

Young america and old europe in nabokov's lolita



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In *Lolita's* afterword, Nabokov describes two opposing views of the book, displayed by two readers. One felt that *Lolita* was a tale of " ' Old Europe debauching young America,'" while another saw it as " ' Young America debauching old Europe'" (p. 314). The question is, who or what exactly represents young America and old Europe? In the context of the book, young Dolores Haze is the embodiment of young America and its culture, while Humbert Humbert represents the older, refined European culture. Just who is debauching whom is another question entirely. What exactly is young America? During the post-war period in which *Lolita* takes place, young America was a new culture of consumers - materialistic, spoiled, obsessed with objects. These are teenagers who are obsessed with movies, soda fountains, and roller rinks. To a European like Humbert, their culture is shallow. Thoughts of Europe evoke images of cathedrals, fine art, elegant cuisine. Compared to this, American culture seems cheap and unsophisticated. Culture would prove to be one of the greatest differences between Dolores and Humbert - other than that most important difference in age. Dolly's childish love for Humbert began in the image of a man in an advertisement. Humbert comes across this advertisement in Dolly's bedroom, taped to the wall with the letters " H. H" written next to the man's face. How fitting, then, that Humbert would later remark, " She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster" (p. 148). In fact, Dolly's desire to consume would prove to be profitable for Humbert - it enabled him to buy her love (or perhaps her sex would be a more appropriate term). Humbert takes advantage of the idea of America as a nation of consumers through Dolly. The promise of movie matinees, sweater sets, and ice cream sundaes were all that could

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keep Dolly with Humbert. He marvels at the price of Dolly's love: "Knowing the magic and might of her own soft mouth, she managed - during one schoolyear! - to raise the bonus price of a fancy embrace to three, and even four bucks" (p. 184). In a sense, consumerism drives the relationship between Dolly and Humbert. Yet Dolly's "Americanness" is precisely what Humbert detests most about her. He adores most parts of Dolly, as is evident in his writing about her. But he cannot stand her infatuation with pop culture. He laments: "Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl. Sweet hot jazz, square dancing, gooey fudge sundaes, musicals, movie magazines and so forth - these were the obvious items in her list of beloved things" (p. 148). Dolly represents a cheap, frivolous culture through the eyes of Humbert. Their relationship is made more complex by the opposition in their backgrounds - old Europe can't relate to young America. Perhaps Dolly was never quite able to satisfy Humbert's longing for his first love, Annabel, because she couldn't be exactly who Annabel was. Annabel was classy Europe; Dolly was fast-food America. Humbert just couldn't seem to connect with Dolly. Humbert's disdain for parts of American culture are made evident in some of his statements, such as when he describes Mrs. Haze as "bland American Charlotte" (p. 83). His European background gives him an elegance in the eyes of others. In Charlotte's confessional love letter to Humbert, she essentially apologizes for her stereotypically American tendencies. She gushes: "I know how reserved you are, how 'British.' Your old-world reticence, your sense of decorum may be shocked by the boldness of an American girl!" (p. 68). The comparisons between European and American culture always hint at the eloquence of Europe, the brashness of America. Despite Humbert's distaste for many aspects of American culture,

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he is in awe of many parts of this country, as is evident during his and Lolita's cross-country trip. He is entranced by the American landscape. He sets out on the road, exalting that " I have never seen such smooth amiable roads as those that now radiated before us, across the crazy quilt of the forty-eight states" (p. 152). Humbert is quite affected by the American countryside, the fusion of nature and pop culture: Now and then, in the vastness of those plains, huge trees would advance toward us to cluster self-consciously by the roadside and provide a bit of humanitarian shade above a picnic table, with sun flecks, flattened paper cups, samaras and discarded ice-cream sticks littering the brown ground...lost in an artist's dream, I would stare at the honest brightness of the gasoline paraphernalia against the splendid green of oaks, or at a distant hill scrambling out - scarred but still untamed - from the wilderness of agriculture that was trying to swallow it (p. 153). America has always represented vastness, an expanse of land waiting to be tamed, the frontier. Europe may be the more " civilized" country, but America has a wild beauty to its youth that Humbert appreciates. Conversely, Lolita " had no eye for scenery" (p. 152), further illustrating the distance between her and Humbert. Perhaps Lolita saw what was American in the landscape - neon gas station signs, looming billboards - while Humbert regarded the landscape with a European outlook, appreciating the hills and trees. Maybe Humbert didn't feel that he was old Europe, debauching the young American Lolita Haze. He seemed more concerned that young America was debauching Lolita. He granted her permission to indulge in parts of that culture - the movies, the ice cream parlors - simply to extract favors from her. But Humbert knew that this was a culture that was more attractive to Lolita, thus jeopardizing whatever enchantment he could hope to have over her.

Humbert detested Dolly's Americanness because he knew it was what would separate them.