

**HUMBERT'S STRANGE LOVE:**  
**Sexuality through the Historical Time Frames of *Lolita***



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## Introduction

In Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Bend Sinister* (1947), he asked his readers not to extract any hidden meaning or symbols and metaphors from a work that is overtly critical of the totalitarian regime of the fictional "Communazis". Nabokov disclaimed political readings, stating in the introduction to that he never wrote the novel as "literature of social comment": "I am neither a didacticist nor an allegorizer," he explained. "Politics and economics, atomic bombs, (...) the Future of Mankind, and so on, leave me supremely indifferent" (vi). Despite this appeal, other critics suggest that Nabokov's novels cannot be treated separately from the historical context in which they were written.

In the Afterword "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," Nabokov again stresses he "detest[s] symbol and allegories" and that the story "has no moral in tow" (314). He also declared in an interview with *Playboy* magazine that his "[political] desires are modest." In his opinion, "portraits of the head of the government should not exceed a postage stamp in size. No torture and no executions. No music, except coming through the earphones, or played in theatres" (*Strong Opinions* 35). Although less conspicuously than *Bend Sinister*, *Lolita* (1955) is interweaved with references to the Second World War and its aftermath in the development of nuclear weapons in the United States. The sociopolitical background of post-war America, which Humbert Humbert encounters after "the gloom of yet another world war [has] settled on the globe" (32), is a key element of *Lolita*'s fictional world; a "gloom" of which Nabokov witnessed the early stages during his life in Europe.

Martin Amis, admirer and noted critic of Nabokov, suggested how *Lolita* reflects only fleetingly on the traumatic events of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. In a bad dream, a nightmare he has shortly after *Lolita*'s disappearance, Humbert Humbert is

haunted by images of “brown wigs of tragic old women who had just been gassed” (254). According to Amis this is “proof of the fact that style, that prose itself, can control morality” (Amis). Other critics have also argued that the Second World War and its nuclear aftermath are indeed deeply rooted in Nabokov’s most celebrated novel. Susan Mizruchi and Douglas Anderson both discussed Humbert’s mysterious European background and his fascination with race. Adam Piette finds, “threaded through the wearisome jocularity of Humbert’s prose, (...) intimations of war and Cold war” (82). Similarly, Anderson distinguishes “a range of associations” (87), indicating how the obsession with nuclear firepower during the 1950s is a important to fully appreciate the historical context of *Lolita*.

In its turn, this paper will explore and analyze these discussions to establish a comprehensive notion of the post-war consciousness of the novel. Firstly, it will review Stanley Kubrick’s cinematic interpretation of the Cold War in *Dr. Strangelove*, interpreting its theme of sex as an extension of Kubrick’s adaptation of *Lolita*. Subsequently, this concept is extended to Piette’s premise about “the sexualization of nuclear technology” (91) in *Lolita*’s 1950s setting. Finally, Humbert’s obscure European background and his obsession with the human body. Moving from the 1960s to the Second World War, this paper intends to show how, through the different time frames, the theme of sexuality exposes the backbone of *Lolita*: the “secret points” and “subliminal co-ordinates” (316) of Humbert’s strange love.

## 1960s – Film and Sexuality: Stanley Kubrick and the Cold War

In a 1972 interview with *Newsweek* film director Stanley Kubrick reflected on his film adaptation of Nabokov's *Lolita*: "Had I realised how severe the [censorship] limitations were going to be, I probably wouldn't have made the film" (Corliss 12). Richard Corliss counts "In two-and-a-half hours of *Lolita* [...] but eight kisses," of which "Most are as chaste as Carmelite's lips" (59). Nevertheless, *Lolita* was released in Britain under an 'X' rating by the British Board of Film Censors, and, despite its approved rating in the United States, children were rejected from its screenings. Sue Lyon, who played Lolita and was fifteen years old when it was released, wanted to attend the Hollywood premiere but was not allowed in (Corliss 60). Strangely enough, Kubrick's widely celebrated comedy *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* was released under an "Approved"-rating, allowing all ages to attend its screening ("MPAA rating"). Yet, *Dr. Strangelove*, which centers around the Cold War's nuclear threat, is at its heart a movie about sex and sexual dominance: a theme Kubrick intended to explore in *Lolita*. The absence of sexual and erotic innuendos in *Lolita* is rectified by the dark satire of *Dr. Strangelove*.

"The eroticism of the story," Kubrick reflected on *Lolita*, "served a very important purpose in the book," but due to censorship restrictions, he was unable to make the film more like the original story. In the book, the eroticism "obscured any hint that Humbert loved Lolita (...) It was very important to delay an awareness of his love until the end of the story. I'm afraid that this was all too obvious in the film" (Corliss). Whereas, in *Dr. Strangelove*, the theme of nuclear annihilation is merely a veil under which hides a film about sexual obsessions. Kubrick was well aware of the

parallels between sexual and nuclear domination and remodeled Humbert's strange love into the Nazi professor Dr. Strangelove.

*Dr. Strangelove* lends it comedic quality for a large part to the names of the characters which bear sexual connotations. General Jack D. Ripper, who initiates the attack on the Soviet Union, accuses the Communists of an "international [...] conspiracy to sap and impurify all of our precious bodily fluids" ("Continuity Transcript"). The real problem of his "loss of essence" is his impotence. His cigar and the machine gun allude to his frustration with his male member. The name of the President, Merkin Muffley, is based on the word for a pubic wig for women, but also contains the slang term for the female sex organ, muff. General Buck Turgidson, the slightly juvenile, yet rugged warmonger, lends his name to his physique: Buck, which means 'male' with its various connotations, and turgid, meaning 'swollen'. Captain Mandrake's name comes from the phallic-shaped mandrake root, which is considered an aphrodisiac, promoting fertility. Yet, the most important name is that of the sinister Nazi advisor of the President. Doctor Strangelove, in a wheelchair, impotent, is a German scientist. In the final scene of the film he proposes his plan "to preserve a nucleus of human specimens [...] at the bottom of some of our deeper mineshafts," for when Doomsday Machine will be set off. "The radioactivity would never penetrate a mine some thousands of feet deep," he explains in his thick German accent. "With the proper breeding techniques and a ratio of say, ten females to each male, I would guess that they could then work their way back to the present gross national product within say, twenty years." Strangelove's plan is based on sexual reproduction and the continuity of a race in which the women have "the sexual characteristics [...] of a highly stimulating nature"; note the word "penetrate". To preserve the entire human race in this small community – or, *gemeinschaft* – in the

mine shaft, “each man will be required to do prodigious service along these lines”. Aroused by his own ingenuity, the impotent Doctor Strangelove gets out of his wheelchair, proud and erect, yelling “*Mein Führer!* I can walk!” In *Dr. Strangelove*, which was initially intended as a dramatization about nuclear power struggles, Kubrick reduces Cold War diplomacy to a contest about who, metaphorically speaking, wields the largest weapon.



Peter Sellers as Doctor Strangelove. “That arm hated the rest of the body for having made a compromise. That arm was a Nazi”

Another contemporary film, that recognized the theme of sexuality in the nuclear obsession during of the Cold War, was *Dr. No*. Through this film, Stanley Kubrick became interested in set designer Ken Adam, after seeing the set he designed for the original Bond movie. Adam designed the now famous war room of Kubrick’s film. Interestingly enough, not only the titles of the two films have the character of a doctor in common, but centre around radioactivity. *Dr. No*, the screen adaptation of

Ian Fleming's sixth James Bond novel, tells of a German-born villain who lost his hand in nuclear experiment, changed his name when he came to the United States, and wants to manipulate the courses of American missiles. He mines guano – sea bird excrement used as fertilizer – to use as missile ammunition, and in the novel he dies when he is buried under a heap of guano. Perhaps also influenced by *Dr. No*, is the black glove that Peter Sellers wears in guise of Doctor Strangelove. “Maybe he had some injury in a nuclear experiment of some sort,” Kubrick suggested when Sellers and himself came up with the idea of the black glove. “I gave the arm a life of its own,” Sellers reflected. “That arm hated the rest of the body for having made a compromise. That arm was a Nazi” (Stillman 494).

“The wheelchair motif is harder to source with confidence,” according to Grant B. Stillman. “But it probably has some inspiration in the sexually frustrated, war-scarred, intellectual husband of Lady Chatterley in D.H. Lawrence's novel. The novel was going through hard-fought obscenity trials for release in the early 1960s” (494), and argues that this must certainly have caught Kubrick's attention after his struggle with the censorship for his adaptation, or in effect, rereading of *Lolita*: “men at war and men and sex are one and the same” (Roger Lewis 772). As viewers of *Lolita* should note is that Kubrick dismissed most of Nabokov's script, and that Peter Sellers' improvisation had major influences on the dialogues. In his Sellers biography, Roger Lewis concludes that there is a “sensation of heaviness and soullessness” (775) in Stanley Kubrick's films, which attracted Sellers. “The irony, of course, is that *Doctor Strangelove* [...] is not about love, but death,” as is *Lolita* “not about insemination, but annihilation” (772).

### 1950s – Radioactivity and Sexuality: Time and Location in Humbert’s Narrative

Nabokov famously declared that “one cannot *read* a book: one can only reread it” (*Lectures on Literature* 3). Rereading is like looking at a painting, he explains: the reader has taken the time to see the whole picture, now it is time to focus on the details that “yield the sensual spark without which a book is dead.” To understand the importance of details, “diagrams are most helpful,” Nabokov argued: James Joyce’s *Ulysses* should be taught using maps of Bloom’s and Stephen’s “intertwining itineraries” (*Strong Opinions* 157) to visualize and enjoy its art. In this respect, Adam Piette constructed a theory that is based on the importance of mapping the locations of *Lolita* in order to recognize this “sensual spark.” Like Kubrick, Piette considers sexuality analogous to radioactivity: a *leitmotif* that he argues is deeply rooted in the historical importance of the novel’s “subliminal co-ordinates”. Anderson, in his turn, parallels Humbert Humbert’s itinerary to the major event of the Cold War. In order to fully appreciate Piette’s and Anderson’s analyses, the reader should be aware of Nabokov’s indirect connection to one of America’s most controversial cultural organizations during the Cold War.

At the height of the Cold War, the United States established a vast program of cultural propaganda that was to infiltrate Western Europe. At the heart of this venture was the Congress of Cultural Freedom (CCF), secretly managed and subsidized by the CIA. The Congress published art and literary magazines, held exhibitions, organized international conferences, and propagated musicians and artist into the limelight, in order to “nudge the intelligentsia of Western Europe away from its lingering fascination with Marxism and Communism towards a view more accommodating of ‘the American way’” (Stonor 1). One of its most influential members was Nicolas

Nabokov, Vladimir's cousin. By initiating a large cultural festival, he positioned the Congress as one the CIA's most important devices during of the cultural Cold War.

Like Vladimir, Nicolas Nabokov fled Europe and became an American citizen in 1939. As a talented composer and a music teacher at various colleges, Nicolas was part of the highbrow émigré society in the United States. Both cousins stayed in contact throughout their lives, spending summers together and attending the same émigré meetings (*American Years*). In 1950, CIA agent Michael Josselson appointed Nicolas Nabokov General Secretary of the Congress of Cultural Freedom. Although both Vladimir and Nicolas were part of the post-War American intelligentsia, Nicolas was well aware of the Congress's clandestine financial foundation, directing "constant efforts (...) towards proving to European intellectuals that the Congress for Cultural Freedom is not an American secret service Agency" (Stonor 103).

From 1953 the CCF published *Encounter*, a literary magazine, which held an important position in post-war literary circles up to 1990. Michael Josselson referred to it as "our greatest asset" (165-66). It printed contributions by the world's most influential writers, among which Nicolas's cousin Vladimir Nabokov, whose essays on Pushkin were published in 1962. All the articles that were to be published – which in all cases were "resolutely ideological, an integer of anti-Communist Cold War thinking" (Stonor 165) – were to be authorized by its main editors, among which Nicolas. Vladimir would not have recognized his cousin's work as cultural propaganda, but it might very well have influenced his general notion of how the Cold War could be represented in literature; a theme that both Adam Piette and Douglas Anderson trace throughout *Lolita*.

In “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” Nabokov explains what “are the nerves of the novel,” which he realizes, “will be skimmed over or not noticed” by most readers. “Pale, pregnant, beloved, irretrievable Dolly Schiller dying (...), or the tinkling sounds of the valley town coming up the mountain trail” are two of these “nerves” of “the secret points, the subliminal co-ordinates by means of which the book is plotted” (316). Adam Piette takes these statements as the inception of his analysis, linking Lolita’s death and the small mining village to the prospecting of uranium in the Midwestern United States. What is a seemingly random association between Lolita’s given name and the Dolores River, is central to his examination of the text. Through the namesake, as Piette shows, Nabokov connects the fictional world of the novel to his personal experiences with uranium and its importance in the Cold War era of the United States.

Every summer, as Nabokov explains to the reader in his Afterword, his wife Véra and himself would go butterfly hunting in places such as “Telluride, Colorado; Afton, Wyoming; Portal, Arizona; and Ashland, Oregon,” (312) where he also worked on *Lolita*. This is the same region, nicknamed the Four Corners (where Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and Utah border), through which the Dolores River runs. In the 1950s, the Four Corners area was famously known for uranium prospecting (Ringholz). “At such headquarters,” (312) Nabokov witnessed the uranium rush, instigated by the governments demand for the mineral in order to produce the nation’s nuclear weapons. Piette draws a connection between this location and Nabokov’s travels, taking from Brian Boyd’s *Nabokov’s Butterflies* the fact that he discovered “the first female of the *Lycaeides sublivens*” (76) in this area. In one of the letters to his friend Edmund Wilson, Nabokov describes a small mining village. Overlooking a valley, “the voices of children playing in the streets” reached

him “on the steep slope high above Telluride” (*Dear Bunny* 249). This happy memory is echoed in the final scene of the *Lolita*, just before Humbert Humbert is arrested for murder:

“Reader! What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and as limpid was the air that within this vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic – one could hear now and then, as if released an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter, or the crack of a bat, or the clatter of a toy wagon, but it was all really too far for the eye to distinguish any movement in the lightly etched streets. [...] I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord” (307-08).

The village Humbert overlooks in this climatic scene of the novel is one of the many mining towns that were set up by uranium prospectors in the area. To produce the atomic defense, the US government paid a good price for the mineral, consequently attracting many fortune seekers to the Colorado plateau. With their “rich, ore-like glitter”, the radioactive “vapory vibration of accumulated sounds” of children at play, make Humbert Humbert “wipe his foul mouth”. It is almost as if Humbert Humbert – or rather “H.H.” – is the personification of the thermonuclear H-bomb’s hydrogen isotopes when the chain reaction is activated: like “A very light cloud [...] opening its arms and moving toward a slightly more substantial one belonging to another, a more sluggish, heavenlogged system” (307).

Piette recognizes a correlation similar to Kubrick’s association between the nuclear war and sexuality. Arguing that a “connection between girl-child and nation is developed round the trope of uranium” (85), *Lolita* “represents the forbidden and secret precious metal, radiating nymphet energy, it is he [Humbert] who is the lethal

and sterilizing force” (92-93). He points out many of the obscured references to the atomic bomb, radioactivity and combustion. Piette links the premature births and stillborn babies in the novel to the effects of nuclear bomb testing and uranium mining on the human body: not only “Mrs. ‘Richard F. Schiller’ die[s] in childbed, giving birth to a stillborn girl” (*Lolita* 4), but also Valeria, “the comedy wife” (30), has the same faith. Charlotte’s friend Jean Farlow also has two miscarriages before dying of cancer herself. Humbert also recalls signs in motels “asking guests not to throw into its [toilet] bowl garbage, beer cans, cartons, stillborn babies” (146), and at one point observes a “pregnant young wife” with her baby “and the other, more or less cancelled child” (215). Moreover, Humbert has one of his first sexual experiences with Annabel “in the violet shadow of some red rocks forming a kind of cave” (13), reminding the reader of Colorado, also known as Red Rock Country: “[Annabel’s] face [...] emitted a faint radiance” (14). Images of combustion reoccur throughout the novel. When Lolita leaves Humbert for Camp Q, and runs upstairs to kiss him goodbye, his heart “expanded with such force that it almost blotted [him] out” (66). A similar “case of internal combustion” (131) excites Humbert during their first night together in the Enchanted Hunters.

Douglas Anderson shows how there is a strong correlation between the events in *Lolita* and the important dates of nuclear development in the United States. Nabokov “clusters a range of associations” (87) that parallel the decisive moments in the course of the Cold War and the “technological holocaust” (87). Anderson illustrates these between the fictional and non-fictional years of 1947 and 1949: the years during which Humbert fosters Lolita, which are also the years during which the American government nurtured the development of its nuclear power. Quilty’s

maneuver of checking Lolita out of the hospital, taking her into his custody, corresponds with the nuclear dominance, shifting from America to Russia.



The nuclear mushroom cloud from the Baker test, part of Operation Crossroads on the Bikini island, July 25, 1946.

On 1 January, 1947, “Lolita’s [twelfth] birthday” (85), the Armed Forces Special Weapons Project (the AFSWP) was established to assume responsibility for all military service functions of the Manhattan Project: assembling and testing the weapons. The AFSWP participated in weapons development, in coordination with the Atomic Energy Commission, which was under civilian control (Buck). This separation of the Manhattan Project into two specialized organization meant to facilitate the development of America’s nuclear power. What Anderson perhaps fails to see is the fact that it was not until August 15, 1949, that the Manhattan District was permanently terminated. Coincidental or not, this is the exact same day Humbert leaves Ramsdale after Charlotte Haze’s death to pick up Lolita at Camp Q. As the atomic bomb loses its official home, Lolita is removed from hers.

Two years later, America’s nuclear monopoly turned out to be an illusion when President Truman announced on August 23, 1949, “within recent weeks an

atomic explosion occurred in the U.S.S.R.” (“Harry S. Truman”). The U.S. Air Force had been under the impression that “the earliest possible date” a Russian bomb could be produced was “mid-1951”, and the “most probable date” even mid-1953. In these “recent weeks” (National Security Archive) Humbert – to his own bewilderment – loses exclusive possession of Lolita when he is taken over by the “Red Aztec convertible” (227): Monday, the fourth of July, shortly after Humbert has been listening to the firecrackers – the “veritable bombs” (245) – of the Independence Day celebrations, Quilty checks Lolita out of the Elphinstone hospital. Subsequently, “between July 5 and November 18”, Humbert sets out on a wild goose chase, staying “at 342 hotels, motels and tourist homes” (248), trying to track down Lolita. Never will Humbert have her under his wing again, nor would the US ever again be the sole nuclear power of the world.

Humbert’s tragic story ends when he dies “in legal captivity, of coronary thrombosis, on November 16, 1952” (*Lolita* 3): the exact same day the world’s largest fission bomb was tested (Bhushan 66)<sup>1</sup>. The Ivy King bomb – “K” for kiloton – was part of a series of tests in Project Ivy held on the Enewetak Atoll of the Marshall Islands. At 500 kilotons, it was thirty times more powerful than Little Boy, which was dropped on Hiroshima seven years earlier. The bomb was made of highly enriched uranium, or oralloy, also known as a SOB (Super Oralloy Bomb), harmonizing with Lolita’s “sobs in the night – every night, every night – the moment [Humbert] feigned sleep” (176), and reminding of “Standard Operational Bullshit”, military slang for

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson calls Humbert’s death “strategically timed” (87) but miscalculates that the Ivy King test took place on the 17th of November, “the day after Humbert Humbert’s fictive heart attack” (85). The bomb was tested on the 16<sup>th</sup>, 11.30 am local time, at the Enewetak Atoll: the actual day of Humbert’s death. This means that at the moment of the explosion (assuming Humbert was in legal custody in Colorado at the time, in the MDT zone) this was the 15<sup>th</sup>: the day *before* Humbert Humbert’s fictive heart attack.

obeying protocol, as the soldiers in *Dr. Strangelove*'s B-52 do<sup>2</sup>. This particular nuclear reaction, reaching the practical limits of atomic weaponry and marking the end of America's nuclear development, "expand[ed] with such force that it [...] blotted [Humbert] out" (66): the "ultimate sunburst" (90).

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<sup>2</sup> *Nota bene*: S.O.B. today also stands for the Sexual Offences Bill that was passed in the UK in 2003, which focusses on rape and sexual abuse of children, like Lolita, under the age of thirteen (UK Parliament).

### 1940s - Race and Sexuality: Humbert's European Background

According to Susan Mizruchi "Reading *Lolita* in history is necessary to its deepest appreciation" (630). For this historical understanding of the novel the reader is required to attend the "twin time frames the novel invokes directly and more often indirectly" (631): the nuclear era, and on the other hand the European years during and before the war which led to this. Humbert's carefully recorded journal reminds the reader how "the gloom of yet another World War has settled upon the globe" (32), and shows many other traces of his European background. By drawing on Douglas Anderson's analysis, Mizruchi suggests a "holocaust subtext" (631) in *Lolita* that implies a relationship between Humbert and Nazi Germany, associating Humbert's sexual misdeeds to the racial obsessions of the Nazi regime.

Humbert, born to "a salad of racial genes: A Swiss citizen, of mixed French and Austrian decent, with a dash of Danube in his veins" (*Lolita* 9), sporadically falls back into German and French tongues. Throughout the novel Humbert's name is mistaken to be German, and, as John Ray explains, the "author's bizarre cognomen is his own invention," and a "mask – through which two hypnotic eyes seem to glow" (3). These biographical features, Humbert's obscured European background, his name and the glowing "hypnotic eyes", raise questions about the obscured history of the person behind this "mask".

As Anderson points out, not only the reader but also the characters in the novel question Humbert's background. Like Nabokov, Humbert has a great eye for detail, classifying people and the things around him. Very aware of racial differences, he classifies himself as "a White Widowed Male" (3), and tends to put all of the people he recalls in his memoir into distinctive categories. For instance, *Lolita's*

precursor, Annabelle, is like himself “of mixed parentage”; he distinguishes “apron pot-scrubbers” from “flannelled potentate” and “Elderly American ladies leaning on their canes” (10). He speaks of “the plump, glossy little Eskimo girls with their fish smell, hideous raven hair and guinea pig faces” (33) and describes Charlotte Haze as a “not unattractive feature of a type that may be defined as a weak solution of Marlene Dietrich” (37). More importantly, Humbert makes a distinction between ordinary girls or women, and nymphets: “My world was split. I was aware of not one but two sexes, neither of which was mine; both would be termed female by the anatomist. But to me, through the prism of my senses, ‘they were as different as mist and mast’” (18).

Continuing his lecture on the nymphet-gender, he flaunts his scientific knowledge: “The bud-stage of breast development appears early (10.7 years) in the sequence of somatic changes accompanying pubescence. And the next maturational item available is the first appearance of pigmented pubic hair (11.2 years)” (20). Anderson suggests that this obsession with sex stems in his general interest in race, just as “the Nazi obsession with ‘race’ was by necessity an obsession with sex” (78). He warns the reader not to view Humbert’s sexual obsession as his “individual disease,” but as part of this historical background.

Building on Anderson discussion of Humbert’s obsession with sex and race, Susan Mizruchi analyses Humbert preference for incest as the ideal relationship with Lolita. She argues that incest in Humbert’s eyes is a “perverse drama of blood purity,” and, similar to the Nazi protection of a pure race, “a means of preserving unadulterated kinship lines” (Mizruchi 635). The Nazi regime disapproved of partnerships that would contaminate, or even obstruct the improvement of a purer Aryan breed. This obsession with race was by necessity an obsession with sex: “an area of knowledge in which Humbert Humbert too is expert” (78).

Like Nabokov's obsession with Lepidoptera, Humbert is obsessed by scientific experiment. Humbert's journal, which is not only important to the plot and the narrative, shows his obsession with keeping records. He records dates, and, "with a clock-like regularity" (Mizruchi 632), Humbert reminds the reader of the current date, time, and even detailed descriptions of the weather. He even writes down what fragments of his memoir would make good film scenes. He even argues that "Nowadays you have to be a scientist if you want to be a killer". Ironically enough, he adds that, "No, no, [he] was neither" (87). Of course, by the time of writing his confessional memoir, Humbert knows he is a killer indeed. We might assume, then, from his "hush-hush" arctic exploration "somewhere on Prince of Wales' Island" (33) he considers himself a scientist as well.

Drawing from this scientific background, Anderson suggests that the motif of twins establishes a connection between Humbert's experimental sexual relationship and the "prominence of twins among Nazi doctors" (79). A memoir by a Nazi camp-survivor, the Hungarian physician Gisella Perl, recounts Nazi doctor Josef Mengele's interest in multiplying the German manpower and the Aryan race through the mystery of multiple births. Similarly, Humbert has a keen eye for the occurrences of twins throughout his own memoir. Firstly, the reader should notice the exceptional number of twins in the Ramsdale class of "Haze, Dolores": the Beales, Cowans, Mirandas and the Talbot twins, with in the middle "(she!)" (52). The motif is delicately extended as a reference to one of the motels Humbert and Lolita stay in on their way to Elphinstone:

Again we were welcomed to wary motels by means of inscriptions that read: 'We wish you to feel at home while here. *All* equipment was carefully checked upon your arrival. Your license number is on record here. Use hot water sparingly. We reserve the right to eject without notice any objectionable

person. Do not throw waste material of *any* kind in the toilet bowl. Thank you. Call again. The Management. P.S. We consider our guests the Finest People of the World.'

In these frightening places we paid ten for twins, flies queued outside at the screenless door and successfully scrambled in, the ashes of our predecessors still lingered in the ashtrays, a woman's hair lay on the pillow, one heard one's neighbor hanging his coat in his closet, the hangers were ingeniously filed to their bars by coils of wire so as to thwart theft, and, in crowning insult, the pictures above the twin beds were identical twins. (210)

"The bitter parody of hospitality," echoes the camp discipline that Gisella Perl would have experienced in Auschwitz: the queueing flies, the "coils of wire". Perhaps most sadistically, the "ashes of [...] predecessors still linger[ing] in the ashtrays" and "a woman's hair [...] on the pillow" conjure up the frightening images of the Nazi work camps and their barbaric "Management". Mizruchi points out that Humbert, who calls himself "a very conscientious recorder" (72), echoes the statement of Nuremberg defendant Hans Frank: "[M]y own diary bears witness against me" (Mizruchi 642), and so it proves how Humbert Humbert's confession, reflects, as it does, the *zeitgeisten* of the 1940s to the '60s.

## Conclusion

After leaving Europe's growing Nazi threat, Vladimir Nabokov closely witnessed the development of the nuclear Cold War in America during the 1950s, as well as the Cultural Cold War that was fought by his cousin. These form the basis of *Lolita* and its "subliminal co-ordinates".

Not only does it form the backdrop of his travels with Lolita, it forms Humbert Humbert as a character, through whom the reader must recognize the "holocaust subtext". Susan Mizruchi associates Humbert's obsession with Lolita, and the nymphet in general, with that of the Nazi obsessions with race: Humbert has a very keen eye, is a careful recorder of details and distinguishes human types. Both Humbert's obsessions with nymphets, as well as the Nazi obsession with the Jewish and Aryan human types are at its heart obsessions with sex.

Another important connection is that of time and place in *Lolita* and during the Cold War. The important dates of Humbert's existence in Nabokov's fiction, as Douglas Anderson shows, correlate with the terrifying history of America's development of nuclear arms, reaching its climax at Humbert's death when the largest atomic bomb of the time was detonated. Adam Piette traces Nabokov's travels back to the Four Corners area – near the Dolores River – where uranium mines made the development of nuclear warheads possible. He also shows how fiction and reality blend in the final scene of *Lolita* when Humbert awaits his arrest on a hillside, overlooking a small mining village.

When Stanley Kubrick ventured upon the task to make an adaptation of *Lolita*, he struggled to work the theme of sexuality into his screen adaptation of the novel. Due to censorship the film was never realized to Kubrick's own fulfilment. Two years later, in his satiric dramatization of the Cold War, *Lolita*'s theme of sexuality finally

found its voice within the context of the Cold War. The film does not only associate nuclear warfare with the act of love and sexual dominance, it also spans a bridge to the Second World War when race was subject to scientific experiment under the Nazi regime. Through the character of Nazi scientist Doctor Strangelove, Kubrick subtly exposes what Nabokov called the “subliminal co-ordinates” of *Lolita*, and shows how rereading – and, in a sense, the refilming of Humbert’s strange love – gives way to a fuller appreciation of *Lolita*’s historical context.

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