

Relationship, Identity and Mass Media: the Consumer Culture in Nabokov's *Lolita*

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Abstract

Lolita, a novel of controversies since being published due to its erotic theme, actually reflected its writer Nabokov's insightful observation on the consumer culture in 1950s America. In the novel, the relationship between Humbert Humbert and Lolita turned to be a business transaction; Humbert's clothing consumption for Lolita was a process of refashioning her identity; the mass media such as advertisements and movies deluded Lolita. Both as European intellectual elite, through the protagonist Humbert Humbert's narration, Nabokov satirized ironically the illusory and deceitful characteristics of commodities' signified symbols and the whole system.

Keywords: *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov, consumer culture

Introduction

Restricted by the strict censorship of American press industry in 1950s, the novel *Lolita*, with its controversial theme, was rejected to publish by five largest publishing companies separately. Till in 1955 the writer Vladimir Nabokov found a small publishing company in Paris called Olympia, notorious for publishing vulgar pornographic literatures, *Lolita* got published. With erotic motifs such as pedophilia and incest, *Lolita* quickly made tremendous hit by drawing European and American readers' and critics' attention once it was published. In 1959, Hollywood director Stanley Kubrick invited Nabokov to write a screenplay adapted from *Lolita* and shot a movie of the same name. In 1972, Nabokov published his original screenplay *Lolita*. In the following decades, *Lolita* has brought a wide and profound influence on the popular culture in America and even in the world. By virtue of this work, the Russian immigrant writer Nabokov built his fame and began his further successful literary career in the USA. Nabokov had expressed many times that his favorite and most contented work was *Lolita* in the interviews.

However, *Lolita* is not merely a work of vulgar erotic themes but an invention of America culture in the 1950s by a European elite member, significantly reflecting a European intellectual's deep insight to the American society and culture. In 1899, Vladimir Nabokov was born in a wealthy aristocratic family in St Petersburg, Russia, which provided him a good education background with a high taste in literature since he was little. Because of the outbreak of the February revolution in 1917, Nabokov as well as his family members was forced to slip into the exile in the Western Europe. In 1919, he was admitted to the University of Cambridge in the UK and his family inhabited in Berlin and Paris intermittently after his graduation. In 1940, in order to escape from the persecution of Nazi in Europe, Nabokov brought his Jewish wife to flee to America. After his migration into the USA, Nabokov taught respectively in Harvard University and Wellesley College. Then he continued to teach European and Russian literature in Cornell University for 11 years, mainly about the classic literary works and wrote literary criticisms including *Lectures on Literature*, *Lectures on Don Quixote*, *Lectures on Ulysses* and *Lectures on Russian Literature*. The same as the protagonist Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, Nabokov was also the representative of European modernist cultural elite. However, in order to meet the cultural orientation of American readers, in the process of novel writing, he intentionally modified the topic, diction and writing style, and mixed the American cultural elements into the novel. Nabokov once said, "I did not know any American 12-year-old girls, and I did not know America; I had to invent America and Lolita."¹

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: 1973), p. 26.

Unfortunately, due to the well-known controversy of *Lolita*'s erotic themes, readers tend to ignore the author's profound insights into American consumer society and his pungent satire to consumer culture in 1950s. With rapid economy booming and social wealth accumulating, America gradually has developed into the affluent society since World War II. At that time, American society was full of large quantities of goods and commodities produced by the large-scale industry represented by Fordism; Eisenhower government built up huge national traffic road network; the acceleration of urbanization and the development of mass media technology made American market consumption-oriented; commodities and trends were inclined to update constantly. In the novel, Humbert and Lolita had conducted with a large number of consuming and shopping activities. Apart from the consumption of sightseeing, accommodation, fixing car and gasoline fee in their traveling, Humbert spent a lot of money on merchandise given to Lolita, including clothing, snacks, toys, album, movie posters and so on. In addition, Lolita was also obsessed with mass media such as advertisements, movies and magazines. From the perspective of consumer culture, this thesis aims to reveal the fierce satire in *Lolita* given by Nabokov, a European intellectual of profound humanistic background, on the American consumer society where people were dominated by commodities. Furthermore, it was also implied that commodities as signified codes were illusioned and nihilistic, and in the consumer society people were no longer subjects of consumption conducts but the objects of commodities.

Humbert Humbert, Lolita and the Consuming Relationship

As a European intellectual fond of highbrow culture, when Humbert Humbert came to this new England countryside and saw Mrs. Haze' house for the first time, he would rather to leave immediately. He was unsatisfied with its dingy and old appearance as well as its vulgar and untidy interior decoration, moreover, he disliked shallow lord Mrs. Haze either. "Let's get out of here at once,"² Humbert said to himself. Even not so clever Mrs. Haze found out his dissatisfaction and said "I see you are not too favorably impressed."³ Then Mr. Humbert "groped for the timetable" in his pocket and "surreptitiously fished it out to look as soon as possible for a train."⁴ No sooner than he was going to leave and went through the greenery piazza, he saw his nymphet, his light of soul-Lolita. Next Humbert began to describe and imagine Lolita's body part from a male's point of view, "her shoulders, back, hair, breasts, abdomen, hips, then he changes his plan and decides to settle down here."⁵ The reason that made him to change his mind and decide to rent this house is Lolita, the only selling point of this unattractive commodity. At this moment the use value of this boarding house gave way to its signified value since Humbert was projecting his emotion on this commodity-the house and therefore associated Lolita to his young lover Annabel who had died years ago as well as identified with this signified image behind the signifier. What he valued was not the commodity not matched with his identity and taste, but the signified codes of commodities including a series of emotional experience, cultural association and illusion, which constituted the essence of Humbert's consumption.

Twelve-year-old Lolita grew up in this American consumer society who enjoyed indulging in the commodities world, believing in the hedonist life principle but not the restrained puritans' any more. Lolita was one representative of the commodity fetishism in the consumer society, not only worshiping material goods, but the whole system of commodities' signs. During their travelling, Lolita frequently asked to live in luxurious hotels or have meals in recommended restaurants. If they lived in the plainer motor courts, she would lose her temper and Humbert said that "the Lord knows how many nickels I fed to the gorgeous music boxes that came with every meal."⁶ Humbert induced Lolita to have sexual intercourse with him weekly using pocket money as a lure and each time when Lolita could not control her greed to buy desirous commodities asking for money, Humbert would take the chance to request the assorted caresses, until this sustained high expense made him feel stressed and unaffordable. On the other hand Lolita forced Humbert to increase her pocket money by degrees taking advantage of her own body, and finally the price of an embrace was up to 3 or 4 bucks.

² Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*. (Boston: 1997), p. 39.

³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*. (Boston: 1997), p. 40.

⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*. (Boston: 1997), p. 40.

⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*. (Boston: 1997), p. 40.

⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*. (Boston: 1997), p. 186.

Besides, she constantly asked for buying “sweenmeat, movie ticket”, and would be “listlessly” unless Humbert met her demand for money.⁷ The relationship between Humbert and Lolita became the one of consuming, in which Humbert spent money to buy Lolita's caresses and satisfy his physical lust, while Lolita spent the money she earned to buy snacks, toys, movie tickets which could satisfy her desire and illusion. After she fled away from Humbert, Lolita had begun a new life, married and pregnant, and she wrote a letter to Humbert in which she asked for meeting with him with the only purpose of asking for money. She wrote that “please do send us a check, Dad. We could manage with three or four hundred or even less, anything is welcome.”⁸ Ridiculously, the most sacred love for Humbert was nothing but a void maintained by money, meanwhile, their relationship descended to a mere plain commodity transaction.

Clothing Consumption and Refashioning Identity in the Novel

In Humbert and Lolita's list of commodities, apart from the goods asked by Lolita and their travelling expense, the only consumption that made Humbert willing and happy was to buy various clothes and shoes for Lolita. As soon as Mrs. Haze died in the car accident, Humbert could not wait to drive to a commercial center and spent the whole afternoon to buy beautiful clothes for Lolita. Humbert called it “crazy purchases”, and said that “check weaves, bright cottons, frills, puffed-out short sleeves, soft pleats, snug-fitting bodices and generously full skirts. Oh Lolita, you are my girl.”⁹ Then Humbert also bought various colorful swimming suit and different styled shoes for her, and kept the measurements of Lolita's body parts in his mind, including her exact “hip girth”, “thigh girth”, “calf girth”, “neck circumference”, “chest circumference”, “upper arm girth”, “waist stature”, “weight and so on.”¹⁰ In the small town Lepingville after Humbert told Lolita her mother's death, he once again bought her “garments swooners, shorts, all kinds of summer frocks.”¹¹

These commodities including dresses and shoes are a set of signified codes which represent at least two levels of signified symbols: commodity symbol and the patriarchal symbol. As for the commodity symbol, skirts and snug-fitting bodices have the most distinctive feminine characteristics and the bright color, weaves and pleats symbolize the image of a maid, which highlight the sexual feathers. Till now, this dressing style of Lolita in the novel has still made a great impact upon the world's fashion industry. Moreover, as for the patriarchal symbol, the body of Lolita turns to be the aesthetic object during the process of consumption under the gaze of men. With the male-centered narrative focus, Nabokov made Lolita to be the object of men's erotic delusion through the clothing consumption and body appreciation. “Women and the body have shared the same servitude, the same relegation, throughout Western history.”¹² “The sexual definition of woman is historical in origin: the repression of the body and the exploitation of women were carried out in the same spirit.”¹³ In the novel there is no comment given by Lolita on these clothes, which is intended by Nabokov to erase Lolita's subjectivity and merely make her to be the aesthetic object of men. By the consumption of clothes, Humbert refashioned Lolita to be “his girl” which reflected the power of commodities in the postmodernist society. However, identities are uncertain and fluid in the late capitalist culture and Lolita's identity decorated by commodities is illusory and temporary. After Lolita fled away from him, his love and lust to her were all in vain, and those clothes and shoes he bought for her become worthless finally.

The Deception of Mass Media in the Novel

The emergence of television, film, broadcast, advertising and other new media has changed people's behavior and social structure in the 20th century, and undoubtedly advertising is one of the most influential mass media. Advertisement, by encoding, can re-interpret and re-create an illusioned signified symbol of actual commodities, meanwhile it should be ensured that this signified symbol could be decoded by all consumers. Through the technology of mass media, the advertisement produced an unreal and fictional signified image to persuade consumers to buy, which is the most critical part of purchasing intention, producing hope and satisfying desire for consumers. Humbert satirized the deception and deceit of advertisement to Lolita in the novel.

⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*. (Boston: 1997), p. 231.

⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*. (Boston: 1997), p. 343.

⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*. (Boston: 1997), p. 131.

¹⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*. (Boston: 1997), p. 131.

¹¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*. (Boston: 1997), p. 181.

¹² Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London : Sage, 1998. 138

¹³ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London : Sage, 1998. 138

During the trip, Lolita always proposed to consume in the hotels and restaurants that were recommended in the travelling guide books. “She would pick out in the book, while I petted her in the parked car”, and questioned “why she could not go riding up some advertised trail or swimming in that local pool of warm mineral water.”¹⁴ Lolita was excited with these advertisements that could be seen everywhere on their journey while Humbert felt annoyed by them. Humbert said that “I was soon discouraged; but Lo kept following the scent of rich food ads”. He even felt scared about the explosive advertising promotion and said “I shudder when recalling that soi-disant ‘high-class’ resort in a Midwestern state.”¹⁵ After they left these expensive and unworthy hotel recommended in the advertisements, he complained that they were “robbers’ den”. The world-known critic Jean Baudrillard notices that advertisement is one of the most widely spread mass media and associates with commodities most intimately. It is a kind of “message”, “a message of segmentation and spectacularization, of misrecognition of the world and foregrounding of information as a commodity, of glorification of content as sign.”¹⁶ “In short, it performs a conditioning function” and “a function of misrecognition.”¹⁷ Meanwhile, advertisements could be viewed as an indicating system composed of symbols, whose signified meanings are much more diversified and advanced than their signifiers. That is the particular reason why Humbert felt disappointed at these real commodities after consumption while Lolita believed in the advertisements as her faith. “She believed, with a kind of celestial trust, any advertisement or advice that appeared in *Movie Love* or *Screen Land* Starasil Starves Pimples.”¹⁸ Humbert commented on Lolita that:

“If a roadside sign said: Visit Our Gift Shop we had to visit it, had to buy its Indian curios, dolls, cooper jewelry, cactus candy. The words ‘novelties and souvenirs’ simply entranced her by their trochaic lilt. If some caf sign proclaimed ice cold Drinks, she was automatically stirred, although all drinks everywhere were ice-cold. She was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster.”¹⁹

Like a daydream, advertisements having the “infantilizing function” and making “the basis of our belief in it,”²⁰ brought a type of carnival excitement to Lolita, who is eroticized by the image behind these advertisements. Humbert applied the word “foul” in the description of poster advertisements which implied that he had already recognized the fact of the advertisements’ coding system. On the surface, the common consumers, such as Lolita, are the subjects of advertisements and mass media, however, in fact, they are the disciplined objects of these advertisements’ producers and commodities’ manufacturers.

Besides believing in advertisements as her faith, Lolita was crazily fond of watching movies. She and Humbert took “one hundred and fifty or two hundred programs during that one year”, “and during some of the denser periods of movie-going”, they “saw many of the newsreels up to half-a-dozen times since the same weekly one went with different main pictures and pursued us from town to town.”²¹ Why was Lolita so addictive to watching movies? The great thinkers of Frankfurt School T. W. Adorno and M. M. Horkheimer believe that cultural industry can provide deceptive joy to audiences to satisfy themselves. The amusement caused by movies “always means putting things out of mind, forgetting suffering, even when it is on display.”²² “It is indeed escape, but not, as it claims, escape from bad reality but from the last thought of resisting that reality.”²³ Lolita frantically treated watching movies as a way of getting rid of reality and deluding herself. She loved performing on the stage at school; indulged in the dream of being a movie star in Hollywood; got close to the movie playwright Quietly; bought a large number of movie magazines and posters. The magic of movies lies in that they produce an illusion to make audiences believe what they watch actually happens in reality. “The more densely and completely its techniques duplicate empirical objects, the more easily it creates the illusion that the world outside is a seamless extension of the one which has been revealed in the cinema.”²⁴

¹⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*. (Boston: 1997), p. 185.

¹⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*. (Boston: 1997), p. 185.

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London : Sage, 1998. 124.

¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London : Sage, 1998. 124.

¹⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*. (Boston: 1997), p. 186.

¹⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*. (Boston: 1997), p. 186-187.

²⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*. (London, New York: 1996), p. 172.

²¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*. (Boston: 1997), p. 213.

²² Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. (Stanford: 2002), p. 116.

²³ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. (Stanford: 2002), p. 116.

²⁴ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. (Stanford: 2002), p. 99.

Movies emphasize “chance”²⁵, for example, a girl student might believe that there is no difference between her and the actress who plays the role of a student in the movie, thus, like many beautiful girls, Lolita eagerly looks forward to being a famous movie star overnight. Lolita's admiration for Quietly was derived from her worship to movies, however, Quietly did not help her to accomplish her star dream but induced her to make pornographic film, which ironically satirized the deception of movies and entertainment industry. On the contrary Humbert thought movies “unreal”, and he usually felt there was “nothing to show” during his watching or “the rest of the show was fog to me.”²⁶

Unfortunately, Lolita had been obsessed with the consumer society full of advertisements and movies, since she was 12 years old to her death in childbirth at 17, lost in the jungle of signified illusions of commodities. Rational and independent-thinking as Humbert was, who saw through the illusory quality of commodities, but his tragedy was that he fell in love with Lolita who was indulged in these signified symbols, what’s more, Lolita was the only shadow of his first lover.

Conclusion

In the consumer society described in the novel *Lolita*, people were surrounded and seized by the abundant goods, where those people like Lolita believed in commodity fetishism as their faith, relationship of men became a kind of business transaction and affections were materialized. Meanwhile, the signifiers of commodities were much inferior to a rich variety of signified symbols produced by commodities, real or sham, which made consumers to be indulged in totally losing their reason. Commodities empowered consumers with omnipotent rights and even could help to fashion identities, while those identities were the same as signified codes and symbols, illusory and changeable. The advertising, film and other mass media, as the persuasive statements subverting previous traditional logic, were only responsible for attracting consumers to buy rather than the products themselves. Nabokov created a world filled with commodities in the novel *Lolita* with the purpose of revealing the falsehood of those commodities’ signified symbols everywhere in the 1950s in America.

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²⁵ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. (Stanford: 2002), p. 117.

²⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*. (Boston: 1997), p. 213-214.