’s motivation for goading Humbert ranges from a sly wink of fraternity (Kubrick) to a threat (Lyne). These reasons are complicated by the films’ relationship to each other and to Nabokov’s precursor texts. Since the scene is crucial in defining the relationship between Humbert and Quilty and the narrative, the variations in portrayal will thereby alter the significance of the narrative itself. As this scene appears in all three iterations of *Lolita* and is the first time that Quilty and Humbert interact—beyond Humbert’s murder of Quilty, which is presented out of sequence—it merits detailed examination.

This article will compare and analyse the desexualisation of Humbert and hypersexualisation of Clare Quilty in the filmic versions by Stanley Kubrick and Adrian Lyne. Since Humbert’s and Quilty’s meeting at the Enchanted Hunters initiates and helps define their

relationship, I will focus on the variations within this scene. The four versions, when put in dialogue with each other, reveal sociopolitical commentary intended by the author and directors that otherwise would be less immediately detectable. First, I will analyse Nabokov's original *Lolita*, to explain the scene and its significance to the overall narrative.<sup>1</sup> I will then analyse Kubrick's *Lolita*, particularly the performance of Peter Sellers's Quilty and Kubrick's commentary on contemporary culture through his use of "quite wild and often grotesque dark humor" (Schuman 198) and "playfulness and pathos [rather than the novel's] eroticism" (Nelson qtd. in Burke 19). Finally, I will consider Lyne's noir-esque interpretation of this encounter, paying attention to the re-sexualisation of both men and the vilification of Quilty.

### **Nabokov's *Lolita*(s)**

Since Nabokov's novel represents the confession of Humbert, based on his thoughts and memories of before he met Lolita, his time with her, and after the murder of Quilty, Nabokov limits the dialogue between characters to render the verisimilitude of a memoir. Mimetic realism dictates that a person would not necessarily remember quotidian conversations; therefore, Nabokov avoids abundant direct dialogue. However, in the Enchanted Hunters scene, the dialogue is exact, signifying that Nabokov, through Humbert, marks this encounter as memorable:

Suddenly I was aware that in the darkness next to me there was somebody sitting in a chair on the pillared porch. I could not really see him ... I was about to move away when his voice addressed me: "Where the devil did you get her?" "I beg your pardon?" "I said: the weather is getting better." "Seems so." "Who's the lassie?" "My daughter." "You lie—she's not." "I beg your pardon?" "I said: July was hot. Where's her mother?" "Dead." (Nabokov 128–9)

Quilty then extends a lunch invitation to Humbert and Lolita, which Humbert declines. Quilty responds to Humbert's farewell by telling him, "that child of yours needs a lot of sleep. Sleep is a rose, as the Persians say..." (Nabokov 129). The interlocutor will not be identified as Quilty until much later in the novel. Nabokov's prose style renders the scene unremarkable, except for the use of direct dialogue as opposed to paraphrastic dialogue, which, as I have suggested, lends verisimilitude to Humbert's confessional. Additionally, as Julian Connolly points out in his treatment of the Enchanted Hunters scene, "[t]he initial comments about Dolly's status seem very odd when coming from a stranger, and they read remarkably well as the promptings of Humbert's conscience about his relationship with the child. It is moments like this when one senses the affinities between Quilty and Humbert" (125). It is this specific instance of affinity between the two men, exposed in this scene on the porch, that I will explore throughout all four versions of *Lolita* (including of course, the source novel). Until Humbert, through his own inferences and Lolita's exposition many years later, discerns the "mystery" of the novel, Quilty remains an anonymous figure in the text.<sup>2</sup> He is mentioned several times by Lolita and her mother, both speaking in tones of limerence. Humbert writes that he "is said to resemble some crooner or actor chap on whom Lo has a crush", emphasising Quilty's qualities as a foil for Humbert (45). Though Humbert presents his biases as fact in the narrative, the

reader is to understand that both men are equally predatory and condemnable. However, I posit that Nabokov emphasises Humbert's sexuality more than Quilty's.

Throughout Sections One and Two of Nabokov's *Lolita*, Humbert alludes to and describes, in varying degrees of explicitness, his arousal by "nymphets" including Lolita (18). For example, in chapter Six in the first section, Humbert recounts his affairs with child prostitutes in Europe before meeting Lolita. Humbert details his experiences with Monique, who "among the eighty or so *grues* [Humbert] had operate upon [him], she was the only one that gave [him] a pang of genuine pleasure" (24).<sup>3</sup> In fact, Nabokov captures Humbert's sexuality in the opening passages: "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul" (11). In the first statement, the attraction beyond sexuality is highlighted, "light of my life", the primary description of Lolita could refer to manifold levels of affection. However, the second part—"fire of my loins"—clarifies that this is a sexual attraction. The following vocative statement inverts this structure. Lolita is Humbert's "sin", again implying sexuality, or at least something unorthodox and unusual. But the second half extols Lolita as Humbert's "soul", again elevating her from the object of sexual desire to something spiritual and luminescent. The juxtaposition of these two perceptions of Lolita does not negate either one. Because Nabokov presents Humbert as unaware of his deviance, it is fitting that he should introduce Lolita with this unapologetic dichotomy of the spiritualisation and sexualisation of a sexual (albeit, paedophilic) relationship.<sup>4</sup> Though he begins with the blatant sexuality of Humbert, through the novel Nabokov does evoke a method of censorship when describing the more lurid details of Humbert's sexuality (much is made of the artful dash in the middle of sentences promising lascivious detail); however, at the same time, euphemisms that lack subtlety are employed regularly (such as when he "gave to her [Annabel] to hold in her awkward fist the scepter of [his] passion" (17). Nabokov thus allows the reader titillation from Humbert's account of his own titillation.

By contrast, most of Quilty's perversions are implied or mentioned in allusion and described more ambiguously. In an early reference to Quilty, Humbert again presents a portion of direct dialogue in which an acquaintance of Charlotte Haze reports on "two children, male and female, at sunset, right here, making love" (91). This woman goes on to mention that she "expect[s] to see fat old Ivor [Quilty's uncle] in the ivory. He really is a freak, that man. Last time he told me a completely indecent story about his nephew. It appears—" (91). Here, she is interrupted and the reader is left to speculate what she was about to reveal about Ivor's nephew, who is, of course, Clare Quilty. Both Nabokov and Humbert toy with the reader in this way. Nabokov withholds information from the reader under the guise of Humbert's ignorance of or, perhaps, inability to express Quilty's predilection. Nabokov uses Humbert to execute this clever device of making ambiguous Quilty's sexual nature. Though the character of Humbert might not have been able to express what Quilty was doing, the author could have included speculations, or a scene of explicit enlightenment. Instead, he allows Humbert to express his own exploits, and exploitive emotions and relations towards nymphets, while obscuring Quilty's.

Even when Lolita explains her relationship with Quilty to Humbert, it lacks the explicitness that informs Humbert's description of his own sexual exploits. Humbert presses Lolita for details on the sorts of things that "she refused to take part in because she loved him

[Quilty]” (278). She reluctantly provides the information that Quilty was into “weird, filthy, fancy things ... two girls, and two boys, and three or four men” (278). At Humbert’s insistence, she relates an instance in which she told Quilty that she would not *souffler* his “beastly boys because [she] only want[ed him]” (279). Because of Humbert’s presumed narration, he is able to censor Lolita’s description of Quilty’s sexual predilections. As Humbert has written Lolita’s explanation, the text reads: “I said no, I’m just not going to [she used, in all insouciance really, a disgusting slang term which, in a literal French translation, would be *souffler*] your beastly boys...” (279). Again, the exact, explicit details about Quilty are literally omitted. Nabokov, as the narrator controlling Humbert, could have easily exposed the nature of Quilty’s sexual deviance quite explicitly at this point—he allows Lolita to do so. However, Humbert, as the fictitious narrator, censors her. And through this, he, yet again, places Lolita in a passive role, while assuming the masculine/active role of deciding what is appropriate and inappropriate for Lolita to express. Moreover, he maintains his status as the more explicitly sexual between the two men. In fact, it is not insignificant that the word that Humbert chose to cover up Lolita’s explicitness is French in origin, which is left untranslated, except through Appel’s endnotes.<sup>5</sup> Though Quilty speaks French, it is Humbert whom Nabokov constantly identifies in a European context. This argument will be borne out as I analyse later how the filmmakers detract from Humbert’s Europeanness in order to make Quilty the Other. Had Humbert not censored Lolita, the reader could have been shocked by her (for knowing the term “to blow”) and by Quilty (for having asked to film Lolita doing this to these “beastly boys”); however, as it is, the exposure of Lolita and Quilty is deflected by Humbert. By covering up for Lolita, Humbert simultaneously does so for Quilty too and thus remains the most explicitly sexual character in the narrative—truthfully or not. Just as Quilty is about to be explicitly sexualised by Lolita, the reader’s attention is drawn back to the overt sexual nature of Humbert instead. This presentation of Humbert as an overtly sexual character, and Quilty as a more subtly sexual one, does not suggest that Humbert is the villain in relation to Lolita, nor is it to claim that Quilty fulfils this role either. The constructs of the traditional moral narrative are omitted, placing the morality of the novel in a grey area, which the film directors attempt to polarise.

Kubrick and Lyne each declined to use Nabokov’s screenplay in their respective films, thereby allowing both of them to heighten Quilty’s villainisation. Though Nabokov’s original script is not published, an edited version from 1973 shows the author’s conception of his work, which varies greatly from his novel and from Kubrick’s *Lolita* for which it was intended. Samuel Schuman remarks on the chief differences in the transition from Nabokov’s novel to his screenplay: “[O]bviously, with Quilty a more clearly visible villain and Dolly a less innocent nymphet, the character of Humbert is also altered—his persecution is greater and his crime is less” (201). Kubrick and Lyne do not adhere to the increased sexualisation of Lolita; in fact, the Lolita of the filmic iterations is, like Humbert, desexualised, to create a socially acceptable portrayal of a pre- or recently pubescent girl. The directors, like the novelist, see the need for Quilty to function as the villain.

Schuman’s description of Quilty as “a more clearly visible villain” is more complicated than Nabokov relegating Quilty to a villainous role. Rather than increasing Quilty’s treachery or his ostensible sexuality, Nabokov increases Lolita’s sexuality and begins the process of toning down the expressiveness of Humbert’s. By adjusting certain attributes, particularly the

sexuality of two of the characters, the quality of the third character will reflect these changes. In Lyne's and Kubrick's respective versions, this means decreasing Humbert's and Lolita's sexuality so that Quilty becomes burdened with an overly-sexual nature. By changing the representation of Lolita and Humbert, Nabokov's screenplay does not have to feature a particularly villainous Quilty. As in the novel, Quilty's appearances notably blur aspects of his identity. Nabokov's depiction of the Enchanted Hunters porch adapts from the novel faithfully—and Lyne's version bears a closer interpretation than Kubrick's. Nabokov's set directions describe a dimly lit porch, where “two or more people are sitting. We distinguish vaguely a very old man, and beyond him another person's shoulder. It is from these shadows that a voice (Quilty's) comes” (105). The subsequent dialogue follows the double-entendres of the novel. Both Lyne's film and Nabokov's book and screenplay shroud Quilty in darkness on the porch of the Enchanted Hunters to encourage the anonymity of their antagonist. This depiction differs appreciably from Kubrick's as we shall see in the coming section.

### **Kubrick's *Lolita* and Counterculture**

Bosley Cowther answers the question of “how did they ever make a movie of *Lolita*” much less obliquely than I proposed, by stating simply that “they didn't” (qtd. in Webster 12). Cowther refers to the measures of censorship necessary to adapt *Lolita* into a viable film version in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Kubrick approached Nabokov in July of 1958 about making a film adaptation of *Lolita* and Nabokov wrote a script version of his novel. Kubrick essentially rejected this script because, as Webster notes, he “was not interested in making a literal adaptation of the novel” (11) and found Nabokov's script to be “un-filmable” (10). When faced with the stipulations of the censorship boards of the time, the director “had the choice of making *Lolita* [sic] the censors' way, or not at all. He did something more devious: he made it their way his way” (Corliss qtd. in Webster 13), which meant that Kubrick was “forced to embrace an erotic discourse in much more subtle methods” (Webster 17). Connolly further explains Kubrick's strategic deviations from Nabokov's works:

one of his [Kubrick's] chief concerns was not to run afoul of the so-called Production or Hays Code, a set of guidelines adopted by the motion picture industry in the 1930s to prohibit the depiction of activity that might be deemed immoral or offensive to society, especially if the depiction seemed to condone that activity. To avoid a confrontation with the Code, Kubrick made several strategic decisions that significantly altered Nabokov's *Lolita*. (129)

These decisions included casting choices, an emphasis on the comic, and a de-emphasis of sexuality. The compromise struck between Kubrick and Nabokov, and Kubrick and the censors, resulted in not only the commercially successful filmic adaptation of a book occasionally deemed as pornographic, but, also, a contemporary sociopolitical commentary.

In Nabokov's screenplay, the film would have begun in the castle where Quilty's debaucheries took place. Though the camera would show “a prone sleeper (Quilty)”, neither Humbert nor Quilty would have been identified by name during this opening sequence. However, Kubrick establishes Quilty's identity from the first scene in which he appears (1).

The opening credits are overlaid onto a scene portraying a man's hand (presumably Humbert's) sensually manicuring a girl's foot (presumably Lolita's). This dissolves to a shot of a car driving up a misty road towards a castle. The next shot shows Humbert inside the castle, which is strewn with furniture covered in white sheets and empty liquor bottles. "Quilty" is the first, and last word that Humbert speaks in the film, unlike, as Webster points out, in the book, where "Lolita" begins and concludes the narrative—thus emphasising Quilty's role. Sellers, as a dishevelled Quilty, arises from beneath a white sheet, says he is Spartacus, then corrects himself and confirms he is Quilty, and the action of the narrative begins. The film seems to attempt to conceal Humbert's identity in the first scene. Quilty establishes that he is indeed Quilty, and from the beginning, the viewer understands that there is a conflict between him and the man pointing the gun (Humbert), and that this conflict is over the possession of Lolita. This impasse is exemplified when Quilty sings, "she's mine", then, noticing Humbert's chagrin, changes the lyrics to, "*yours*, she's *yours* tonight". Despite Humbert's vocative repetition of Quilty's name, when prompted to identify Humbert, Quilty is incapable of doing so. Ultimately, Humbert is not identified in this opening scene. Instead, Humbert is granted an identity when the narrative switches to a flashback to his arrival at Ramsdale.

In Kubrick's version, Nabokov's original dialogue on the porch of the Enchanted Hunters would not add any new information, unlike the novel where the dialogue of this scene is suspicious enough to warrant the reader's attention. For Kubrick, Sellers's rambling speech and physicality toward Humbert become much more pointed ways of establishing Quilty's personality and his relationship with Humbert. Therefore, "[w]hen Humbert goes downstairs and onto the porch, Kubrick introduces one of the greatest deviations from Nabokov's novel and screenplay" (Connolly 130), which, I argue, is a necessary deviation that will result in a shift in the relationships between Humbert, Quilty and Lolita that resonates throughout Kubrick's adaptation.

In all three renditions of the Enchanted Hunters scene, Quilty and Humbert never converse face-to-face. This reinforces Nabokov's intent for Quilty to be not just a foil for Humbert, but to remain anonymous throughout the narrative, despite his paradoxical omnipresence. The film versions use the medium to place even more significance on this scene than the book. In his adaptation, Kubrick uses this opportunity to continue the queering of Clare Quilty. Sellers's back remains towards Mason in this scene, in what Webster describes as a "passive posture ... inviting a metaphorical congress of pederastic possibility" (23). Couple this with Quilty's homoerotic tendencies, shown by his flirtations with the male receptionist in the lodge and his homosocial relationship with Humbert, and Quilty becomes more of a threat to non-queer, that is heteronormative, early 1960s culture than Humbert, thus making Humbert more sympathetic in comparison to the perverse Quilty.

Kubrick's Quilty becomes a more dominant protagonist—albeit complexly so, because he is simultaneously submissive—than Nabokov's shadowy figure. For both Kubrick and Lyne, "Quilty still had a bigger presence in [the] film than in the novel" (Burke 22). The cinematography in Kubrick's *Lolita* supports this. Quilty becomes the focus of the Enchanted Hunters scene, as he dominates the conversation, though, visually, he is in a position inviting passivity. Through a stammering monologue, Quilty tries to extract Humbert's accord that they are both "normal". Sixteen lines of dialogue in the book becomes almost four and a half

minutes of Sellers, expressing that he wishes he “had a really lovely pretty tall lovely little girl like that”, and remarking on Humbert’s normalcy and interesting face. Kubrick relies on the grotesque, ironic humour that this man, who knowingly wishes to commit the same paedophilia with Lolita, would refer to himself and Humbert as normal. Sellers is able to convey that he is *not* normal. In this way, Kubrick not only asserts the literary foil relationship between Humbert and Quilty, but also presents a certain homosocial, if not homoerotic, characteristic of Quilty. As Quilty stutters through his one-sided conversation, he apologises to Humbert for making an insensitive joke, telling him that he “get[s] sort of carried away, you know, being so normal and everything”. After this point in the conversation, Quilty begins to allude uncomfortably to the soon-to-be-consummated relationship between Humbert and Lolita. If normalcy in this context is an ironic nod at the shared predilection of these men, then Quilty’s subsequent disclosure that, “George Swine [the owner of the Enchanted Hunters] is a normal, nice sort of guy, a normal word in his ear, you’d be surprised what things could happen from a thing like that” and offer that George would “turn some of the troopers so you could have a lovely room, a bridal suite for you and your lovely little girl”, makes the allusion clearer still. Towards the end of this exchange, Quilty reiterates that Humbert is normal (“I think you’re really normal and everything”) and that he too is normal (“I was wondering, whether maybe in the morning, you know, me being lonely and normal... Have breakfast with me”). Quilty, however, knows that he is not normal, as does Humbert, while the audience is similarly attuned to this reality. Even Lolita remarks on Humbert’s and Quilty’s normalcy. At the end of the film, when she explains her relationship with Quilty to Humbert, she says that, “he [Quilty] wasn’t like you and me. He wasn’t a normal person. He was a genius; he had kind of a beautiful Japanese oriental philosophy about life”. Again, if we take normal to mean perverse, Lolita condemns herself and her relationship with Humbert, and elevates Quilty. Even if we take normal to mean vulgar, Lolita still places herself and Humbert below Quilty. Lolita’s statement contradicts the villanisation of Quilty and complicates the narrative and the social commentary. Lolita’s subsequent explanation that Quilty is not normal, and that she loved him, coupled with Kubrick/Sellers’s portrayal of Quilty, gradually allows the social commentary to emerge. Since Kubrick was restricted by the censorship board, it would appear that he and Sellers embedded a critique of heteronormative culture—the culture dictating the censorship. Humbert is able to infiltrate Lolita’s normal suburban life. Quilty remains Othered and a menace to heteronormativity. But the normal Humbert damages the suburban lifestyle even more than the alternative subculture lifestyle of Quilty. Humbert masks what he is; Quilty does not.

To support my claim, I will examine several instances in which Kubrick focuses on heteronormativity and the queer subculture. In the same scene as he displays a sexual interest in the male receptionist at the Enchanted Hunters, Quilty redirects his libidinous comments towards his partner, Vivian Darkbloom, hyper-sexualising his character in the process. Quilty and Vivian represent a threat to normal culture. She fulfils the role of dominatrix to Quilty’s ambiguous persona. Quilty explains to the receptionist that they practice Judo, and when she sweeps his ankle he “go[es] down with a hell of a bang”. Krin Gabbard’s article on “The Circulation of Sadomasochistic Desire in the *Lolita* Texts” considers this sadomasochism bondage discipline (SMBD) relationship between Quilty and Darkbloom and the non-sexual dominant and submissive relationships between Kubrick and Sellers and Kubrick and Nabokov. Each man alters and attempts to dominate the other’s vision of *Lolita*. The subculture of sadomasochism plays an integral role in the narrative and the production of

*Lolita*. Quilty represents an unfixed sexual identity as both submissive and dominant. In alternating these positions, “Quilty can (1) revel in his masochistic submission to Vivian Darkbloom while (2) exhibiting this eroticised masochistic stance so as to (3) aggressively seduce a hotel desk clerk in a blatant display of homoeroticism” (Bick 9). Since Quilty obviously knows about Humbert’s desire for Lolita, his goading of him on the porch is an attempt to get one man to talk dirty to the other. Quilty does not have to be classified as homo-, or bi-, sexual but rather as *sexual*, perhaps pansexual, and his overwhelming sexuality, in a film that downplays the inherent eroticism of *Lolita* (which Lyne will re-establish later), redefines the narrative.

In a culture that valued heteronormativity, such as late 1950s, early 1960s America, “his name [Clare Quilty] connotes the gender and sexual ambiguities essential in a sadomasochistic masquerade [and] (the phantasmagoric setting of his home)” become increasingly perverse (and yet, attractive) to the suburban culture to which Lolita and her mother belong (Bick 9). Kubrick’s Quilty displaces Humbert as the Other, not just in terms of sexuality. His Otherness manifests itself in “Clare Quilty’s houses ... decorated in the Oriental style in the tradition of English and French decadent literature ... introducing a divided vision of the female body” (Manolescu 2).<sup>6</sup> Therefore, even Quilty’s house stands out as a bastion of decadence and sexuality at a time when suburban normality was prioritised. Though Lolita’s mother references his “Old World charm”, Kubrick’s Humbert is not as European as Nabokov’s, nor as sexual as Lyne’s. In Nabokov’s work, Humbert is Parisian, and often the text is interspersed with French, augmenting his foreignness, and serving as a constant reminder to the reader that he is Other. However, neither of the film adaptations addresses Humbert’s French origin. Paris is mentioned, but, again, not as a point of origin for Humbert. Mason’s performance pulls Humbert away from the Continental mystique endowed upon him by Nabokov, towards a more English, less European, portrayal. Humbert’s voiceover narrative explains that he had come to America to lecture at Beardsley College because his translations of poetry from French to English had enjoyed some success, although the point is not made that French should be Humbert’s native tongue. Nabokov’s Humbert even teaches Lolita French and reminds the reader that he is not only Parisian but of Eastern European stock. The Kubrickian Humbert, by contrast, teeters into normalcy, and owing perhaps in part to Mason’s reassuring familiarity, one can forget that he is a paedophile, a self-declared monster. As demonstrated by Kubrick’s oeuvre—an obvious example being his characterisation of Alex DeLarge in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971)—he is comfortable with portraying problematic characters and their deviances. Perhaps, had Kubrick made *Lolita* after *A Clockwork Orange*, Humbert would more closely resemble Nabokov’s intent. The de-sexualisation of Humbert then, is not only a pre-emptive strike to capitulate to standards of normalcy set by critics, censors and the public, but also serves to critique suburban heteronormative society.

Humbert lives with Charlotte and Lolita in a heteronormative suburban setting, while Quilty resides with his partner (and his beastly boys) in a decadent castle-like edifice. The first time the viewer is introduced to Quilty is at Lolita’s school dance. His home and manner code him as being different from the North-Eastern, suburban culture into which he has inserted himself, unlike Humbert, who seems to interpolate himself seamlessly into Charlotte and Lolita’s lives. Humbert wants to fit in to be allowed access and proximity to Lolita. By allowing himself to play the part of a domesticated husband to Charlotte, Humbert can pursue



Lolita, a duplicity that requires him to capitulate to societal norms and thereby represent the suburban culture.

Quilty represents sub- or counter-culture, unlike Humbert who attempts to be part of a normative cultural paradigm of the time. Thus, by sexualising Quilty, while de-emphasising Humbert's sexuality, Kubrick allows the viewer to perceive Quilty as the villain. Therefore, superficially, Kubrick and Sellers seem to have condemned the subculture as being monstrous and perverse, while redeeming the normative culture, or at least those who attempt to homogenise within it. The viewer may initially sympathise with Humbert at Quilty's expense; however, it becomes clear that Humbert's subjectivity influences the story of *Lolita*. Kubrick's direction seems to understand Nabokov's intent, though slyly—the author has constructed a narrator, who is outside of the realm of socio-normalcy, with whom the reader will sympathise, however briefly. Upon recognising his or her sympathies with this perversion, both intend for the audience to be repulsed both by themselves and by Humbert. By contrasting Humbert and Quilty, Kubrick also persuades the viewer into accepting Humbert and denouncing Quilty. Additionally, the aesthetic impact of Sue Lyon's Lolita invites the viewer's own libido to be aroused. Lyon, though fourteen during filming, appears to be “a well developed seventeen [and] Humbert's desire for her comes off as ordinary lust” (DeVries qtd. in Webster 13).

Both men have committed, more or less, the same ethical violation. Lolita confesses, during her last conversation with Humbert, that Quilty “was the only man she had ever been crazy about” (Nabokov 274). From this confession, the audience and Humbert realise that Humbert has forced Lolita against her will.<sup>7</sup> In Kubrick's version, this serves to delicately reveal the extent to which Humbert has coerced Lolita, whereas Nabokov's novel emphasises that Humbert's love for/of Lolita is a one-sided affair. Lolita's expression of her affections for Quilty makes the reader even more sympathetic to her. To call attention to Humbert's coercive relationship with Lolita, both Nabokov's novel and Lyne's film depict a scene that strongly suggests that Lolita essentially prostituted herself to Humbert. In a scene, adapted from the novel by Lyne, Lolita and Humbert struggle in bed over a coin purse, an event Kubrick notably omits. Kubrick's version suggests instead that Lolita loved the subversive, countercultural Quilty, and it was the seemingly normative Humbert by whom she felt manipulated. Though Quilty represented the counterculture, the over-normalised Humbert of Kubrick's making took advantage of Lolita signifying that ultimately suburbia made a prostitute of Lolita and not the queer sub-culture.

### **Lyne's *Lolita* and the 1990s**

In his version of the film, Adrian Lyne re-sexualises Humbert, though not to the extent of Nabokov's initial depiction. Because of this re-sexualisation, Quilty needs to be amended accordingly into a more traditionally villainous figure. Therefore, if Humbert is perverse, then Quilty must be worse still to allow for a more dichotomous depiction of the struggle between good and evil. Under Adrian Lyne's direction, Frank Langella's Quilty menaces Jeremy Iron's Humbert. When they first meet at the Enchanted Hunters, a cloud of cigar smoke obscures Quilty, who is wearing a black and white tuxedo, while in the background insects are incinerated by a bug zapper. In contrast to Kubrick's scene, which uses no background music,

“‘*Twin-Peaks*’ style music’ scores Lyne’s scene” (Burke 23). Lyne draws the dialogue directly from Nabokov; however, the tone of the scene is far more threatening than the preceding representations. This threatening mood is heightened by the use of canted angles and other disorienting shot set-ups.

Lyne retains several of the sexual scenes between Lolita and Humbert—yet Quilty fulfils the role of antagonist, and does so more distinctly than in Nabokov’s or Kubrick’s renditions. Nabokov’s Quilty is an anonymous figure in both renditions. Where Kubrick’s Quilty is a figure of ambiguity, Lyne’s has a distinct purpose. While Lyne maintains the anonymity of Quilty, in as much as the cinematic medium will allow, his presence is nevertheless consistently ominous. By creating a more distinct villain, Lyne attempted to create a commercially viable film—an endeavour that ultimately failed.<sup>8</sup>

Lyne supposes that the modern viewer will want a narrative with a more clearly defined villain. A softer, more contrite Humbert provides an acceptable counter-figure to Quilty. While Kubrick’s cultural commentary is a reversed reflection of what he saw in society, Lyne directs his attention towards normative American cinematic consumers and 1990s culture. In the thirty five years between the filming of Kubrick’s *Lolita* and Lyne’s version, censors and the public grew more tolerant of what was acceptable onscreen. Kubrick was not able to film *Lolita* his (or Nabokov’s) way; he had to incorporate tongue-in-cheek innuendos while capitulating to censors. Lyne was also bound to similar censorship standards but for different cultural reasons. Though movie censorship had been considerably relaxed since Kubrick’s *Lolita*, Lyne’s production was not without its problems. He outlined the difficulties he faced with censors in an interview with the *New York Observer*:

halfway through the cutting [of *Lolita*]-1996—there was this child pornography law ... aimed chiefly at the Internet [the Child Pornography Prevention Act of 1996], which prohibited putting a child’s head on an adult body. That meant I couldn’t use any shots taken with a body double, so I sat with a lawyer for six weeks and I took out those shots. (“Erica Jong Screens *Lolita*”)

We can surmise that Lyne intended a more sexual representation of his film version of *Lolita*. However, the prevailing cultural climate made a sexualised *Lolita* almost impossible. He places his iteration of *Lolita* within the culture of the 1990s, stating that: “[s]ix years ago, when [he] started ... there really wasn’t this sort of obsession with pedophilia that there is now ... [Y]ou weren’t reading about it on a daily basis” (“Erica Jong Screens *Lolita*”). The restraints of contemporary culture impacted upon the art that Lyne wanted to produce, as he himself noted when stating that “pedophilia is the last taboo...People want to believe that sexuality flies in conveniently at the legal age of 18, and it’s just not true” (“Erica Jong Screens *Lolita*”). His film, and the process of filming it, thus, becomes a commentary on the 1990s and what was deemed appropriate during a decade that was saliently bookended by President Bill Clinton’s 1998 impeachment resulting from perjury over supposed sexual misconduct.

While art will always be impacted by the time and cultural context from which it derives, the sensitive subject of *Lolita* makes it replete with opportunity for contemporary culture to impact on, and be critiqued by, it. Nabokov provided the anonymous figure that

would be a blank canvas for future iterations of the narrative. Kubrick's film, like his *Quilty*, winked at the 1960s censors. Both director and actor dared to villainise heteronormative suburbia, transforming anonymity into ambiguity. Lyne's film, like his *Quilty*, loomed dangerously, threatening censors with subject matter of hyper-significance in the 1990s. *Lolita*, the eponymous girl, loses her subjectivity to masculine control—Humbert, *Quilty*, Nabokov, Kubrick or Lyne—and the culture into which she is born and reborn. Perhaps the publicity byline should have read: “When will they make a movie of *Lolita*?”.

## Acknowledgement

I thank Professor Julian Connolly for personally emailing me his essay “A Close Reading of the Enchanted Hunters Scene”.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Nabokov began work on a script for Kubrick in 1959, a script Kubrick largely ignored to which Nabokov's “first reaction ... was a mixture of aggravation, regret and reluctant pleasure” (Nabokov xiii).

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Appel provides a complete “telescopic” list of the appearances of Clare Quilty throughout the novel on page 349 of the 1970 annotated version that I used for this analysis.

<sup>3</sup> *Grues* is French slang for prostitute, as noted by Appel (343).

<sup>4</sup> To show the tenderness with which Humbert thought of *Lolita*, I reference the last lines of the novel, which refer to his confessional as “the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my *Lolita*” (311).

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Appel was a student of Nabokov's at Cornell University. His 1970 edition of Nabokov's *Lolita* provides the original text, as well as detailed, scholarly notes about patterns, characters and Nabokov's various references to other texts throughout his narrative.

<sup>6</sup> Author's translation.

<sup>7</sup> *Lolita* says the same words in all versions of *Lolita*.

<sup>8</sup> Released in the UK in May 1998, Lyne's *Lolita* grossed £73,685 on its opening weekend. Comparably, it grossed just \$19,492 on its opening weekend in the US two months later. By November of that year, the US gross was a modest \$1,060,056 for a film with an estimated budget of 58 million dollars (“IMDB”, *Lolita*).

## Work Cited

- Bick, Isla J. ““That Hurts!’: Humor and Sadoomaschism in *Lolita*”. *Journal of Film and Video*. 46.2 (Summer 1994): 3–18. Print.
- Burke, Ken. “Novel to Film, Frame to Windows: The Case of *Lolita* as Text and Image”. *Pacific Coast Philology*. 38 (2003): 16–24. Print.
- Connolly, Julian. “A Close Reading of the Enchanted Hunters Scene”. *Lolita: From Nabokov to Kubrick to Lyne*. ed. Erik Martigny. Paris: Sedes, 2009. Print.
- “Erica Jong Screens *Lolita* With Adrian Lyne”. *Observer.com*. *The New York Observer*. 6 June 1998. <<http://observer.com/1998/06/erica-jong-screens-lolita-with-adrian-lyne/>> Web. 12 November 2012.
- Gabbard, Krin. “The Circulation of Sadoomasocistic Desire in the *Lolita* Texts”. *Journal of Film and Video*. 46.2 (Summer 1994) 19–30. Print.
- Kubrick, Stanley. Dir. *Lolita*. Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1962. Film.
- . Dir. *A Clockwork Orange*. Warner Brothers, 1971. Film.
- “*Lolita* (1997)-Box Office/Business”. Internet Movie Database. *IMDB*. <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119558/business>> Web. 12 November 2012.
- Lyne, Adrian. Dir. *Lolita*. Pathé, 1997. Film.
- Manolescu, Monica. “Voiles et caravansérails: l’Orient dans *Lolita*”. *Sillages Critiques*. (Nov. 2010): 1–29. <<http://sillagescritiques.revues.org/1657>> Web. 12 November 2012.
- Nabokov, Vladimir, and Alfred Appel. *The Annotated Lolita: Ed., with Preface, Introduction and Notes by Alfred Appel Jr.* New York, Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1970. Print.
- . *Lolita: A Screenplay*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997. Print.
- Schuman, Samuel. ““*Lolita*”: Novel and Screenplay”. *College Literature*. 5.3 (Fall 1978): 195–204. Print.
- Webster, Patrick. *Love and Death in Kubrick: A Critical Study of the Films from Lolita Through Eyes Wide Shut*. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011. Print.

**Suggested Citation**

Richards, Emerson. “‘I Get Sort of Carried Away, Being So Normal and Everything’: The Oscillating Sexuality of Clare Quilty and Humbert Humbert in the works of Nabokov, Kubrick and Lyne”. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 4 (Winter 2012). Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.

**Emerson Storm Fillman Richards** is an MA candidate in the English Department at the University of Florida, under the chairmanship of Terry Harpold and William Calin. She primarily studies Medieval literature. When she is not researching monasticism, Celtic literatures, Jules Verne or Arthuriana, she is in the film suite, making experimental short films on 16 & 8 mm celluloid.