

The Migration of Lolita From High-Brow Literature to Pop Music: An Overview

Mónica María Martínez Sariago, University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Considered nowadays to be one of the best novels of the 20th Century, Lolita has become firmly established in the literary canon. Furthermore, its main character has become an icon in mass culture. However, by making her a teenage temptress with an out-of-control sexuality, mass culture has distorted the point of the novel. Film versions have contributed to this misrepresentation. In this paper the presence of the archetype of Lolita in pop music produced worldwide is surveyed. The depiction of the characters of the young girl and the male adult in song lyrics is considered, together with the aesthetic strategies used by creators to integrate allusions to Lolita into the music videos. Finally, we explore the phenomenon of teenage singers incorporating this aesthetic into their public persona. By doing so, the diverse ways in which the character's influence extends into the realm of pop music will be revealed.

Keywords: Nabokov, Lolita, Pop Music

iafor

The International Academic Forum

www.iafor.org

1. Introduction

The prevalent pattern of mass culture appropriating literary and cinematic references is out of question. One notable example of this trend is the iconic character of Lolita, crafted by Vladimir Nabokov in his eponymous novel. The provocative teenager, characterized by heart-shaped sunglasses and a lollipop, derived from promotional posters for Kubrick's film adaptation, represents a simplified and decontextualized reinterpretation in the realm of mass culture of Nabokov's literary creation: a 12-year-old girl victim of sexual abuse by her stepfather. From the middle of the 20th century onward, the character has indeed evolved within mass culture, transforming from an abused girl into a provocative young woman (Vickers, 2008; Martínez Sariago 2022, 2023).

This chapter analyzes the way in which the image of Lolita has been adopted and reinterpreted by popular song, moving away from its original literary essence. The two existing film versions –Stanley Kubrick (*Lolita*, 1962) and Adrian Lyne (*Lolita*, 1997)– have contributed to this process. As an essential preliminary step for examining the character within popular songs, the various representations of the character in cinema will be then elaborated upon. Both renditions have had a significant impact in the realm of music videos, while their portrayal of Lolita as a manipulative teenager plays a pivotal role in shaping the Lolita myth in the realm of music.

This transformation, derived from the fallacious image of Lolita as a seductress provided by cunning Humbert Humbert in the novel, persists, with the character's continual and widespread incorporation into pop music further solidifying and perpetuating this stereotype. The ongoing cultural influence has allowed the character to transcend its literary origins, becoming a symbol deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness and continually reshaped by contemporary media and artistic expressions.

2. Beyond Literature: the Creation of a Myth

2.1. The Novel *Lolita* (1955)

The novel *Lolita* (1955), by Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977), focuses on the abusive relationship established between the book's narrator, Humbert Humbert, and his 12-year-old teenage stepdaughter, Dolores Haze, better known as Lolita. When Lolita's mother is hit by a car, Humbert kidnaps the teenager and begins a long trip through the United States in which he sexually and psychologically abuses her. The abuse persists until the girl finally manages to break free from him years later. The relationship is not just manipulative but also incestuous and inappropriate. It comes as no surprise that the book sparked controversy upon its release, leading to bans in the United Kingdom and France, ultimately fueling its notoriety.

It is important to note that Lolita is not a glorification of child abuse. The novel is a complex work of literature that addresses the themes of erotic obsession, manipulation, and moral corruption from the perspective of an unreliable narrator. Nabokov wrote it with the intention of exploring the twisted mind of Humbert Humbert, and not to praise his behavior. The fact that the novel is presented from the perspective of the protagonist adds, in fact, an additional layer of complexity, since Humbert Humbert has a remarkable rhetorical and persuasive capacity. His rhetorical prowess is a fascinating exploration of how language can be wielded to captivate and manipulate. Despite the sordid nature of the narrative, Humbert strategically

employs literary allusions, puns, and consistent linguistic patterns to present his dark passion in an enchanting and confusing manner, effectively seducing his audience. As a professor of Comparative Literature, Humbert also leverages his extensive knowledge in the field to draw fallacious parallels between his unconventional love story with Lolita and the romantic narratives of historical great lovers¹. This literary sophistication serves to both justify and romanticize ethically questionable deeds, creating a narrative that engages readers in a complex dance of moral ambiguity and aesthetic allure. In essence, Humbert's linguistic mastery becomes a tool for *psychagogia*, leading readers into the morally murky waters of Lolita's story while simultaneously enchanting them with the artistry of his language. Humbert Humbert portrays himself as the victim and Lolita as a seductress, distorting the reality that Lolita is actually a vulnerable victim ensnared by him.

In fact, Nabokov consistently viewed his Lolita as a girl corrupted by a monster. In a 1966 interview, he referred to her as “my poor little girl” (Nabokov, 1973, p. 94). Later, in a television appearance on the show *Apostrophes* (1975), he was even clearer regarding the interpretation that should be given to the novel:

Lolita is not a perverse girl. She is a poor girl who is corrupted, and whose senses are never awakened under the caresses of the filthy Mr. Humbert, to whom she once asks: “Will we always live like this, doing all kinds of filth in hotel beds?” (...). And it is very interesting to consider, as you journalists do, the problem of the silly degradation that the character of the nymphet that I invented in 1955 has suffered among the general public. Not only was the poor creature's perversity grotesquely exaggerated, but also its physical appearance and age. Everything was modified by illustrations in foreign publications. Girls of 20 years or older, bimbos, street cats, cheap models or simple criminals with long legs are called nymphets or “Lolitas” in Italian, French, German magazines, etc. And in the covers of the Turkish or Arabic translations –the summum of stupidity– they represent a young woman with opulent contours, as was often said before, and with blonde hair, imagined by idiots who never read the book.

Véra Nabokov, the author's wife and the zero reader of Lolita, to whom the novel is dedicated, expressed her dissatisfaction in her diary, noting that critics tended to disparage Lolita as a lascivious brat. She contended that they never acknowledged the novel's most terrifying paragraph, describing the child, after being raped, silently crying “every night, every night,”² while Humbert callously ignored her pleas with selfish cruelty.

2.2. *Lolita* (Stanley Kubrick, 1962)

The novel was made into a film by Stanley Kubrick in 1962, with the iconic photo of Sue Lyon as a promotional poster for the film, and again by Adrian Lyne in 1997. In the chain of resemantization or corruption of the character in mass culture, the film of Stanley Kubrick (1928-1999) represents probably the first step and appears, therefore, as ultimately

¹ Humbert uses “sa prodigieuse culture du vieil Européen pour tenter d'inscrire ses relations avec Lolita dans le musée légendaire des amours célèbres” (1998, p. 113). On Nabokov's use of *La vita nuova*, cf. Morgan (1983).

² This reiterated phrase is precisely the one used by López Mondejar in her novel *Cada noche, cada noche* (2016), a Hispanic reimagining of the myth. The novel revisits Nabokov's narrative universe, paying homage to Lolita while simultaneously challenging its portrayal of the character as a perverse nymphet in the male erotic imagination. It does so from the indignant perspective of Lolita's daughter, Dolores Schiller, who seeks to rectify the representation of her mother. For insights into the feminist teaching of Lolita in the #metoo era, cf. Edelstein (2021).

responsible for the meaning that the noun *lolita* eventually acquired in everyday language as a ‘sexually precocious young girl’ (*Oxford American Dictionary*), or as a precociously seductive girl (*Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*).

To begin with, the distortion of the human type can be attributed to the casting choice of a 14-year-old actress, who, moreover, did not appear to be of that age, in this film adaptation. Kubrick’s 1962 release of the film also incorporates iconic elements of the myth that were absent in the novel. One notable addition is the erotic scene where Humbert paints Lolita’s toenails, a moment featured in the credits. For another thing, very distinctive elements of the Lolita character, like the heart-shaped sunglasses and lollipop, do not make an appearance in either the movie or the novel, but have been directly taken from a promotional photo shoot for the film (fig. 1). Apparently, these elements were a contribution by Bert Stern, the photographer responsible for the session, whose reference or inspiration was not a young girl, but the very adult and voluptuous Marilyn Monroe (Vickers, 2008, p. 148).

Hence, Kubrick’s portrayal of Humbert does not depict him as a pedophile, monster, or sexual maniac. Instead, the character embodies the erotic desires commonly associated with the average heterosexual male (Iglesias Turrión, 2011).



Figure 1: Photograph from the promotional poster for *Lolita* (Stanley Kubrick, 1962).

2.3. *Lolita* (Adrian Lyne, 1997)

A new adaptation was undertaken in 1997, directed by Adrian Lyne (1941-). While this film incorporated crucial aspects of the novel overlooked by the initial adaptation, it departed from faithfulness to the original material. In contrast to the novel’s portrayal of Lolita as the victim, Lyne’s rendition presents her as a provocative young woman who delights in teasing Humbert and revels in their encounters, conforming to the predominant distorted version of the character in mass culture. She is no longer a young girl corrupted by a monster, as Nabokov intended to portray her, but rather an inciting young girl. For another thing, Adrian Lyne’s subtle manipulation of light, influenced by his training in the English advertising school of the seventies (Etcheverry, 2009, p. 197), appears to conjure, as per Stam, the English poetic prose of Nabokov: “In the Lyne film a love affair with a filtered light and textured style in some ways substitutes for Nabokov’s love affair with language” (2007, p.

122) (fig. 2). This effect, associated with the photographic technique of David Hamilton (1933-2016), has significantly influenced subsequent content produced by other creators, including those in the realm of pop music.



Figure 2: *Lolita* (Adrian Lyne, 1997)

3. Pop Music and Videoclips

The claim has been made that the incorporation of the Lolita myth into the realm of popular music originated in France with *Histoire de Melody Nelson* (1971), a groundbreaking concept album by the iconic French musician Serge Gainsbourg (Balestrini, 2018, p. 185). However, as argued in this paper, Joan Manuel Serrat's "Quasi una dona" predates Gainsbourg's work by nearly a year.

Since then, numerous songs have explored the Lolita archetype, emphasizing the allure of a youthful and captivating teenager, but also her conflicted relationship with the male adult. Each song brings its own perspective to these themes, reflecting different genres and artistic expressions across the years, and also different modalities of intertextuality. In what follows the list provided by Balestrini is supplemented with some additional examples, particularly from the Hispanic sphere. The list is not exhaustive but is representative:

- "Quasi una dona" (Joan Manuel Serrat, 1970)
- *Histoire de Melody Nelson* (Serge Gainsbourg, 1971)
- *Lolita Go Home* (Jane Birkin, 1975)
- "Don't Stand so Close to Me" (The Police, 1980)
- "Shame on You" (Aerosmith, 1985)
- "Lolita (trop jeune pour aimer)" (Céline Dion, 1987)
- "No Man's Land" (Billy Joel, 1993)
- "Whose Bed Have Your Boots Been Under?" (Shania Twain, 1995)
- "Tierna y dulce historia de amor" (Ismael Serrano, 1998)
- "Moi...Lolita" (Alizée, 2000)
- "Carolina" (M-Clan, 2001)
- "Ghetto Model" (Master P., 2004)
- "Funny Face" (Red Hot Chili Peppers, 2006)
- "Lolita" (Prince, 2006)

- “Shakey Dog Starring Lolita” (Ghostface Killah, 2006)
- “Scandalous” (Cobra Starship, 2007)
- “One of the Boys” (Katy Perry, 2008)
- “Lolita” (Belinda, 2010)
- “Lolita” (MC Lars, 2011)
- “Permanent December” (Miley Cyrus, 2012)
- “Lolita” (The Veronicas, 2012)
- “Versace Hottie” (Wavy Spice, 2013)
- “Nokia” (Father, 2014)³

Some of these songs describe the young girl, others focus on the male character and the impact Lolita has on him; some develop a narrative, while others present the empowered voice of the teenager. From the most poetic to the crudest, almost all of them exploit the stereotype of the seductive and manipulative teenager⁴. In the following, some of the most significant examples will be discussed. The trailblazers “Quasi una dona” (Joan Manuel Serrat) and *Histoire de Melody Nelson* (Serge Gainsbourg) will be analyzed in the first place. Then, attention will be paid to some of the songs that include direct allusions to the book or even quotations: “Don’t Stand So Close to Me” (The Police), and “Moi...Lolita” (Alizée). For its richness and complexity, the corpus of songs about Lolita developed by Lana del Rey will also deserve special attention.

3.1. “Quasi una dona” (Joan Manuel Serrat)

Released in 1970, shortly after the Kubrick’s movie premiere, “Quasi una dona”, by Joan Manuel Serrat, stands out for its depiction of the romantic entanglements of the lyrical subject with an adolescent. The track encapsulates the legacy of North American folk music, particularly drawing inspiration from Bob Dylan, whom it pays tribute to right from the title⁵. Besides the explicit influence of Bob Dylan (paratextually marked in the title) and of the Catalan poet Joan Salvat Papaseit (mentioned in the song’s body)⁶, there are echoes of other musical and literary texts, notably from the French artist Charles Aznavour and the Catalan poet Gabriel Ferrater (García Gil, 2004, p. 89). The piece even relates to other songs by Serrat himself, such as “Poco antes de que den las diez,” which also revolves around the lyrical subject’s romantic involvement with an adolescent⁷. The rich intertextuality showcased by this song underscores the complexity of the text, which is profoundly lyrical.

³ Lana Del Rey’s songs are deliberately excluded from the corpus due to its abundance and intricate nature, which deserves individualized attention.

⁴ As a counterpart to these representations of Lolita as a miniature *femme fatale* stands the song “Gothic Lolita” (*Opheliac*, 2006), by Emilie Autumn (1979-), unique in its genre for showcasing Lolita as a victim of sexual abuse. Furthermore, as an additional distinctive detail, the clothing aesthetic of the video clip is related to Japanese lolitas fashion (Younker, 2012), specifically to the “Gothic Lolita” modality, a trend related to the modest Victorian aesthetic and, therefore, radically opposite to the provocative nature of the clothes worn by the protagonists of the remaining video clips.

⁵ Bob Dylan has a piece titled “Just like a Woman” (*Blonde on Blonde*, 1966), where he portrays a woman with both captivating and frustrating qualities.

⁶ “M’agrada acariciar-la, perquè em neteja el cor / Vull ser mestre d’amor com en Salvat / I als meus genolls / Dormir el seu coll / Prim i fort / Tant se val si és pecat / Tant se val si és pecat”. More than to the famous “Mester d’amor,” the allusion is to “Ser mestre d’amor,” which says: “Ser mestre d’amor / qui no pagaria. / ara que en sóc jo / l’aprenenta em tira. / De dir la llicó / tota Ella s’afina- / ja sap tant el cor / que no li cal guia; / amb un sol petó / la llicó es sabia. / Qui és mestre d’amor / del guany ja pot viure”. About the literary tradition of the *magister amoris topos*, cf. Socas (2011).

⁷ In this song, exemplifying intratextuality, the teenager must head home before 10 p.m., after engaging in intimate encounters with the lyrical subject, to prevent arousing suspicions from her parents.

At its core, the lyrics revolve around the sensual prosopography of the adolescent, described with hair the color of ripe wheat, the scent of freshly baked white bread, and still wearing socks:

Té els cabells llargs i nets color blat madur
i la olor del pa blanc quan surt del forn.
I té els ulls blaus,
la pell suau
i el pit dur.
Encara du mitjons,
encara du mitjons.

She has long and clean hair, the color of ripe wheat,
And the scent of white bread when it comes out of the oven.
And she has blue eyes,
Soft skin,
And a firm chest.
She still wears socks,
She still wears socks.

The detail of the socks, repeated for emphasis, is presented as indicative of her extreme youth. The joyful and sensual portrayal of their love –“I omple el meu món de flors” (“fills my world with flowers”)- transitions into the depiction of the slightly manipulative nature of this young apprentice:

És quasi una dona.
M'enreda quasi com una dona.
Em busca quasi com una dona.
I juga quasi com una dona,
com una dona que et vol
com a ningú
i al de matí obre els seus ulls amb tu.

She's almost a woman,
Almost deceives me like a woman,
Almost seeks me like a woman,
And plays almost like a woman,
Like a woman who loves you
Like no one else,
And in the morning, she opens her eyes with you.

Hence, the portrayal of the *femme fatale*, the alluring teenager, pervasive in media culture after Kubrick's *Lolita*, is aptly mirrored. This archetype will subsequently emerge in numerous other songs.

3.2. *Histoire de Melody Nelson* (Serge Gainsbourg)

In *Histoire de Melody Nelson* (1971) a narrative unfolds with a dramatic twist. The tragic and poetic tale recounts the chance encounter between Gainsbourg's protagonist, a wealthy and worldly man who drives a Rolls Royce, and Melody Nelson, a young teenage girl he comes

across while she is riding a bicycle. The album's plot evolves across seven tracks, with Gainsbourg narrating the story against a backdrop of lush orchestrations and innovative musical arrangements. Gainsbourg's storytelling explores the intricacies of the unexpected relationship between the man and the teenager, played by Jane Birkin, who oscillates between vulnerability and sensuality. Both the song lyrics and the corresponding series of seven music videos, released the same year as a half-hour telefilm directed by Jean Christophe Averty, objectify Lolita as a "poupée" ('doll'). As per the lyrics, she is 14 and, in the conclusion, meets her demise in a plane crash on her way to Sunderland, lost in a jungle in Papua New Guinea. The album cover features Jane Birkin topless, made up like a doll and covering her chest with an actual doll, but the fact that she was 25 at the time helps dispel the Lolita effect (fig. 3). While the storyline portrays a taboo relationship, Gainsbourg's narrative style avoids outright condemnation or glorification, leaving room for interpretation and reflection.



Figure 3: Cover of the album *Histoire de Melody Nelson* (Serge Gainsbourg, 1971)

3.3. “Don't Stand So Close to Me” (The Police)

The song “Don't Stand So Close to Me” (The Police, 1980) develops a description of an inappropriate relationship between a teacher and his student. The lyrics reflect the tension between attraction and prohibition:

Young teacher, the subject
Of schoolgirl fantasy.
She wants him so badly
Knows what she wants to be.
Inside him, there's longing.
This girl's an open page.
Book marking, she's so close now.
This girl is half his age.

Don't stand, don't stand so
Don't stand so close to me.
Don't stand, don't stand so
Don't stand so close to me.

The narrative of the lyrics highlights temptation and forbidden desire:

Temptation, frustration
So bad it makes him cry.
Wet bus stop, she's waiting.
His car is warm and dry.

The last stanza of the song includes the intertextuality contract by means of allusion. The final line explicitly mentions indeed the literary work, drawing an explicit parallel between the story told in the song and Nabokov's *Lolita*.

It's no use, he sees her
He starts to shake and cough
Just like the old man in
That book by Nabokov.

While presenting the student girl as seductive and bold ("She wants him so badly", "This girl's an open page"), the teacher hesitates between fulfilment of desire ("Inside him, there's longing", "Temptation") and repression out of moral and legal considerations ("Frustration", "This girl is half his age"). The reference to the main character of Nabokov's novel ("Just like the old man in / That book by Nabokov") serves to characterize his position and feelings through both a positive correlation (the man feels tempted by the seduction of the younger girl, just like Humbert Humbert did) and a negative one (unlike the protagonist of the novel, the lyrical subject of the song strives to repress the temptation and manages to suppress it by demanding that the girl keeps distance from him: "Don't stand so close to me").

3.4. "Moi... Lolita" (Alizée)

Explicit references to the book are also present in "Moi...Lolita" by Alizée (1984-). In the photograph illustrating the cover of her album *Gourmandises* (2000) (fig. 4) Alizée strategically incorporates visual elements reminiscent of Lolita's allure, lying on the grass, as portrayed in Lyne's version just three years prior.

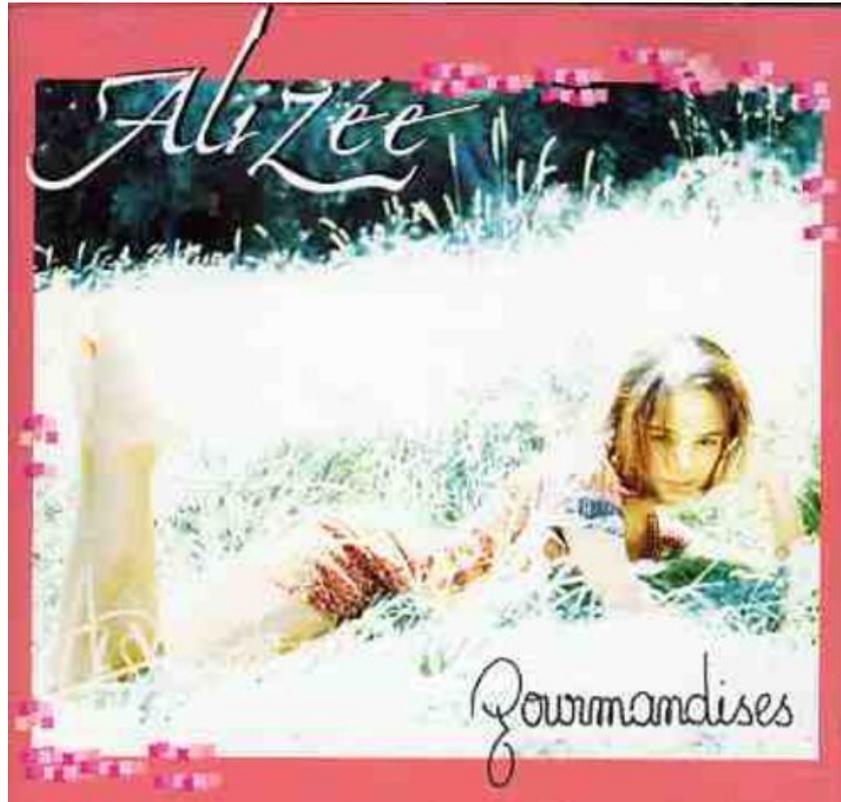


Figure 4: Cover of the album *Gourmandises* (Alizée, 2000)

Moreover, this song arguably stands as one of the most iconic representations of the seductive teenager stereotype embraced by mass culture, with various factors contributing to this consideration. First of all, one of the stanzas includes a rewriting of a very significant excerpt from Nabokov's *Lolita*. Alizée's character declines in the first person all the variations of her name—

Moi je m'appelle Lolita,
Lo ou bien Lola, du pareil au même.
Moi je m'appelle Lolita.
Quand je rêve aux loups,
c'est Lola qui saigne.

Me, I call myself Lolita
Lo or even Lola, it's all the same.
Me, I call myself Lolita
When I dream of wolves,
It's Lola who bleeds.

— just as Humbert did with the name Lolita in the first page of the novel: “She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita” (Nabokov, 1995, p. 9).

The accompanying music video is also noteworthy, displaying a clear influence from Adrian Lyne's cinematic version. The visual representation in the video aligns with the aesthetic choices made in the film, creating a visual homage to the Lolita archetype. There are, for

example, evident examples of intericonicity, as in the scene where the characters do the laundry and then hang up the clothes to dry, together with the consistent use of the soft-focus technique. The deliberate references and echoes from the cinematic adaptation contribute to the song's iconic status, as it actively engages with and builds upon the cultural representations of Lolita. The video also inherits the portrayal of the main character from Adrian Lyne's cinematic: a teenage girl with brown hair who exploits the fascination she generates in an adult man to ask him for money ("Je t'aime" / "T'as pas 200 francs?") (fig. 5), so that she can go partying... without him.

3.5. Lana del Rey's Corpus

Finally, Lana del Rey's songs contain a compendium of verbal and iconic references that span from lyrical subjects resembling Lolita and sharing personal experiences akin to those of Nabokov's titular character. She includes unmistakable mentions of her name and direct quotations from the novel. Frequently, allusions to the novel are intertwined with evocations of film culture in general or specific references to the two existing cinematic adaptations of Lolita.

Direct quotations and references occur in many songs recorded and released between 2008 and 2012, like in the very obvious "Lolita", where a pleasure-seeking teenager asserts her capability to manipulate (fig. 5), but also in other pieces. There are several instances. In "Diet Mountain Dew" and "Every Man Gets his Wish," Del Rey includes references to iconic elements from Kubrick's version, as in the lines "Baby, put on heart-shaped sunglasses / 'Cause we going to take a ride", and "He loves my heart-shaped sunglasses," respectively. In "Put Me in a Movie," the lines "Come on. You know you like little girls" evoke Clare Quilty's use of child actors in pornographic films, offering also a clear reference to Nabokov's *Lolita*. Recognition of the allusions to Nabokov in "Off to the Races" also requires knowledge of the novel, but the reference becomes even more direct as the lyrics quote from the opening lines of the novel ("Light of my life, fire of my loins"), subsequently altering them into "Light of his life, fire of his loins" and into "Light of your life, fire of your loins." The song's speaker, depicted as extremely self-deprecating, focuses on sinfulness, hedonism, and alcohol, along with a fascination with the world of Hollywood movies. The lyrics portray the desire for stardom evolving into depicting Lolita as Humbert Humbert's prostitute or mistress, as seen in lines like "I'm your little scarlet, starlet, singin' in the garden" and "I'm your little harlot, starlet"⁸. Even the title of her 2014 album, *Ultraviolence*, could hint at Humbert Humbert's description of Lolita as his "ultraviolet darling" in his sarcastic apology after subjecting her to violence (Balestrini and Jandl, 2016, p. 8).

These songs not only capitalize on the stereotype of the seductress, but also complicate the character of Lolita. Lana Del Rey has indeed been referred to as the Lolita of sadcore (Wazzan, 2017). Being labeled as such implies that she evokes the archetypal figure of Lolita, but also embodies characteristics associated with the musical genre "sadcore", characterized by a melancholic and somber tone. Lana Del Rey's music and artistic style possess indeed a gloomy quality, as she emphasizes seduction in controversial contexts. Her songs encapsulate a blend of charm, melancholy, and provocation, akin, in fact, to Nabokov's portrayal of Lolita in his literary masterwork.

⁸ Balestrini and Handl (2016) provide an in-depth analysis of these references.

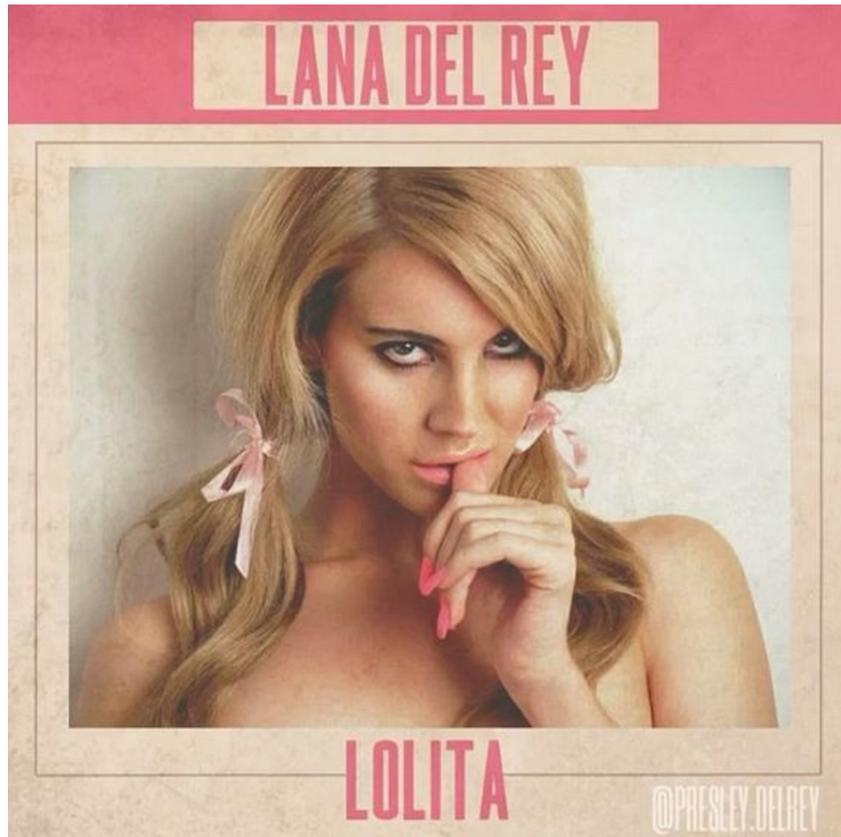


Figure 5: Cover of the demo of “Lolita” (Lana Del Rey, 2010)

4. Lolita as an Aesthetic: the Public Persona of Female Pop Singers

In the realm of pop songs, it’s intriguing to observe the phenomenon of teenage singers who embrace the aesthetics associated with the character of Lolita as popularized in mass culture, portraying a provocative teenager. This trend is evident in notable figures such as Britney Spears (1981-), who, particularly in her early career, embraced a Lolita-inspired image characterized by innocence and sensuality (fig. 6). This inspiration is particularly evident in the period of her life corresponding to the release of “...Baby One More Time” (1998). In the accompanying music video, she was seen dressed as a schoolgirl, a deliberate nod to the Lolita archetype, as she sang about love and performed provocative dance routines. Notably, this occurred before Britney Spears had reached the age of 18, adding an additional layer of controversy to the portrayal. This strategic use of the Lolita aesthetic in her visual presentation contributed to the construction of her public persona as a youthful, yet provocative, pop sensation. She was the prototype of an American sweetheart (Nash, 2006).



Figure 6: Britney Spears' promotional picture

Alizée (1984-) also strategically leveraged the Lolita image in her public appearances beyond the success of “Moi... Lolita.” Exploiting a youthful and flirtatious persona, she maintained a consistent aesthetic that resonated with the Lolita archetype. Through her styling, which often featured girlish outfits and playful expressions, Alizée perpetuated her teenage allure, captivating audiences and reinforcing her image as a modern Lolita figure. This is evident, for example, in her performances of “J’en ai marre,” which bear no connection to the initial hit. The deliberate alignment with the Lolita persona in songs other than “Moi...Lolita” allowed her to extend the impact of the character beyond the confines of the initial hit song. Lolita became a key element in her public persona.



Figure 7: Alizée's Lolita-like performance of "J'en ai marre"

Finally, Lana del Rey (1985-) has also garnered attention for her stylized music videos and lyrics that evoke a nostalgic and provocative ambiance, aligning with the Lolita aesthetic. Notably, she actively embraces the Lolita persona in posters, social media, and selfies (fig. 8). Del Rey's case adds complexity compared to Britney Spears or Alizée, as her songs transcend mere exploitation of the vulgar cliché, infusing them with a poignant and dramatic aura. Being the Lolita of sadcore, her musical narratives often delve into tragic themes, weaving intricate stories that evoke a sense of melancholy and yearning. Her unique blend of haunting melodies, soulful vocals, and cinematic aesthetics contributes to an overarching tragic sensibility in her work. This distinctive approach sets her apart, turning her songs into pieces with a deeper emotional and artistic intensity than usual in the genre.

Furthermore, Lana Del Rey has become an influential role model for postmodern teenagers, as underscored by her significant following, particularly in Tumblr and in the realm of sugar culture (Davis, 2017)⁹. Del Rey's reinterpretation of the Lolita aesthetic, coupled with her cultural impact, amplifies the intrigue and allure surrounding the Lolita phenomenon in contemporary societies. There is indeed a pronounced postmodern fascination with Lolita mediated through Lana Del Rey. Fans engage in creative expressions such as collages and fan art, intricately interweaving references to Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and the coquette aesthetic¹⁰ (fig. 9). This participatory art form reflects a nuanced appreciation for the amalgamation of these influences, emphasizing the complex interplay between pop culture, literature, and music.

⁹ The sugar culture involves consensual relationships between an older, wealthier individual (sugar daddy or mommy), who provides financial support or gifts, and a younger person (sugar baby), who receives such gifts. These arrangements are often built on companionship and mutual benefits, distinct from traditional relationships, with clear expectations and agreements regarding money and sex between the parties involved.

¹⁰ The coquette aesthetic embraces a flirtatious and charming style, characterized by playful and alluring elements. It often involves a mix of innocence and seduction, featuring delicate and feminine fashion choices combined with subtle, suggestive cues. This aesthetic exudes a captivating and enigmatic allure, emphasizing a balance between modesty and allure.



Figure 8: Lana del Rey's promotional picture



Figure 9: Lolita and Lana del Rey's fanart: moodboard

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Lolita portrayed in pop music shares some parallels with the iconic literary character of Nabokov, now firmly embedded in the 20th-century literary canon. Nonetheless, it is essential to acknowledge that, even with the enduring presence of certain elements of the novel, such as textual echoes, cinematic influences have played a predominant role in shaping the Lolita myth within the realm of song. Mass culture, taking creative liberties, has portrayed Lolita as a teenage temptress exuding unrestrained sensuality, thus distorting the original intent of the novel. Film adaptations by Kubrick and Lyne have particularly contributed to this misrepresentation, reinforcing the image of Lolita as a seductive figure in mainstream consciousness.

This paper has delved into the prevalence of the Lolita archetype in pop music, scrutinizing the portrayal of an adolescent seductress in song lyrics. Additionally, the aesthetic strategies employed by creators to seamlessly integrate allusions to Lolita within music videos have been explored. Visual echoes from the films, incorporating vintage American elements from both versions, and even specific photographic techniques like the soft focus, borrowed from Lyne's photography direction, further enrich the visual landscape.

Lastly, the phenomenon of teenage singers adopting the Lolita aesthetic as an integral part of their public persona has been examined. This trend is evident in notable pop stars such as Britney Spears or Alizée, who, particularly in her early careers, embraced a Lolita-inspired image. Lana del Rey has also garnered attention for her stylized music videos and lyrics that evoke a nostalgic and provocative ambiance, aligning with the Lolita aesthetic, but her case is even more relevant. She has provided indeed a powerful role model for young women in Tumblr and other social media. Anyway, all these instances underscore the enduring influence of Lolita in shaping the public persona of contemporary teenage singers.

Through these explorations, the intricate interplay between literature, popular culture, and music, has been illuminated, and the multifaceted nature of Lolita's presence in the realm of pop music has been underscored.

Acknowledgements

This work has been carried out at the University of Barcelona with the support of a "Spanish University System Restructuring" grant awarded by the Ministry of Universities.

References

- Balestrini, N. W. (2018). Popular Culture. In D. Bethea y S. Frank (Eds.), *Vladimir Nabokov in Context* (pp. 182-189). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Balestrini, N.W. & S. Jandl (2016). Lolita and Lana in the Age of Internet Memes. *Nabokov Online Journal*, X-XI, 1-18.
- Davis, R. E. (2017). "Tell me you own me, gimme them coins": postfeminist fascination with Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture on Tumblr. [B.A. Thesis: University of Tennessee-Chattanooga].
- Durham, M. G. (2008). *The Lolita Effect: the Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What We Can Do about it*. New York: The Overlook Press.
- Etcheverry, M. (2009). Le charme feutr  du mauvais gout philistin: *Lolita* d'Adrian Lyne. En D. Machu & T. Tuhkanen (Eds.), *Lolita. Roman de Vladimir Nabokov (1955) et film de Stanley Kubrick (1962)* (pp. 195-205). Paris : Ellipses.
- Edelstein, M. (2021). (How) Should a Feminist Teach *Lolita* in the Wake of #MeToo. In E. Rakhimova Sommers (Ed.), *Teaching Nabokov's Lolita in the #metoo Era* (pp. 11-30). Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.
- Garc a Gil, L. (2005). *Serrat, canci n a canci n* (2^a ed.). Barcelona: Ronsel.
- Iglesias Turri n, P. (2011). Lolita, de Nabokov a Kubrick o el poder femenino en el heteropatriarcado. *Youkali. Revista cr tica de las artes y el pensamiento*, 10, 123-135.
- Mart nez Sariego, M. M. (2022). My Poor Little Girl: c mo la cultura popular corrompi  a Lolita. In T. Ar nguez S nchez & O. Olariu (Eds.), *Algoritmos, teletrabajo y otros grandes temas del feminismo digital* (pp. 730-756). Madrid: Dykinson.
- Mart nez Sariego, M. M. (2023). De la literatura a la cultura digital: el viaje de Lolita de la novela a Tumblr. In T. Ar nguez S nchez & O. Olariu (Eds.), *Ensayos ciberfeministas* (pp. 747-770). Madrid: Dykinson.
- Mianani, S. S. (2019). Lana del Rey's 'Off to the Races' and its allusions to Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. *Journal of Language and Literature*, 19.1, 1-8.
- Mond jar Sol , L. (2016). *Cada noche, cada noche*. Madrid: Siruela.
- Morgan, P. B. (1983). Nabokov and Dante: The Use of *La Vita Nuova* in *Lolita*. *Delta: Revue du Centre d'Etudes et de Recherche sur les Ecrivains du Sud aux Etats-Unis*, 17, 53-59.
- Nabokov, V. (1973). *Strong Opinions*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Nabokov, V. (1995). *The Annotated Lolita*. London: Penguin. Ed. A. Appel.

- Nash, I. (2006). *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Twentieth-Century Popular Culture*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Socas, F. (2011). Magisterio de amor. In R. Moreno Soldevila (Ed.) *Diccionario de motivos amorios en la literatura latina (siglos III a.C.-II d.C.)* (pp. 257-259). Huelva: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Huelva.
- Stam, R. (2007). Film and Narration: Two Versions of *Lolita*. In R. Barton Palmer (Ed.), *Twentieth-Century American Fiction on Screen* (pp. 106-126). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Troubetzkoy, W. (1998). La nymphette et le pentapode. In M. Couturier (Ed.) *Lolita. Figures Mythiques* (pp. 102-127). Paris: Autrement.
- Vickers, G. (2008). *Chasing Lolita: How Popular Culture Corrupted Nabokov's Little Girl All Over Again*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press.
- Wazzan, S. (24th February, 2017). Lana del Rey: la lolita del sadcore. *Cusica+*.
<https://plus.cusica.com/2017/02/24/lana-del-rey-la-lolita-del-sadcore/>
- Yunker, T. (2012). Japanese Lolita: Dreaming, Despairing, Defying. *Journal of East Asian Affairs*, 11. 1, 97-110.

Contact email: monica.martinezsariego@ulpgc.es