Lolita as Goddess between Life and Death: From Persephone to the Poplars

Mythical Allusions in Nabokov’s Lolita

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Among the multiple literary allusions that envelop the epic structure of Nabokov’s novels, mythology plays an important role. Lolita is one of the best examples of how the web of overt or hidden citations transforms the meaning by enlarging the background of associations connected to heroes and their motives. Images that are closely attached to some Greek or Roman mythological patterns or archetypes are the object of investigation in this article. They form only one layer of the polygenetical system of the Nabokovian novel. Nabokov said in an interview that this nymphet is “mythical.” What then is mythical in Lolita? The most striking of all the mythological allusions is Lolita’s parallel with Diana, a parallel that was discussed in a previous paper of mine (Hetényi, “Rimskiie siostry Lolity”). The present article aims to consider some hidden motifs of Demeter and Persephone appearing in Lolita’s character and the events or objects around her.

Demeter is the Mother Goddess of the Earth and fertility in Greek mythology. The best-known tale from Homer’s Hymn to Demeter tells the story of Persephone, Demeter’s daughter by Zeus. Initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries revealed the profound significance that lay behind their rituals. Persephone, Demeter’s only daughter, grew up among nymphs in company with Artemis, whose references also enrich Lolita’s character. Artemis is also identified by the Romans with Diana (Grimal 60; see also both Hetényi works cited). Hades, the King of Underworld (brother of Zeus, and so Persephone’s uncle), fell in love with her and abducted her. While Persephone was picking up a lily (according to some myths, the lily, or narcissus, was put there by Zeus, as an accomplice of Hades), the ground opened and Hades dragged her down to the Underworld. Demeter wandered for nine days and nights over the world with a lighted torch in her hands to find Persephone. Only Helios could tell her the truth. Demeter decided to abandon her divine role until her daughter was returned to her, and went to Eleusis to work as a wet nurse. Demeter’s exile made the earth sterile, so Zeus ordered Hades to return Persephone, but, as in the meantime she had eaten a pomegranate seed that tied her to Hades forever, she was now his wife. Therefore, a compromise was reached: Demeter returned to Olympus, and Persephone divided the year between the Underworld (one third of the year while the seed is in the ground) and the Earth. This is how the rhythm of sterile winter and fertile summer, with a transitional period in between, was formed.
Demeter and Persephone are so important that they are often called simply the “Two Goddesses” in ancient Greek, without names. In Latin they are Ceres and Proserpina. In their honor there survived in Greek culture not only the well-known Eleusinian initiation mysteries, held during nine days in September (ritually repeating the nine-day wandering of Demeter), but also the Thesmophoria festivities held for three days in the middle of October, at the very end of the harvest.\footnote{Demeter’s main symbols are the apple, the lily, the grain, the poplar, the willow, and the pig (Kerényi, \textit{Eleusis} 43, 55, 120–30, 130–44, 170–71; Grimal 122–24). If we read Lolita’s story through the lens of this mythological history, we can discern several archetypal parallels that enhance our understanding of what Nabokov meant by saying that his nymphet was “mythical.”} If we read Lolita’s story through the lens of this mythological history, we can discern several archetypal parallels that enhance our understanding of what Nabokov meant by saying that his nymphet was “mythical.”

First of all, Lolita is introduced in the novel indirectly; this method achieves a slow, gradual, erotic advancement of the plot. Among the few things marking her presence in the house before her first appearance are some objects, emblematically linking her to Demeter and Persephone: “the brown core of an apple,” “a glittering stone of one plum,” and at the very moment of her appearance, lilies (Nabokov, \textit{The Annotated Lolita} [AL] 39, 41, 42). Lily is also a phonetic echo of Lolita’s name. The lily is attached to sexual meaning in the “romantic” (AL 170) scene of “rural amours” (AL 171) when Lolita and Humbert are caught naked by the child twins and their mother, “who automatically added a wild lily to her bouquet” (AL 171). Lilies and flowers do not necessarily evoke life and fertility as they often do in common or everyday symbolism, because in the myth of Demeter they represent the transition to the otherworld or underworld, that is, death. Persephone is surprised by Hades at the moment of seeking, and finding, a lily. Flowers appear in the second abduction of Lolita in exactly the same double sense, but with more of the ill-omened meaning, exactly like in the myth. Humbert Humbert on his last visit to the hospital comes with a lot of things for Lolita, including a bouquet of wildflowers. He says the flowers were “gathered with my own gloved hands on a mountain pass at sunrise” (AL 244)—the place that reminds him of their romantic “rural amour.” Nabokov includes a statement by Lolita to underline the second, darker side of the flower motif: “What gruesome funeral flowers” (AL 245), she says. When she disappears, it is as if she dies for Humbert, and her letter coming three years later is a kind of resurrection, an eternal return in the cyclical time of myth.

Here it is important to consider how Nabokov constructs his heroine. Lolita is not at all a coherent psychological phenomenon, unlike traditional female heroines—unlike, by the way, many of Nabokov’s other heroines. This incoherence can be read as simple feminine caprice that, on the level of the narrative of the novel, has an erotic charge. As Nabokov notes of his favorite heroine, Sonia in \textit{Glory}: “[. . .] little Sonia [. . .] should be acclaimed by experts in amorous lure and lore as being the most oddly attractive of all my young girls, although obviously a moody and ruthless flirt” (Nabokov, \textit{Glory} 8–9). But Nabokov never explains the most
profound secret of his art: his motif-building purposes are always just as important as those of plot building.

Lolita’s words are often deeper and more sophisticated than would be appropriate for a twelve- or fourteen-year-old American teenager. One of these ideas, uttered in an everyday dialogue with her girlfriend, another nymphet, by Humbert’s definition links her explicitly with death: “You know, what’s so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own” (AL 286). In Humbert Humbert’s previous and subsequent words the context of death and the Otherworld or Underworld is developed: “every limit presupposes something beyond it” (AL 285); “living as we did, she and I, in a world of total evil [. . .]” (AL 286). Lolita’s strangeness and her unusual ideas and reactions to death (first of all to that of her mother) contribute a Persephonian phenomenon, because every time the goddess returns to the earth, she carries with her a hint of sadness, a sign of Hades, the Underworld—because she knows she must return there. The pomegranate seed swallowed is the token of this return, symbolizing many things at the same time: life, fertility, marriage, death, and resurrection. That is why Lolita fittingly dies when she gives birth to her “still-born” daughter; they both have to return to Hades.

It is also important to underline that the function of Lolita’s death is not to suggest any ideas of punishment or tragedy or consequence of any crime committed by her or Humbert. Nabokov is an author who sets his face resolutely against moral or ideological content in art. By choosing mentally strange or ill protagonists, he circumvents the easy possibility of moralizing in his novels. His mythological allusions are among those elements that operate at a distance from the plot and raise his novels above conventional moral or ideological approaches.

Lolita’s death could also be read in the broader context of the novel. She is not the only woman to die in the novel, and not the only one “stolen.” Humbert’s first love, the proto-Lolita Annabel, dies very young, without sharing the pleasures of love with anybody: “[. . .] I was on my knees, and on the point of possessing my darling, when two bearded brothers, the old man of the sea and his brother came out of the sea with exclamations of ribald encouragement, and four months later she died of typhus in Corfu” (AL 15).

The young “faunus and nymphet” do not reach the highest point of “taking a peek into paradise” (a constant metaphor in Nabokov for sensual ecstasy; see Nabokov, Glory 45); the moment is stolen and immediately after that (following not strict chronology, but the sequence of the strangely elliptical sentence), Annabel dies. She dies on a Greek island, which emphasizes her association with Greek myths. Jean Farlow does not survive either, passing episodically through Humbert’s early life. “Jean Farlow, who was thirty-one and absolutely neurotic, had also apparently developed a strong liking to me. [. . .] [She was] already nursing the cancer that killed her at thirty-three” (AL 106). Humbert’s wife and Lolita’s mother, Charlotte, dies at a very apt moment, like an old mythical queen yielding
to a young one (see below). Valeria, Humbert’s first wife, was stolen from him by a Russian émigré and eventually died as well, in childbirth. Humbert’s introductory comment is as follows: “I had my little revenge in due time” (AL 32)—as if his will can turn the world.

Aleksandr Dolinin says in an essay that everything that happens after September 23, the moment when Humbert Humbert begins his manuscript, is fictitious and imaginary, and from this point Humbert merges with Nabokov, the author. According to him, the village Gray Star, where Lolita dies, is nothing other than Nabokov’s gray realm—his brain (Dolinin 13–14). If we agree with Dolinin’s argument, it is difficult to believe any event reported by Humbert Humbert in his manuscript concerning his past. Humbert begins reflecting on his past and future immediately after having seen Lolita for the last time. The intermezzo-like chapter 30 of part 2 deserves attention here precisely because of its plotlessness. Its last sentence, “I was weeping again, drunk on the impossible past,” could also be understood as suggesting that the past is not real but imaginary. As happens sometimes while reading Nabokov, we find help here by comparing the English and Russian texts. In one scene, Humbert is gazing at a midnight cityscape, at the lights and letters over shops. In Nabokov’s calambour-joke, Humbert mistakenly reads “Gulflex Lubrication” instead of “genuflexion lubricity.” This unconscious erotic mispelling in the later Russian text gives a completely different impression, not of Humbert’s consciousness, but of the intention of the author. In the Russian text of the same sentence, Humbert reads “Avtora ubili” (the author is killed), instead of “Automobili” (cars) (Nabokov, Lolita 311).

Humbert Humbert steals Lolita from her summer camp, lying to her and to everybody, on August 15, when the end of the harvest is approaching. The archetypal nature of this action is ironically strengthened and revealed by Nabokov because he repeats it in the next theft of Lolita, when Quilty takes her from the hospital, this time at the beginning of the harvest time, July 2. Thanks to this varied repetition, the pattern of disappearance evokes constantly the idea of death and rebirth in the novel, the same rhythm that forms the paradigm of the eternal return of nature expressed in the myth of Demeter and Persephone. Nabokov ironically shows that women are “stolen” again and again, and this is how the “uninitiated” reader enjoys the turn of the story. Humbert Humbert is blind to the love story between Lolita and Quilty, the next thief, which is busy developing in the background of his own story.

On the other hand, in this sequence of events Lolita is placed side by side with Persephone on the mythical plane. Her first sexual experience, an adolescent one on an island, is discussed below. Later, in Humbert Humbert’s arms, she is initiated to the secret life of grown-up sexuality, but in Quilty’s house she undergoes a real Eleusinian initiation: “When Cue and she came, the others had them actually go through a coronation ceremony and then—a terrific ducking, as when you cross the Equator” (AL 278). The bath of purification was part of the Greek ritual,
and this water motif also evokes the River Styx dividing Life from the Underworld.

In both cases the men-thieves are “relatives” of Lolita in some fashion, as Hades is Persephone’s uncle, brother of Zeus. Humbert is her stepfather, Quilty is her uncle; at least he claims to be her uncle when he steals Lolita from the hospital: “The day before, around two, her uncle, Mr. Gustave, had called for her with a cocker spaniel pup and a smile for everyone, and a black Caddy Lack, and had paid Dolly’s bill in cash, and told them to tell me I should not worry, and keep warm, they were at Grandpa’s ranch as agreed” (AL 248). Quilty’s joke, that he pretends to be Humbert’s brother (a virtual relationship accepted also by Humbert): “To myself I whispered that I still had my gun, and was still a free man—free to trace the fugitive, free to destroy my brother” (AL 249). This quasi-parenthood is at the same time an overt illustration of a dominant motif of the novel, namely the close resemblance of Humbert and Quilty as if they were brothers or twins. Quilty plays the role of a real Hades; he comes with his dog, comically transformed by Nabokov into a small pet pup. Incest as an illegal sexual relationship is one of the most significant erotic phenomena in the novel, and we recall Jung, who considers incest to be the striving after the harmonious union of the original, primitive condition of world (Jung; Jacobi). But here the incest is placed in the cosmic context of mythology, and if these relationships are considered alongside Greek myth and the relationships between Greek gods, the comparison eliminates all “pornographic” simplicity. Introducing the Humbert-as-father and Quilty-as-uncle relations to Lolita is a poetic device by the author not only to deepen the erotic tension through these masks, but also to reproduce the mythological necessity of incest; Greek gods “marry” regardless of generation or love relationships.

If we continue to think in the mythical register, Grandpa’s ranch (AL 248) is the realm of Cronus, father of Demeter, Zeus, and Hades—that is, outside the borders of contemporary reality. Cronus was the first god to rule over both Heaven and Earth. Cronus is often (although, in linguistic terms, erroneously) identified with Chronus, the personification of Time. In Aleksandr Pyatigorsky’s essay on the philosophy of Nabokov, Lolita is in Humbert’s eyes an object, a thing, a pure thing; only in this way can she be represented in his mind (Pyatigorsky 344). In fact, Lolita, taken by Humbert out of the normal flow of life and time in order to keep her forever a nymphet-child (like a butterfly on a pin), now, by escaping from Humbert, returns to time, to get ripe in orgiastic love in Quilty’s house, to become disillusioned, progress in age, marry, become pregnant, and die.

At the end of the story, Lolita cannot go back to Humbert Humbert because she is pregnant—just as swallowing the pomegranate seed in the Greek myth is symbolic of pregnancy, signifying the next year’s crop. Her house is now guarded by a large dog—as if Cerberus were watching her in Hades. After this last scene, when Humbert Humbert and Lolita meet again, Lolita goes north to Alaska with
her husband and dies there, underlining once again her Artemis-like nature: the Amazons (who worshiped Artemis) had their kingdom, according to mythology, in the North, on the boundaries of the civilized Greek world (Grimal 37–38). In further accordance with Amazonian society, where only baby girls were kept, she gives birth to a daughter. Lolita's death at the end of the novel, on December 24, the darkest day of the year (and of course, in a Christian context, the proximity to Christmas should not be overlooked), parallels the death of Nature, but carries at the same time the idea of resurrection with it. Lolita is thus transfigured in the text: her death was the impetus for the publication of the memoirs of Humbert Humbert, the birth of this literary oeuvre.

Mother and daughter, Charlotte and Dolly, are closely, inseparably linked in the novel, in the same way that Demeter and Persephone are connected in the myth. They form a link in the eternal chain of woman, woman as daughter and mother, the seed and the carrier of the seed. As mentioned above, Charlotte dies at precisely the best moment for her to yield her place to her daughter, as if an old queen has been supplanted. In some myths, Demeter and Persephone are portrayed as a double-faced goddess. On Greek vases, they are often depicted as the same figure, and sometimes Demeter holds in her hand the pomegranate, the symbol of Persephone.

Parallel to the similarity between the two goddesses, there are both external and inner likenesses between Lolita and Charlotte. Nabokov first illuminates the similarity right after the marriage in a whole paragraph; Lolita's smile, gestures, handwriting, hair, eyes, and photos are likened in erotic descriptions to Charlotte's. Nabokov even playfully modifies and intertwines their names: Lotte, Lottelita, Lolitchen (chap. 18, AL 78–79). The two female figures are interwoven particularly in two circumstances—the first, when Charlotte is lying dead on the street below the laprobe, "her eyes intact, their black lashes still wet, matted, like yours, Lolita" (AL 107). The moment of transition to the Underworld makes mother resemble daughter (foreshadowing Lolita's death at the end of the novel). The second is a description of the pregnant Lolita three years later. Pregnancy naturally arouses associations with myths of birth and rebirth. The state of being a mother-to-be is also a preparatory phase of death for Lolita; she is already engaged to Hades by the "seed," the "grain" in her; thus, she is on her way to him. "She was smoking herself. First time I saw her doing it. [. . .] Gracefully, in a blue mist, Charlotte Haze rose from her grave. [. . .] She directed the dart of her cigarette [. . .] toward the hearth exactly as her mother used to do, and then, like her mother, oh my God, with her fingernail scratched and removed a fragment of cigarette from her underlip" (AL 277).11

Nabokov also links the two women through some parallels in scenery. Humbert offers a whisky to Charlotte the moment before she runs out and dies in the street, and when he returns with the scotch, there is no more Charlotte. In the same way, he comes with a glass of pineapple juice for Lolita and does not find her
anymore; she is far away with Quilty. The parallel is marked by the text: “I stooped to set down the glasses on a bench and for some reason, with a kind of icy vividness, saw Charlotte’s face in death [ . . . ]” (AL 165). Their common color is aquamarine—Lolita has a “a large beautifully cut aquamarine on a silver chainlet [ . . . ], a spring rain gift from me” (AL 210). Charlotte’s eyes are sea-green, the Latin aquamarine being thus translated in order to make clear the watery element of the word (AL 39).

The poplar is also a symbol of Persephone, although less commonly known. Poplars grow in front of the palace of Hades and Persephone in the Underworld (Homer, Odyssey 10.508–30), and Homer also describes a poplar tree sacred to Persephone in a grove near the entrance to Hades on the island of the nymph Calypso, with nests of birds of death on it (Odyssey 5.63–66).12 Poplars stand at the entrance to Hades, at the spring of Oblivion and Memory. The word for poplar in Greek is akherois, as a row of poplars grew along the river Acheron in Elysium. Taking into consideration that Mnemosyne is one of the basic concepts of Nabokov’s oeuvre (see, for example, his Speak, Memory!), poplars should command our special attention. The significance of the use of certain special plant names for Nabokov is evident, and not only because he was a biologist-entomologist. Plant names are often used by Nabokov with full etymological and semantic consciousness. In Ada, or Ardor he built not only a multilayered (and multilingual) intertextual image (involving James Joyce, Rimbaud, Musset, and Hamlet) around a simple yellow flower, but the flowers’ names forecast the further development of the history—for example, Lucette’s death in water as a parallel to Ophelia (Nabokov, Ada, or Ardor 63–65). Nabokov pays special attention to the same question as a translator in his essay, The Art of Translation, where he sharply criticizes Pasternak’s translation of Hamlet, in which the poet changed the names of simple “liberal shepherd’s” plants (“crowflowers, nettles, daisies and long purples”) into more sophisticated, genteel ones (“violets, carnations, roses and lilies”) (Nabokov, The Art of Translation 316–17).

Poplars grow in the garden of the Hazes’s Ramsdale house, as they do at Persephone’s palace. Through their leaves Humbert Humbert can see Charlotte going to the mailbox with a letter (AL 91–92), the same action that she repeats some days later when she runs out with letters and while crossing the street is knocked down by a car and killed; poplars here thus actually foreshadow her death. It is difficult to register the first appearance of the poplar motif without the other poplar images that come later in the text, but if one realizes the mythological meaning of the poplar and connects it with Persephone, then the engagement with the Underworld becomes clear, as for example when Lolita and Humbert are reflected together in a mirror. Humbert tries to take an irritating dirt particle off of Lolita’s eye with his tongue. “For a moment, we were both in the same warm green bath of the mirror that reflected the top of a poplar with us in the sky” (AL 45). Keys here are also the bath of the mirror and the sky. Nabokov gives some
slight help to show how mirror and water are analogous reflecting surfaces (water, or a river, is also the dividing line between the two worlds), and sky is the binary opposite of Hades, also an Otherworld. This sunny Upper Otherworld ("la petite mort," as they say in French, "the divine paradise" in Nabokov, Glory 45) is the "space" where ecstasy is waiting for Humbert. It takes place just a few days later, on the striped canape: "Lolita had been safely solipsized. The implied sun pul-
sated in the supplied poplars; we were fantastically and divinely alone [. . .]" (AL 62).

Separation, the death of a relationship with someone or some place, is also marked with the image of poplars as the threshold of the Underworld. Lolita, leaving for summer camp and never to return to the house, waves "to Louise and the poplars (whom and which she was never to see again)" (AL 68). Poplars are also the last thing seen by Humbert when leaving the house. "The elms and the poplars were turning their ruffled backs to a sudden onslaught of wind, and a black thunderhead loomed above Ramsdale's white church tower when I looked around me for the last time. [. . .] The house of heaven must seem pretty bare after that. [. . .] A raindrop fell on my knuckles [. . .]" (AL 105). Personified poplars reinforce the separation when Lolita escapes from Humbert from a post office standing between a "dormant movie house and a conspiracy of poplars" (AL 226).

In the list of hotels visited by Humbert and Lolita, Nabokov creates a list of special "meaningful" hotel names, among them one Poplar Cove, North Carolina (AL 157) (after a mythical Corn Palace evoking again Persephone), and a Poplar Shade, Utah (AL 160). In Sun Valley, Idaho, opposite the hotel stands "a poplar playing its liquid shadows all over the local Honor Roll," that is, on a grave, signi-
fying death again (AL 160). Finally, poplars appear in Humbert's ecstatic day-
dream where he depicts how he would like to redecorate the restaurant of the hotel "The Enchanted Hunters" (part 1, chap. 30): "There would have been poplars, apples, a suburban Sunday" (AL 136). In the calendar of trees, the most ancient system of reckoning the cycles of nature, the month of the poplar marks the beginning of autumn on the day of the autumnal equinox, September 23 (Graves 1966), and the Eleusinian mysteries were also carried out in September. This is the day when Lolita and Humbert meet after three years of separation. This is also the day when Lolita begins her journey toward death, parallel with the sun-
light that is most attenuated when she dies on December 24.

It is also worth noting that in Homer, poplars are mentioned by Circe, who sends Odysseus and his warriors to Hades. Circe transforms Odysseus's company into pigs: in Greek mythology, although it may seem incongruous to some modern readers, the pig is one of the symbols of Persephone and Demeter. Only with help from Hermes can Odysseus force Circe to transform his companions back, after sleeping with her, but in the process he is enchanted and convinced to stay for a whole year, "season after season." Real liberation is possible only after a visit to the Underworld, where they consult Tiresias in the house of Hades and Per-
sephone, where poplars and willows grow (Homer, Odyssey 10.508–30).
But when your ship crosses the stream of Ocean
You will see a shelving shore and Persephone's groves,
Tall poplars and willows that drop their fruit.
Beach your ship there by Ocean's deep eddies,
And go yourself to the dank house of Hades.
There into Acheron flow Pyriphlegeton
And Cocytus, a branch of the water of Styx.

(Translation by Stanley Lombardo)

Poplars grow on the banks of the river, and their symbolic meaning in mythology is very closely related to that of the willow. Willow Island is the place where Lolita first experiences a sexual relationship (AL 139), which creates a complex and multisemantic picture of these two trees in Nabokov’s novel. Sexuality is linked to death; life and death are not separated but intertwined. Willow Island is not only an allusion to the island of Calypso or to Circe, but here there emerges also a visual reference to the 1860 painting Island of the Dead by Arnold Böcklin, who is often cited in Nabokov’s novels (Glory, Despair, etc.) as a typical decoration in Russian flats in Berlin (see Nabokov, Glory 130, 172); Böcklin’s whole symbolist oeuvre, influenced by Romanticism within the art nouveau style, fits in with Lolita’s atmosphere and motifs; Böcklin’s Elysian Fields (1877) with poplars, which are in the center of The Sacred Wood (1882), or his Nymphs Bathing (1863–1866), represent his main interests: eroticism and death refracted through Greek mythology.

The adolescents swim or come on boats on “Onyx or Eryx, two small lakes in the wood” (AL 139). The third lake is Climax. Greek names refer to Greek mythology so overtly that one is obliged to wonder whether Charlie Holmes’s name does not have some association with Hermes. Holmes is “the only human male for a couple of miles around” (AL 139), so he is admitted into the female circle in the same way that Hermes, the playful divine messenger, can enter at any time among the goddesses (Kerényi). The teenagers arrive then at a hidden place “among luxuriant undergrowth”; the word “undergrowth” perhaps evokes the Underworld here, too.

It seems that when Nabokov uses all these symbols of Demeter and Persephone in Lolita, it is thanks to the general and very vague meaning of those obvious symbols of fertility, the apple/pomegranate, the grove (see Hetényi, “Iz chego sostoit zhivaia sobaka?”), grain, and the poplar. The parallel cannot be complete without the more surprising pig motif, which itself is not free of fertility symbolism. Pigs were consecrated once a year during the Roman Saturnalia, held on the day of the winter solstice (which, as noted above, is when Lolita dies). Pigs and boars are potentially dangerous and are linked with Night and the moon as well as with the realm of the dead.14

A Circean and Demeterian pig image appears on the first day, or night, that Humbert spends with Lolita, at a hotel named Enchanted Hunters, which
Humbert refers to (ironically) as a “pale palace” (AL 119), exactly like Circe’s, or Persephone’s in the Underworld. After Humbert finds the hotel with much difficulty and tries to park the car, he cannot find a space, because “a row of parked cars, like pigs at a trough, seemed at first sight to forbid access,” but then “by magic” he finds a place—the one Quilty has left for a better one (AL 119). The owners, receptionists, and staff of the hotel all resemble pigs. First is “a bold porcine old man” (AL 119), a “pink old fellow” (AL 120) who also has a piggish wife: “the two pink pigs were now among my best friends” (AL 120). They soon merit their German nicknames, Mr. and Mrs. Swine: “Swine, the initial old clown” (AL 120). The hotel employees also look like pigs: “Potts, also pink and bold, with white hairs growing out his ears and other holes” (AL 120). Later in the text, the people at the hotel simply metamorphose into pigs: “Pink pig Mr. Swoon” (AL 141).

Circe enchanted Odysseus and his friends with mandragora. Nabokov uses an ironic variation of the story in the scene when Humbert also gives Lolita a kind of narcotic, a sedative/sleeping pill, that does not work on Lolita. In the mirror of the Circe story, the Enchanted Hunters is an enchanted palace from where there is no escape except through the Underworld, a visit to Hades. Here Lolita meets Quilty, her future abductor, playing with his dog (as we have seen, an attribute of Hades) at the very first moment she sees him in the hotel. The description uses erotic words: “Lolita sank down on her haunches to caress a pale-face, blue-freckled, black-eared cocker-spaniel swooning on the floral carpet under her hand” (AL 119). Quilty also is designated as porcine, being called a hog (AL 278) and a swine (AL 240).

Black thunderclouds and rain settle above Ramsdale to see Humbert off from the village. "A black thunderhead loomed above Ramsdale" (AL 105); "A clap of thunder reverberated throughout the house" (AL 107). The thunderhead and thunderbolt are phenomena signifying divine presence in myth; lightning is a bridge between the Upper World and the Earth; this is how Elijah comes down to earth in Nabokov’s early short story The Thunderstorm (1924), in which Nabokov takes up the image of the Old Testament prophet Elijah riding his chariot in the sky during thunderstorms. In Greek mythology, a thunderclap sounds when someone steps over the threshold of the Underworld, the realm of Hades. It happens when Orpheus goes there, and Hades returns Eurydice to him. As Virgil writes:

Restitit, Eurydicumque suam iam luce sub ipsa
Immemor heu! Victusque animi respexit. Ibi omnis
Effusus labor atque immittis rupta tyranni
Foedera, terque fragor stagnis auditus Avernis.
(Virgil, Georgics 4.490–3)

This happens also when Oedipus goes down into the Underworld. Zeus killed Iasion with a thunderbolt because of his love for Demeter (Grimal 214). This is
how Humbert’s mother dies: “My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three” (AL 12). The moment when Quilty will steal Lolita occurs in the midst of a series of tempests:

The following days were marked by a number of great thunderstorms—or perhaps there was but one single storm which progressed across country in ponderous frog leaps and which we could not shake off just as we could not shake off detective Trapp [. . .] as happens with me at periods of electrical disturbance and crepitating lightnings, I had hallucinations. (AL 218–19)

Here Quilty (Trapp) is identified with the storm in order to suggest his “Underworldly” origins.

Lolita is also scared during the storm, as though she knows its significance, her passing to the Otherworld. “We spent a grim night in a very foul cabin, under a sonorous amplitude of rain, and with a kind of prehistorically loud thunder incessantly rolling above us. ‘I am not a lady and do not like lightning’ said Lo, whose dread of electric storms gave me some pathetic solace” (AL 222). (Note also that “The Lady Who Loved Lightning” is the title of a play by Quilty.) The use of the word “prehistorically” here stresses the mythical character of the scene.

In a small town Humbert is checking a letter addressed to Lolita by her classmate, Mona. He is reading a report on the opening night of the play written and directed by Quilty, “The Enchanted Hunters,” in which Lolita played Diana during rehearsals, but only until the moment she was forced to leave, before the first night’s performance. While Humbert is reading, Lolita disappears (“with a conspiracy of poplars,” see above). Mona writes: “[. . .] there was no author to applaud us as last time [Quilty is with Lolita outside of the post office at this moment], and the terrific electric storm outside interfered with our own modest off-stage thunder” (AL 224). This shows that Quilty as director and writer of the play uses the symbol of the storm in his text, just as Nabokov does in his text. It is only one moment among many where the “main” author, Nabokov, plays with the narration and puts himself as author close to one of his hero-writers and minimalizes or eliminates the distance between them. Once again, the storm is akin to Quilty’s Wagnerian leitmotif, through which Nabokov tells the reader about his presence.

Conclusion

Vladimir Alexandrov was the first to elaborate the concept of Nabokov’s “Otherworlds” (Alexandrov 1991). Mythological allusions in Lolita support and even prove as axiomatic this dichotomy of worlds in Nabokov’s art. But on a philosophical level, Nabokov would never admit to even an ambivalently binary concept; that would be too simplified, transparent, and limited. Mythological patterns are very well-suited to suggest the abyss of infinity, indefiniteness, and
timeless sensuality, as they use multifold forms, rather than simple binarisms. We can see how Lolita’s origin is given in a three-part “Persephonian” definition: when riding with her “across good lands and bad lands,” Humbert Humbert avoids “little Lo’s birthplace, in a corn, coal and hog producing area” (AL 156).

Greek mythology imagines coterminous worlds in a very similar way to the system in Nabokov’s Lolita. The borderline between these worlds is not a line on the earth, but is in motion—like a river—and crossing it takes not one step, not a single moment, but a process of transformation. There is time for thinking, there is a chance to change ourselves. This river or lake washes off the past time when entered, and washes out memory when left behind, in order that the person crossing toward death can be reborn into a new life. If decoded according to the categories in the frames of the archetypal history of Demeter and Persephone, Lolita is a reincarnation of the eternal nymphet.

Notes

1. For the first studies on this special field, see Hopa Букс; David Larmour, “Getting One Past the Goalkeeper: Sports and Games in Glory”; David Larmour, “Leaving Eurydice in the Dark: The Absent Woman in Nabokov’s Early Fiction.”

2. Т Минц, “О некоторых, неомифологических текстах в творчестве русских символистов.” For a detailed analytical exposition of Nabokov’s polygenetical method, see Pekka Tammi’s “Zametki a poligenetichnosti v proze Nabokova.”


4. Some ideas of this article were elaborated during mutual work on my student’s MA essay: Eva Soregi: Mifologicheskoie v Lolite. 2004. Unpubl. manuscript.

5. Artemis is sometimes said to have been a daughter of Demeter, too.

6. In different legends, different places are mentioned where this abduction took place. One of them is Etna in Sicily. Sicily is a recurrent element in references made by Humbert Humbert.

7. “Kalliparthena thesmoforia” (plural) means an Athenian thesmophoria festival celebrated first of all by virgins. The festival of secret rituals in Athens was connected with marriage customs. The ceremony was supposed to promote fertility, and married women prepared for it with sexual abstinence. Bathing was also used for purification. The adjective “kalliparthenos” is a compound, meaning “having beautiful nymphs.”

8. See also Ole Nyegaard. His article concludes with a completely opposite opinion to mine (see Hetényi, “Iz chego sostoit zhivaia sobaka?”), and he does not list all appearances of the canine motif in Lolita.

9. On the dog motif in Nabokov’s novels see Hetényi, “Iz chego sostoit zhivaia sobaka?”

10. Of the four gods of Empedocles’ Elements, the name of Persephone alone is taboo, for the Greeks knew another face of Persephone as well. She was also the terrible Queen of the Dead, whose name was not safe to speak aloud, who was named simply “The Maiden.” In The Odyssey, when Odysseus goes to the Underworld, he refers to her as the Iron
Queen. Her central myth, for all of its emotional familiarity, was also the tacit context of
the secret initiatory mystery rites of regeneration at Eleusis, which promised immortality
to their awe-struck participants—an immortality in her world beneath the soil, feasting
with the heroes beneath her dread gaze (see Kerényi).

11. It is possible that smoking and the smoke are connected with death and the Under-
world.

12. There is another nymph, Leuce, also carried off by Hades and metamorphosed
into a white poplar tree on the Elysian fields. Poplar in general means the presence in
both worlds. Heracles on his way back from his Twelfth Labour wove himself a wreath
from the white poplar tree, or aspen. The outer leaves remained black, the color of the
underworld, but the leaves in contact with his brow became silver-white by his sweat.
Thus, the white poplar was sacred to him, signifying that he had labored in both worlds
(Graves 1.121, 124–25; 2.154).

13. "Each year, when it was time for the crops to be sown, in the month of Boedromion
(September), this was the time of year for the Mysteries to be held. It all stems from the
myth of Demeter and Persephone, when Hades, took Persephone (Kore: “maiden”) down
into the underworld." Ron Leadbetter, Eleusinian Mysteries, www.pantheon.org/articles/
eleusinian_mysteries.html.

14. Pigs are often not "pure" (in Judaism, in Islamic religion). They represent sensual
instincts (in Homer also, and in Christian writings, e.g., St. Clement) or demonic forces
(Luke 8:26–39), or vulgarity (Matthew 7:6).

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