

# A postmodern cultural perspective in Lolita and a streetcar named Desire

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Postmodernism has emerged as a reaction to modernism thoughts and "well-established modernist systems". (Wikipedia, 2005) Specific to Nabokov's Lolita and Williams' Streetcar Named Desire is the idea that both of the novels are written under the view of postmodernism as a cultural movement and that they are broadly defined as the condition of Western society especially after World War II (period in which the novel were written; 1947 for Streetcar and 1955 for Lolita). While modernists viewed people as autonomous (capable of independent rational thought), postmodernists see human identity and thinking as the product of culture. (Xenos Christian Fellowship, 2005). The postmodern main assumption here is that culture and society create individuals as well as all their thoughts and attitudes. Lolita and A Streetcar Named Desire both treat of Cultural Relativism, which is the view that each culture has it's own truths that are relevant to them, but not relevant to other cultures. (Wikipedia, 2005) Economic changes, immigration, capitalism expansion, development of mass and popular culture, which result of the post-war period will also play a great role in defining cultural perspectives in Nabokov and Williams' stories and characters but also in defining the American culture itself. The main characters serve as archetypes of different cultures and symbolizes the integration of Europe in the the United States and a turn in the evolution and the definition of American culture itself. A Streetcar Named Desire portrays the decline of Blache's culture and the subsequent rise of Stanley's one. Blanche Dubois embodies Old Southern America values, defined by the Old South culture. The term originally came into use after the American Civil

War. (Wikipedia, 2005) Many southern whites used it with nostalgia to represent the memories of a time of prosperity, social order, "gracious living" and of white supremacy. It is also a reference to the past times of slavery and the plantation economy. Stanley Kowalski, embodies a rising member of the industrial immigrant class but also the "devil" of the cold war period which opposed Western and Eastern countries located on the other side of the Iron Curtain, such as Poland (which is Stanley's native land). He's the personification of modern practicality, crudeness and brutality. In *Lolita*, Humbert symbolizes the Old and erudite Europe, "the bespectated, round-backed Herr Humbert coming with his Central-European trunks to gather dust in his corner behind a heap of old books." (*Lolita*, p56) He is born in Paris with "a salad of racial genes: a Swiss citizen, of mixed French and Austrian descent, with a dash of the Danube in his veins" (*Lolita*, p. 9), who immigrates in New York (as a reference to the American dream). His arrival symbolizes his encounter with US capitalist culture "In New York I eagerly accepted the soft job fate offered me: it consisted mainly of thinking up and editing perfume ads" (*Lolita*, p. 32). But quickly, he will symbolize the European Influence when he will "complete my comparative history of French literature for English-speaking students" (*Lolita*, p. 32) *Lolita* portrays the young, fast-growing America, symbol of Humbert's dream, symbol of American dream. The Culture clash common to both novels creates a similar tension and an instable environment between the main characters of *Blanche and Stanley* in Williams' *Streetcar named Desire* and Humbert and *Lolita* in Nabokov's *Lolita*. In the two stories two characters, Stella in *Streetcar* and Charlotte Haze in *Lolita* serve as transitional character in the

culture clash. In *Streetcar*, the tension is symbolized by the Old South and the New South cultural encounter. Stella and Blanche come from a world that is rapidly dying. Belle Reve, their family's ancestral plantation, has been lost. The two sisters, symbolically, are the last living members of their family. At this point, Stella becomes a key figure in the cultural change: she's the transition between the two cultures. She mingled her blood with a man of blue-collar stock, and Blanche will enter the world of madness, which can be explained by this cultural shock. The distance between them is clear right at the beginning " some men are took in by this Hollywood glamour stuff and some men are not." (*Streetcar*, p. 89) Blanche's cultural relativism is extreme: she inappropriately judges Stanley's actions and culture, calling him a " polack" hence excluding him from being part of the New South culture. Stanley brutally reacts : " Pig, Polack, disgusting, vulgar, greasy [...] what do you think you are? A pair of queens? Remember what Huey Long said " Every man is a king!" And i am the king around here, so don't forget it" (*Streetcar*, p. 107) Blanche's final decline symbolizes the decline of civilization, the trampling of man's finer instincts by the brutality of the modern world. In *Lolita*, the tension is symbolized by the confrontation of Europe and the United States. Nabokov's novel is in any way an allegory of the culture clash between Old Europe and Young America. Humbert's European culture and background will play a more important role once he enters America. The cultural perspective about America is also symbolized from the main characters' relationship. Charlotte Haze is the transition between the two cultures as she will marry Humbert. She can be viewed as a symbol of bourgeois America; hopelessly striving toward European elegance, she is

instead stuck in American middle-class kitsch. Humbert's description is a foreword of Nabokov's cultural perspective: "Presently, the lady herself—sandals, marron slacks, yellow silk blouse, squarish face, in that order—came down to the steps, her index finger still tapping upon her cigarette [...] a type that may be defined as a weak solution of Marelene Dietrich [...] one of those women whose polished words may reflect a book club or a bridge club." (Lolita, p. 37) Her sense of middle-class propriety is deepened once she marries Humbert. Her activities (redecorating, socializing) are attempts to conform to bourgeois values. Lolita, too, is entrenched in American popular culture. Her attraction to lowbrow film, especially, draws Humbert's attention. During their travel across the U. S., Lolita's bratty, vulgar, kitsch and consumerist qualities bother Humbert more: the tension between them is fast-growing. "Most tempting to her, too, were those "Colonial Inns", which apart from "gracious atmosphere" and picture windows, promised "unlimited quantities of M-m-m food" [...] A combination of naïveté and deception, of charm and vulgarity, of blue sulks and rosy mirth, Lolita when she chose, could be a most exasperating brat [...] The words "novelties and souvenirs" simply entranced her by their trochaic lilt." (Lolita, p. 147-148) This part of the story symbolizes the typical American road "movie" style viewed by an European eye and Humbert's description of their travel constitutes a travelogue of American kitsch. Lolita's attraction to movies is also noteworthy. The kinds of movies Lolita likes (musicals, underworlds, and westerns) are distinctly American, and relate to some of the themes and motifs of Lolita. Popular music is also frequently used in the novel. His humorous parody of the pop song with Carmen "foreshadows his

engagement with American culture through Lolita. Humbert's European ear also revises American idiom when he talk about his " west-door neighbor." (Lolita, p. 179) To conclude, both stories have a strong cultural orientation, which result from the post World War II environment, in which a crassly materialistic and insensitive industrial society followed. The postmodern assumption that human identity and thinking are the product of culture and that culture and society create individuals as well as all their thoughts and attitudes (Xenos Christian Fellowship, 2005), is clearly demonstrated by Lolita's consumerist ideals and Blanche's collapse in the new southern culture.