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Uncovering the Obscene in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and John Irving's *The Hotel New Hampshire* – A Critical Analysis of Cultural Divisions

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Abstract

This thesis examines the obscene, particularly through three taboo motifs present in John Irving's *The Hotel New Hampshire*, and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. I will explore the effect and treatment of issues like incest, rape, and sexual dissidence. Through this analysis of the obscene, I wish to illuminate that there exist inherent similarities between these novels in how the obscene is made conspicuous and is a crucial aspect of these works' depictions of transgression, defiance, and morality. Bringing attention to this similarity is important because it embarks on a larger discussion about cultural divisions. As we shall see, there is overwhelming evidence that these novels have been divided into different categories on the cultural scale; *Lolita* has been received as and deemed a work of highbrow literature, whereas *The Hotel New Hampshire* is labelled a work of popular fiction. The main aim of this thesis, then, is to illustrate how different receptions and cultural classifications of these novels have led to biased readings of the obscene themes and language present in both works. This thesis attempts to disregard this cultural dichotomy, and treat these novels as culturally equal, in that it seeks to view their treatment of the obscene as equally significant.

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Introduction

“How starved for subject matter writers would be were it not for taboos - and for those brave or foolish souls flirting with the forbidden. Don’t eat the fruit of the only tree you were warned to stay away from. Don’t kill your father and marry your mother. Don’t bear the minister’s child out of wedlock unless you plan to accessorize your Puritan basic black with a scarlet A. And, whatever you do, don’t write a poem comparing Stalin’s fingers to fat grubs unless, like Osip Mandelstam, you want to wind up cold and hungry in some God-forsaken Soviet hellhole” – Francine Prose

Through this statement, Francine Prose manages to summarise briefly, and concisely, the presence, impact, and importance of taboos in the history of literature. Her summary also encompasses the effects of transgressing, i.e. the breaking of taboos and exceeding the limits of moral standards. Prose provides examples spanning from Eve’s transgression in the Old Testament, to the dreaded incest taboo in Sophocles’ universally known tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, to adultery in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance*, to politically charged poetry in the twentieth century. Taboos could be deemed vital subject matter inspiring some of Western society’s most important literary ‘masterpieces’ and widely distributed novels. Taboos remain important in contemporary culture, as they are adapted, interpreted, and incorporated into the arts in all kinds of mediums. In art’s aspirations and aims to reshape and illuminate different aspects of reality, ideals, and human nature, taboos become inevitable and coexisting aspects of art’s depictions. Taboos are also intrinsic aspects of human life and society. Eve’s transgression is key, as her penalty for it is childbearing and its pains, as well as being the submissive part of her marriage with Adam. Her wrongdoings have terminal consequences which become symbolic in the Bible’s explanation of the role and sufferings of womanhood. Her sins are present as a lesson in morals: do not defy God. Furthermore, although Oedipus’s transgressions are unknown to him while being committed, the acts of murdering his father and wedding his mother leave him devastated and cause him to blind himself upon realisation. Sophocles’s tragedy uses the taboos of incest and father-killing to illustrate that no-one can escape their fate. Taboos may be portrayed differently in literature, be it symbolically, allegorically, or in a straightforward manner for the sake of familiarising transgressions. Taboos may similarly serve different purposes, be they present to shock and disrupt, to illuminate fatal truths about current issues, or even to emphasise the outcomes for those who transgress, and thus serve as moral and ethical warnings.

This thesis aims to perform an analysis of two twentieth-century novels that present taboo issues and the obscene through characters who commit and suffer the consequences of transgressions of varying natures, intensity, and severity. I am intrigued by literature's ability to capture the ambivalence of taboos, an ambivalence manifested in a coupling of fascination and repulsion. The novels in question, novels which have been read widely and continuingly, are *Lolita* (1955) by Vladimir Nabokov, and *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981) by John Irving. On a thematic level, both novels treat similar taboo issues, which allows for an inspection of taboos' cultural, social, and personal relevance. Furthermore, these works are both examples of literature which incorporates the obscene, both thematically, and through instances of obscene language. The obscene, as explained by Peter Michelson, refers to any depictions of sex and its vocabulary, and sexual violence (xi), which is also the essence of the main taboos and transgressions that will be covered in this thesis, namely incest, rape, and sexual deviation. As an all-encompassing approach to this comparative analysis, I wish to shed a critical light on the different stigmas Nabokov and Irving have arguably faced as a result of their different receptions as novelists; i.e. the overwhelming evidence that *Lolita* is generally recognised as high art and a classic, whereas *The Hotel New Hampshire* is labelled popular fiction, or 'middlebrow' literature.

In Chapters 2 and 3 respectively, I will perform separate, yet comparative analyses of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and John Irving's *The Hotel New Hampshire*, which will pay particular attention to different thematic treatments of incest, rape, and sexual deviation. Each individual analysis will also include an inspection of the impact of obscene and smutty language, an aspect which is immensely intriguing to compare in relation to the stigmas of cultural appropriation; Nabokov's *Lolita*, in spite of some critics' and Nabokov's own claims, is comparatively just as obscene on a linguistic level as the work of Irving. Obscene language also serves different functions, which, through closer inspection, can open the texts even further. An inspection of the obscene in these works illuminates the relevance and importance of taboos, and highlights how literature manages to be an eye-opening source of information regarding the nature of transgressions. It further opens for a broader understanding of the effect of taboos in literature in general, as taboos have fascinated and intrigued readers for centuries.

Lawrence Levine's book *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* covers this notion of cultural categorisation and elaborates on how the division has changed and effectively restructured the notion of cultural hierarchy. Levine states that the framework of culture is susceptible to change, and is constantly evolving, which is evident from

prior parameters of cultural classification. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, have pointed to the origins of the rankings of high and lowbrow literature, which stem from a juxtaposition of an author's work and his social rank according to property. This interrelation was still being actively invoked in the nineteenth century (2). They go on to explain how this original distinction of highbrow and lowbrow continues to exist, even though its origin is perhaps forgotten: "[B]ecause the higher discourses are normally associated with the most powerful socio-economic groups existing at the centre of cultural power, it is they which generally gain the authority to designate what is to be taken as high and low in the society" (4). Although this interrelation is dated and has gradually vanished and been replaced by different criteria of cultural ranking, it is evident through disagreeing descriptions of the work of writers like Irving that subject matter and style no longer mark clear cut distinctions between high and low.

Levine's book considers the hierarchy of contemporary culture, which labels art by employing categories such as 'highbrow', 'middlebrow' and 'lowbrow,' and questions the rise and current existence of an 'elite art.' He is sceptical of the hierarchical separation between different art forms since "things could not be truly compared because they were so rarely laid out horizontally, next to another, but were always positioned above or below each other on an infinite vertical scale" (3). The juxtaposition of different works of literature is precisely what this thesis aims to do, by comparing key issues, themes, and language regardless of the novels' respective rankings as a 'modern classic' in the case of *Lolita*, and 'popular fiction' in the case of *The Hotel New Hampshire*. 'Highbrow', 'lowbrow', and 'middlebrow' were terms originally presented by editor Russel Lynes in 1949 as a means of cheekily categorising the American post-war population according to taste and 'high thinking.' He suggested that there emerged a structurally different social hierarchy in American culture, where prestige no longer relied on wealth and the family name. He rather pointed to the intellectual high thinkers of society as the new social elite, by whom he included innovative individuals such as scientists, writers, and academics. Lynes's thesis was that America was heading for a new social structure where "the highbrows are the elite, the middlebrows are the bourgeoisie, and the lowbrows are hoi polloi," the latter a degenerating term for the masses (147). What this entails is essentially a gradual shift from the social categorisation based in wealth and fortune, an elite who effectively determined *prior* cultural hierarchies and definitions of 'high taste.' Yet a cultural distinction nevertheless exists, and apparently often prevails in determining the inherent quality of a work,

which is often based prejudicially on a work's connotations and associations with rigid and frankly unnecessary determiners such as 'high' and 'popular.'

What I intend to show in the analyses of *The Hotel New Hampshire* and *Lolita* is that an exploration of taboos and the obscene manages to expunge the rigid distinctions between 'high' and popular. Through an inspection of incest, rape and sexual deviance, these analyses highlight the inherent thematic similarity of literary works which treat taboo issues. More importantly, this study allows for a comparison between other critics' readings or disregard of the obscene's aesthetic and thematic relevance and meaning. I call out this particular tendency in relation to several critics' readings, or rather misreadings, of the taboos in question. What is evident is the general appreciation of style over content in readings of 'highbrow' literature. The imbalance of this focus means we may be discrediting works of fiction based on style alone, not taking into consideration the significance a work may present in its plot. This disparity also entails a discriminatory appreciation of works whose innovative style is celebrated, while its actual *content* is lost on us. For instance, as we shall see from the rape motif in *Lolita*, which I argue is constantly present in the narrative, a number of critics have seemingly miscomprehended Humbert's intension because their analytical focus relies too heavily on style and metaphorical readings. Opposingly, John Irving's treatment of the rape motif is disregarded and critiqued due to Irving's alleged simplistic treatment of the theme and straight-forward style of narration. These readings are rooted in the notion that different classifications of literature ultimately operate with different literary means; Within the cultural dichotomy there also exists a subordinate tendency of ascribing 'highbrow' and mass culture different stylistic trademarks. This in turn leads to predisposed modes of interpretation. Juxtaposing the presence and impact of taboo issues in these novels accentuates how many previous readings of both works respectively are rooted in prejudices related to this cultural dichotomy. I intend to show that an analysis based on the obscene manages to reveal how literature, varyingly, depicts transgressions and human nature. This thesis simultaneously rethinks and excises this prevailing cultural distinction, which further serves to directly challenge remaining biases and discriminatory attitudes towards different classes of literature and art.

Focusing on issues that are deemed taboo in a comparative analysis of novels released in different decades means one must also take into consideration that norms and taboos vary and *change*, a point that is relevant because *Lolita* and *The Hotel New Hampshire* were published almost thirty years apart. Hypothetically, the censorship battles of the 1950s and 60s, which also involved *Lolita*, made room for later writers like Irving to indulge more freely in

subject matter which would have previously been considered too obscene to publish. This development perhaps also allowed writers to explore taboo themes and transgressions more explicitly, which is evident in the lack of attempted censorship of the novel *Hotel New Hampshire*. Some issues raised in the latter novel would assumedly have caused strong reactions and stricter censorship, had it been written prior to the 80s. On the contrary, Humbert's transgressions in *Lolita* might remain more controversial than the transgressions present in *The Hotel New Hampshire* even today. Some taboos are inevitably regarded as being far 'worse' than others, depending on how they affect others; for instance, were we to look at the severity of penalties and society's attitudes towards the perpetrators, child molestation is judged more harshly than adultery. Similarly, being caught abusing a dead body would unquestionably create stronger reactions than purchasing sex from a prostitute. Therefore, the current and prior attitudes towards different types of transgressions will also be taken into account when analysing these novels.

Dealing with taboos is characteristic for Irving's work overall. He is known to introduce serious issues in most of his novels, such as abortion in *The Cider House Rules*, and transsexualism in *In One Person*. Edward Reilly states that

[b]ecause he focuses on contemporary issues that include homosexuality, transvestism, mate-swapping, equal rights, radical extremism, incest, rape, abortion, and violence, some critics label Irving a 'trendy' or 'popular' writer; because of his probing insights into and analyses of these issues, other critics label him a 'serious' writer. (11)

This is a noteworthy and questionable distinction, as it suggests these two labels are incapable of coexisting as descriptions of a writer's work. In the discourse of literary categorisations there exists a long tradition of celebrating and emphasising the 'classics.' This distinction has disappeared to a certain extent, yet the 'literature' versus 'popular culture' dichotomy which remains needs to be taken into consideration. This divide genuinely needs to be challenged when biased readings in fact may even be damaging, not only to the individual work; Generalised readings of works ascribed to a certain classification risk generating stereotypical approaches to literature overall.

Lolita has a very wide and continuing distribution and is deemed one of Western society's most popular and controversial literary works. It is also more likely to conjure notions of the modern 'classic' than Irving's novel. Whereas Irving is celebrated for examining serious

and current topics, *Lolita* has rather been celebrated for Nabokov's mastering of English as a second language, and his lyrical style. Julian Connolly even highlights that *Lolita* today has "attained near canonical status in the literary world." Furthermore, in 1998, The board of Random House's Modern Library division ranked *Lolita* fourth on the list of the top 100 novels in the twentieth century (Connolly 141). In Carl Proffer's book *Keys to Lolita*, Proffer's review and appreciation of the novel *Lolita* is rooted in Nabokov's innovative style, his narrative allure, and stylistic features. Proffer further comments that he found himself less concerned with the novel's characters and the meaning of morality, but rather set out to explore the technical puzzles in the novel (Connolly 147). Hence there is an interesting distinction that separates the two novelists in terms of style and content. Whereas *Lolita* is categorised as a must-read classic primarily because of its lyrical and innovative style, Irving is celebrated because of his subject matter. Yet both novelists are questionably equally unorthodox and thought-provoking in their respective ways. And the emphasis on Nabokov's style may in turn also disrupt the reader's attention to the novel's actual plot. It is also worth noting that Irving was in fact not particularly inspired by Nabokov's writing. Irving himself noted regarding Nabokov that

Nabokov was a perfectly interesting writer. He's not one of my favourites but I don't fault him for that. I think he had entirely different aims as a writer than I have. He was a kind of butterfly catcher as a writer. And by that I mean he wrote about human beings often as if he wasn't one. Or he wrote about the kind of human beings that he wasn't. He wrote about subjects sort of pinned to a board under glass. (qtd. in Richardson 76)

The two remain different types of writers, with different stylistic trademarks, which is crucial to bear in mind when comparing them.

About depicting controversial issues, Irving has claimed that his aim is not to simply shock as a means to sell, but rather to obey what he deems a writer's responsibility: "Art has an aesthetic responsibility to be entertaining. The writer's responsibility is to take the hard stuff and make it as accessible as the stuff can be made" (qtd. in Reilly 11-12). Hence the two novelists' intentions are very much polar opposites; Irving varies from Nabokov in that he is deemed a "serious" yet accessible writer of popular fiction and sees subject matter as more important than style and means of conveying. Nabokov, on the other hand, states himself in his afterword to *Lolita* that the story of Humbert was something he wrote as if to simply get it out of his system, and dismisses questions about the author's purpose or overall message (311). Nabokov seems more intrigued by the writer's ability to push boundaries and standards on a

stylistic level, which is heavily implied in the novel's foreword, written by Nabokov under a fictive literature professor's pseudonym: "'offensive' is frequently but a synonym for 'unusual'; and a great work of art is of course always original, and thus by its very nature should come as more or less a shocking surprise" (5). Nabokov assumedly chose taboo motifs of paedophilia and incest, which he knew would create strong reactions, intentionally to push boundaries. With each novelist's different intentions, one could at least question whether Humbert's transgressions are all the more obnoxious and abominable because Nabokov openly meant them to be. However, one also needs to keep in mind the effect of subjectivity in the reception of literature, and the fact that a writer's alleged intentions may not serve as adequate justifications for how a work is experienced.

Both *Lolita* and *The Hotel New Hampshire*'s status as best sellers emphasises that their controversial subject matter has not prevented people from reading their books. Each novel was also adapted to film; *Lolita* has seen two different adaptations, by director Stanley Kubrick in 1962, and later by Adrian Lyne in 1997. Similarly, Irving's novel became a film adaptation in 1984, starring Hollywood actors Jodie Foster and Rob Lowe in the leading roles. Hollywood commercialism and adaptation through other mediums stress both novels' ongoing popularity and relevance in Western Society. And despite varying criticism, attempts of censorship and accusations against the novel *Lolita*, Humbert remains one of modern literature's most famous characters. There is, however, a significant difference between the publishing histories of these two novels. Whereas Irving's novel gained a place on the best-seller list throughout America shortly after its release, *Lolita*'s road to fame was not an easy one. The immense controversy and aftermath created by the release of *Lolita* could also indicate that Nabokov's novel still exceeds Irving's in terms of obscenity, despite being published twenty-six years prior to Irving's novel.

Lolita was finally released in Paris in 1955 through the French publishing company the Olympia Press, run by the controversial publisher Maurice Girodias. He ultimately became Nabokov's saviour and last chance to release his novel, after Nabokov was turned down by a vast number of publishers, undoubtedly due to the novel's taboo motifs. Nabokov was even reluctant to publish the novel under his own name, as he feared the release of *Lolita* would ruin his reputation and cause the demise of his career at Cornell University (Williams, "Lolita, Who's Your Daddy?" 757-58). The fact that Nabokov himself feared the outcome of the release of the novel in his name proves he knew very well the storm it would arouse. Some of the lasting controversy of this novel might also originate from the fact that the Olympia Press was

the publisher behind various works of pornographic fiction and other renowned, contentious works such as Samuel Beckett's first novels and *The Naked Lunch* by William Burroughs (Williams, "Olympia's Demise" 105). The attacks and accusations against Nabokov following *Lolita*'s release did not, however, prevent the novel from becoming the Olympia Press' most profitable release.

It is fair to conclude that *Lolita* gathered major attention because of its controversy, as well as the momentary banning of the novel in the UK and France, which turned out for the good as it boosted curiosity and engagement from a wider audience; works that are deemed taboo and obscene seemingly evoke immense interest, and perhaps an ambiguous mixture of disgust and enthusiasm amongst readers. Also, as Elisabeth Ladenson argues, some of the biggest developments within society in the twentieth century, such as surrealism and existentialism, reshaped the functions and ideals of art immensely (xix). Art in the twentieth century gradually became explicitly intent on challenging what was commonly accepted and taken for granted. These ideals also became an intrinsic part of society through advertising, which means they were commonly accepted. This overall shift meant ideas of transgression and subversion gradually became positive values in themselves (Ladenson xix-xx). Ladenson also manages to illuminate how "countercultural aesthetics" (xix) bled into *all* strata of culture; Nabokov, as well as other artists who aimed to produce highbrow modes of art, were ultimately inspired, and affected by the same development. *Lolita*'s ranking as high art does not exclude any resemblance to commonly accepted, popular movements. Andreas Huyssen raises a central argument regarding cultural divisions and the effect of commercial culture in the twentieth century; many artists have successfully incorporated mass cultural forms, and vice versa; mass culture artists have successfully adopted high art approaches (xi). This suggests that cultural ranking should not be applied or read too rigidly as it risks segregating certain trends, thus similarities within the general canon of literature may otherwise go unobserved. Nonetheless, this development suggests that both Nabokov and Irving's novels belong to a long history of literature, highbrow and mass culture correspondingly, that incorporates transgression as an aspect of realism. Depictions of transgressive acts were gradually acknowledged and accepted, a transition which is evident in *The Hotel New Hampshire*'s reception and popularity.

There are several factors supporting the claim that Irving and Nabokov are categorised differently, the main factor being the critical response to each writer respectively; Irving, as previously mentioned, has been marked as a 'writer of *popular* fiction,' and he is a widely distributed writer, many of whose novels have been adapted to films. Thus, the size of his

readership is unquestionably large. Nabokov's *Lolita* has been deemed one of modern literature's masterpieces, a classic, critically acclaimed, and distributed on the same scale as Irving. Yet there remains compelling evidence that the two writers have received an immensely different span of attention from academia; in fact, it remains surprisingly difficult to assemble a decent number of critical reviews or academic works concerning the published works of John Irving, whereas one quick search through a public library or an internet search engine on the novel *Lolita* will reveal hundreds of sources treating Nabokov's work. It seems as if academia has simply overlooked Irving, regardless of, or quite possibly *because of*, his title as an international bestseller, a writer of 'middlebrow,' mass culture art. The reason for this remains perhaps a puzzle, as the true value and purpose of literature and art is as individual and unfixed as culture itself. Nonetheless, Irving's invisibility in academia compared to Nabokov's praise and attention raises the issue of cultural injustice and discrimination because of Irving's association with 'popular' and 'middlebrow' literature. Gradually, there grew a tendency to use 'popular' as an aesthetic categorisation which, rather than referring to a work's actual popularity, became a dismissive term distinguishing literature associated with bad writing and banality, in spite of the actual size of the readership (Levine 31). The term 'popular writer' therefore connotes 'lowbrow' or 'middlebrow,' as if to distinguish between accessible and complex writers, in terms of their style.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will provide an extended explanation of the terminology introduced here, such as taboos and the obscene, not only discussing their contextual meaning as such, but more importantly the reason for choosing this particular approach to pry apart some of the differences and similarities between Irving and Nabokov. As an overarching approach to this analysis, I will be taking into consideration the different receptions and categorisations of these novels on a cultural scale, because I believe that *Lolita* and *The Hotel New Hampshire*'s receptions respectively as works of highbrow and middlebrow writing, or as modes of 'literature' and 'mass culture,' have in turn led to biased readings of each individual work. The distinction between highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow will be discussed using mainly Lawrence Levine and Andreas Huyssen's discussions about the origins and remaining controversy revolving around these cultural divisions. Based on a number of literary critics' responses and analyses of each individual novel, assumedly Vladimir Nabokov's treatment of the obscene has generally not been fully recognised or appreciated. Contrastingly, John Irving's treatment of the obscene has been considered by critics as being of a too straightforward nature, and thus he is criticised for the lack of symbolic elevation of

serious issues. As a consequence of stigma and stereotypical trademarks associated with classifications of art as ‘high’ or ‘popular,’ I believe we generally miss out on undiscovered opportunities within comparative reading, mainly due to the lack of appreciation of mass culture in the academic fields of literature and the arts.

Through my analysis, I do not necessarily wish to attack or critique the different receptions of these novels as such, but rather aim to provide a more unprejudiced reading of the two novels, thus treating them as equal in their cultural and artistic significance. By this, I mean that the works should be recognised as equally relevant and be read equally seriously. Using the obscene as means of further understanding these literary works, I wish to reveal that regardless of their different receptions as novels, both works portray crucial truths about animalistic nature, forbidden lusts, and the severity of transgressions. This can be seen as literature’s attempt to unmask controversial elements of our historical and contemporary society and reality. My analyses of the novels aim to identify and compare the different forms of transgressions and taboos that are present, as well as discuss the impact and role of these taboos and transgressions on the novels’ characters. My main argument is that through an inspection of the obscene, a thorough and approximately unbiased analysis is able to expose the many perhaps overlooked interpretative possibilities and similarities between even succinctly different modes of literature. My argument further relies on the notion that different cultural classifications of literature in turn shape and disrupt our opinions and expectations regarding a work of fiction. These biases may even disturb our expectations regarding what we originally deem taboo.

Chapter 1

The following chapter provides a closer inspection of terms like ‘taboos’ and ‘the obscene,’ with emphasis on how these terms will be applied in my analysis of the novels in question. I will further suggest how these terms are particularly related to each individual work of fiction. The overarching critical perspective of this thesis is the impact of cultural classification on the reception and analysis of Irving’s and Nabokov’s works. Embarking on the larger discussion about the evidently lasting dichotomy between the categorisation of ‘popular’ and ‘mass culture,’ or ‘high art’ versus ‘literature,’ I will include ideas from various theorists. This is an attempt to explain why there exist and remain biased approaches to Nabokov and Irving respectively, but more crucially what this elitist discriminatory reading may entail.

1.1 Taboos

The *Collins Advanced Dictionary* describes a taboo as “a social custom to avoid doing that activity or talking about that subject, because people find them embarrassing or offensive,” which is arguably an account many will recognise in relation to subjects such as rape, incest, and sexual dissidence. Such acts are not only deemed taboo to advocate, seek out, or perform, but are almost always considered controversial topics for discussion. This has resulted in a long history of omitted and generally avoided subjects within the canon of the novel, and furthermore often resulted in writers including these subjects through implicit and subtle means, avoiding bluntly addressing indecent actions. Through thematic incorporation of taboos like incest, sexual violence and deviant sexuality, John Irving and Vladimir Nabokov actively evoke the obscene and at least artistically break the silence concerning these taboos through representation.

Because the term “taboo” may have several connotations, it is important to introduce a more limited definition of the term, taking into consideration the historical influence of taboos. Because of Sigmund Freud’s impact on literary history, and his relevance to both novels, I have chosen to use the definition of taboo provided by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*. Both *Lolita* and *The Hotel New Hampshire* evoke Freud, who had a big impact on the development and nature of literature from the modernist period on. Freud’s *name*, as well as the concept of psychoanalysis, occurs explicitly in both books, most visibly in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, in

which a crucial character is the Viennese Jew with an unpronounceable name, who “earned the name Freud for his abilities to soothe the distress of the staff and guests alike” (Irving 29). Continuously throughout the novel, references are made to “the other Freud,” often paired with appropriate Freudian remarks that describe different situations or settings. Likewise, Humbert, in *Lolita*, makes several references to psychoanalysis and Freud throughout his narrative: “We must remember that a pistol is the Freudian symbol of the Ur-father’s central forelimb,” he says at one point (216). The occurrence of Freudian ideas formulated as common knowledge shows the impact and distribution of psychoanalysis in the 1950s, the period in which both novels predominantly take place.

In spite of the later general controversy regarding psychoanalysis, its impact on literature, and on Western society’s perceptions of the self, makes it extremely relevant in this context (Leitch et al. 807). First, and most importantly, both main characters of these novels are educated within the field of literature and literary criticism, as well as being writers of their own stories, points that are made clear by both narrators respectively. This puts both main characters within the history of literature, where Freud has a tremendous influence and relevance. As stated by Leitch et al. regarding the works of Sigmund Freud, his

analyses have had a fundamental impact on what we now understand as literary theory, influencing virtually every twentieth-century critic. On the one hand, Freud’s radical new view on subjectivity has deeply affected the analysis of characters, authors, and readers, enabling a new understanding of split, hidden, or contradictory desires and intentions. On the other hand, for Freud literature is not just an illustration but also a source and authority for understanding those desires and intentions in the first place. (812)

Freud’s ideas regarding literature as a modern cultural reflection of human nature and society are relevant when examining the novels as expressions of the pathology of desire, lust, and force that drives people to transgress. It is therefore natural to go back to Freud in discussing the literary functions of moral transgressions. Also, in relation to Peter Michelson’s definitions of neurosis and love, which will be discussed later in this chapter, Freud is immensely relevant because of the relationship between desire and taboos.

Taboos are intrinsic parts of human society, and have been, if we are to believe Freud, part of human societies for an immensely long part of our history, tracing back to ancient

aboriginal tribes in Australia (2). Taboos impart inevitable and crucial norms that shape society and culture, and become evident in art, politics, laws, etiquette, social hierarchies, and literature. Freud points to specific taboos he claims are universal and everlasting, like incest and father-killing. More significantly, he also gives a slightly different explanation of the term ‘taboo.’ The term originates from the Polynesian word *taboo*, and its factual meaning carries slightly different connotations:

The meaning of ‘taboo,’ as we see it, diverges in two contrary directions. To us it means, on the one hand, ‘sacred,’ ‘concentrated,’ and on the other ‘uncanny,’ ‘dangerous,’ ‘forbidden,’ ‘unclean.’ The converse of ‘taboo’ in Polynesian is ‘*noa*,’ which means ‘common’ or ‘generally accessible.’ Thus ‘taboo’ has about it a sense of something unapproachable, and it is principally expressed in prohibitions and restrictions. Our collocation ‘holy dread’ would often coincide in meaning with ‘taboo.’ (21-22)

Freud’s definition of the original meaning of taboo suggests a meaning more ambivalent than purely advocating against a certain act, as the dictionary definition suggests. The *sacred* and positive denotive aspects of taboo acts could explain human fascination with the low, as we as readers have a morbid fascination with the forbidden, the unnatural and the obscene. These conflicting forces of repugnance and desire mirror the repugnance felt towards transgressions like child molestation and incest; there is inevitably also a sense of underlying fascination and desire present that makes readers yearn for insight into the subject matter even if it induces repulsion. Debatably, a vital part of human identification is built on an image of polar opposition, which specifies what one is *not*, and will *not* indulge in, images that are strengthened or challenged through literary representations.

Although Freud’s discussion regarding tribes’ relationship to taboos and norms generally depicts them in a frankly racist and white supremacist fashion, he does make several compelling claims about the position of taboos’ long history and significance in societies, going back as far in human history as possible. He states that the prohibitions found in these old societies indicate a strong relationship and explanation for the origins and backgrounds of “our own ‘categorical imperative’” (26). Furthermore, he cites Wilhelm Wundt, who also states that “[i]f we understand by it [taboo], in accordance with the general meaning of the word, every prohibition (whether laid down in usage or custom or in explicitly formulated laws) against touching an object or making use of it for one’s own purposes or against using certain proscribed words.” Freud concludes that accordingly there would be no races or stages of

culture that lack the impact of taboos (27). Freud's deduction shows how even modern societies' strong relation to taboos and their intrinsic presence in society affects norms, customs, laws, and regulations. Taboos thus also have an immense impact on the history of the novel in terms of censorship and writers evading depictions of certain circumstances, crimes, and vocabulary. The role of the novel in relation to taboos is manifold; whereas the depictions of the high and low illuminate certain social attitudes, utter or partial omission of some themes and subjects suggests these taboos' status as culturally intolerable.

It is significant to emphasise that taboos are, and always have been, social constructs originally unrelated to specific religious scripts or government laws, but rather deeply connected to a sense of normality, ethics, and morals. This of course means that taboos are not universal and static, but rather vary depending on each individual culture's reliance on specific religious, ideological, and traditional norms. Freud's definitions of the incest taboo as a universally static taboo will therefore be contradicted in relationships represented in both novels: the incestuous relationship between John Berry and Franny, as well as Humbert's relationship with Lolita. The nature of Humbert's transgression is arguably worse than a purely incestuous one because it involves the aspect of paedophilia. Also, other transgressions present in *The Hotel New Hampshire* have worse consequences and are rooted in more shame and repulsion than the incestuous relationship between the siblings.

As proven by society's changing attitudes to prior and present taboos, changes in society lead to different definitions of transgression, the obscene, and the forbidden. Definitions of taboos change in accordance to sociological and cultural developments throughout the world. Taboos, according to Freud, "have no grounds and are of unknown origin. Though they are unintelligible to us, to those who are dominated by them they are taken as a matter of course" (22). Whereas this definition makes sense when looking back at the banning of homosexuality, it is harder to swallow when applied to the status of incestuous relationships as taboo, because of how such relationships affect those involved, and the inevitable question of whether all are willing participants. This discrepancy also emphasises the previous claim; current standards and views regarding different transgressions need not bear resemblance to previous general views.

1.2 The Obscene

The term “obscene” in this context is deeply related to the notion of taboos, which we see in Peter Michelson’s book *Speaking the Unspeakable*. He defines a *poetics of obscenity* and presents its history and development, where the definition and application of the term “obscene” is contextually narrowed down thusly: “I want to use obscenity in the Greek sense of bringing onstage what is customarily kept offstage in western culture, for example, the Oedipal bedroom or Jocasta’s suicide or Oedipus’ blinding.” He further emphasises that “obscenity is essentially pertinent to sex and its vocabulary. It also applies, of course, to the privy parts, their excretory functions and epithets about them” (xi). Therefore, literary explorations and illuminations of sex, brutality, and violence constitute aesthetic functions in representing customs and taboos in literature. Representing the obscene is deeply connected to the appropriations of the high and low, realism as a form of depiction, and the historical transition and evolution of definitions of transgression, be it moral, ethical, or legal. One of obscenity’s functions in literature is to unmask what is not explicitly evident, to reveal *all* aspects of humanity and reality. It is my hypothesis that regardless of Nabokov and Irving’s different categorisations as writers of fiction, they both manage equally to illuminate different truths and realities regarding hidden desires, transgressions, and obscene themes, many of which remain important and controversial topics related to gender and notions of morality.

In Michelson’s definition of a poetics of obscenity, he also pinpoints the similarities between writers who work within different genres or different styles, in terms of their treatment of the obscene. Such similarities are evident in instances like Humbert’s sexualisation of the child and the sexual relationship between John and Franny in Irving’s novel. Michelson describes an aesthetic of obscenity as a traditional counterpoint to aesthetics through perceptual alterations in which a species of the ugly is rebuilt to resemble and function as a form of the beautiful. Redirecting the reader’s attention from the ideal in turn highlights familiar, yet unacknowledged aspects of human behaviour (xi). In addressing transgression and obscene acts and language, both novelists fit into Michelson’s characterisation of a poetics of obscenity, a literary discourse which “describes speaking the unspeakable and is defined by the artistic strategies used to change assumptions and perceptions. These will vary according to artist, but what they will have in common is the disposition to make the obscene function aesthetically” (xii). This categorisation highlights the similarities and differences between Nabokov and Irving as writers of fiction. Elements of the obscene function as important aesthetic motifs and

themes of both plots, and are present in both works to emphasise different aspects of human nature. As stressed by Michelson:

The first concern of the writer/artist is articulation, i.e. poetics. He or she may adopt, adapt, reject or reinvent the known modes of articulation. He or she will be informed by many other things – politics, gender, economics, psychology, etc. – but the first principle of making is making, *sine qua non*. (ix)

As taboos have manifested themselves in all the mentioned aspects of society above, they too will impact and affect the ideologies of the novelists and in turn the subject matter. It must also be stressed that Nabokov and Irving portray various themes immensely differently and seemingly with dissimilar aesthetic intentions.

Michelson also distinguishes *three* modes of pornographic literature, adding a third to the standard modes of hard-core and soft-core pornography, wherein hard-core pornographic modes often depict and present explicit sex and genitalia to the extent where it eroticises the reader/audience. Soft-core may also present explicit sex, but in a more confined and “conformist” manner, in a generally more acceptable standard (xii). Michelson proposes a third category within the field of pornography, which he defines as artistic or complex pornography, a genre which

presents the myth of love in the context of obscenity. It differs from soft-core in that it is culturally disinterested, not concerned to serve cultural sentimentalities. It differs from hard-core in that it is complex, committed to exploring the full consciousness of being rather than restricting itself to animality . . . Although it is complex, and may include many other concerns than sexuality, this mode of the genre is pornographic by virtue of making sexuality at once obscene and a major metaphor in the construction of its myths of love. (41)

I will use Michelson’s definition of artistic pornography to prove that through the themes and aesthetics in both *Lolita* and the *Hotel New Hampshire*, the obscene is evoked and made conspicuous to such an extent that at least individual passages within each work can be appropriately deemed artistically pornographic. The myth of love will be discussed in regard to Humbert’s proclamations of love regarding the underaged Lolita, and similarly compared and discussed in relation to John and Franny’s consciousness around their incestuous attractions towards each other. As the following individual analyses of *Lolita* and *The Hotel New*

Hampshire will reveal, the obscene, as seen through incest, rape motifs and sexual dissidence, constitutes a set of major thematic and aesthetic motifs which allow for more literal reading of both novels, less concerned with the symbolic or allegorical effect of the appalling; such a reading rather focuses on the presentation of taboos *as* a species of the obscene and all that it involves and suggests.

Regarding the mode of artistic pornography, Michelson notes that “[t]he imaginative approaches to the theme of love are manifold.” Further, the mode of artistic pornography “follows the dictates of imagination. As with any poetry of integrity, complex pornography is not obliged to confirm cultural norms of what love is” (42). Thus literature, through the obscene, may unfold various depictions of multidimensional individuality. Portrayals of love need not be glorified, nor depicted through words of endearment, as reality isn’t always rooted in the notion that beauty is truth. As shown through the analysis to follow in chapters 2 and 3, obscenity is diversely portrayed, constituted both in the myth of love and in unpleasant depictions and graphic portrayals of the horrors which imagination also entails.

1.3 Cultural Categorisation; ‘Highbrow’/‘Lowbrow’, or ‘literature’ vs ‘mass culture’

There are several terms used to categorise and distinguish the dichotomy between mass culture and literature. Terms which will be employed recurrently throughout this thesis are those employed by Lawrence Levine: highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow. Other scholars have pointed to or even extended the distinction within the field of cultural categorisation: Clement Greenberg, in his famous 1939 article “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” sees a division developing from within the late modernist art movements. He elaborates on tendencies within avantgarde and modernist aesthetics, which involved forms of expression that were affected by a general resistance and scepticism towards commercialism’s impact on culture. Critics operate with slightly different dichotomies; Andreas Huyssen refers to this notion of cultural division as the Great Divide, a discourse which insists on a distinction between high art and mass culture (viii). Greenberg’s article is one of the first articulations of this cultural divide, which has arguably affected the later ideas of Levine and Huyssen. All three cover the same ideas of cultural classification and point to a noteworthy separation. These dichotomies are not rigid, static, or even universally recognised. Yet as Huyssen remarks,

[t]he belief in the Great Divide, with its aesthetic, moral, and political implications, is still dominant in the academy today (witness the almost total institutional separation of literary studies, including the new literary theory, from mass culture research, or the widespread insistence on excluding ethical or political questions from the discourse on literature and art). (viii)

This thesis aims to disregard novelists' 'respective places' on the vertical cultural scale. Rather, a comparative reading of these two novels will reveal a number of similarities between two succinctly different novelists, and thus unravel important aspects of how art portrays the nuances of the forbidden, lust, and transgressions, illuminating aesthetic and cultural effects of the obscene.

I also wish to take into consideration the notion of the writers' intended readership, not as an approach to understanding each individual work, but as means of understanding the cultural categorisations Irving and Nabokov have obtained. A writer's explicit intentions, especially in the case of Irving and Nabokov, may in turn have exaggerated how we perceive and rank them. One can and perhaps *should* take into consideration the overwhelming evidence that Irving and Nabokov aimed for different modes of accessibility and different aesthetics. Critic Gabriel Miller has emphasised how Irving's own views regarding the reader's responsibility encompass a clearly anti-elitist approach to art and literature. In Irving's essays, Irving reads as thoroughly opposed to the "post-modernist tendency in fiction and criticism to promote what is 'difficult,' academic, and consciously 'important' over what is seemingly 'easy,' readable and perhaps popular" (Miller 8). As we see from the terms employed to define differences between artistic modes, even terminology like 'easy' and 'accessible' ultimately carries negative connotations. Further, Irving's fiction "deplores the contemporary novel's dedication to form rather than content, its tendency to place greater emphasis on structural complexity than on character and society" (Miller 8). As I will illustrate in Chapter 3, several critics have accused Irving's writing and plot-structures of being of a too straight-forward nature, too easy, his writing emphasising dialogue and action rather than elevated symbolism. Thus, there is a noteworthy difference in the reception of John Irving's accessibility. Whereas Irving sees clarity as a writer's responsibility, many critics have regarded this clarity synonymously with 'easy' and 'effortless.' And whereas Irving as a contemporary writer is arguably more likely to adopt current attitudes towards artistic division, Nabokov's work is perhaps more inflected by the discourse of the Great Divide, which also dominated the two decades following World War II (Huyssen viii).

Nabokov's *Lectures on Literature* reveal how Nabokov and Irving operate with immensely varying assumptions of a reader and writer's responsibility. Nabokov's introductory lecture "Good Readers and Good Writers" celebrates the impersonal imagination and artistic delight: "the good reader is one who has imagination, memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense" (Nabokov, qtd. in *Critic's Notebook; Nabokov's Quest for the Good Reader*). Nabokov warns about the reader who turns to subjectivity and personal experience as support (Joseph 262). And Nabokov's encouragement for readers to approach literature accompanied by a dictionary reinforces the overall argument that Nabokov deemed the inherent 'difficulties' of literature a virtue. On this matter, Nabokov and Irving wholeheartedly disagree. And as journalist Christopher Lehmann-Haupt also notes regarding Nabokov's views on what constitutes a good reader and writer, one cannot dispute Nabokov's obvious distaste for "didactic, middlebrow and extraliterary fiction" (*The New York Times Archives*).

The impact of the discourse of Great Divide in the post-war decades may likely have involved academics like Nabokov, thus affecting the reading and classification of his work. This idea is certainly affirmed were we to look primarily at *Lolita*'s time of publishing, which was shortly after Russel Lynes's widely distributed ideas about the new American social hierarchy¹. Ideas of cultural classification can similarly be said to be illustrated by *Lolita*'s own protagonist, Humbert, who takes pleasure and pride in his association with highbrow culture, his knowledge of French, and his general status as an academic. Vladimir Nabokov's role as a serious academic and an intellectual might also have affected his general status even as a writer of fiction. If the intellectual, the writer, and the academic were indeed deemed members of the elite, Nabokov arguably could obtain a role amongst the creators of highbrow art merely by association. Nabokov's constant use of French in his work also speaks volumes about his implied readership, as the introduction of a second language would unquestionably filter out any readers 'unfit' to meet Nabokov's expectations. John Irving is also an academic, educated and acknowledged within the field of literature, yet he writes and publishes in an era less distinguished by this exhausted need for cultural division. Irving's own ideologies regarding a writer's responsibility may ironically have led to a biased classification of his work as too accessible, too basic, too simple.

¹ See introduction pp 3 for a more detailed description of Lynes's categorisation of American cultural divisions.

Huyssen draws attention to the emerging volatile relationship between high art and mass culture which sprung out in the period spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He refers to the rising division developing from within artistic movements themselves as “an anxiety of contamination,” experienced as a consequence of the impact of the increasingly engulfing mass culture (vi). This increased anxiety and reaction to mass culture’s influence and reception is precisely what Greenberg is referring to in his article, as he similarly sees an emerging dichotomy between the avantgarde artists in the middle of the century, and what he determines art’s opposite: kitsch. Kitsch is a word adopted from German, an umbrella term which covers “popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc.” (Greenberg 11). It must be stressed that Greenberg’s essay is thoroughly dated and concerns different artistic developments than what we can assume apply to Nabokov and Irving. However, his ideas about the dichotomy between art and kitsch may be applied in this context to illustrate some of the ongoing notions that accentuate the division between highbrow and middlebrow culture.

Greenberg generalises the ideologies of the avant-garde artist effectively as an attempt to

imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape - not its picture - is aesthetically valid; something *given*, increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself. (8)

What is strikingly avant-garde about *Lolita*, or rather what suggests that Nabokov actively tries to be identified with the modes of high art, is the style of narration. In particular, Humbert’s constant digressions and lyrical asides regarding history, events, society and art itself make the novel meta-literal and aesthetically self-aware. Style and narration very often become the focal points of the novel. This focus perhaps allows for the novel’s controversial subject matter and subtle sexual humour to remain less noticed and emphasised. Opposingly, Greenberg defines the appearance of kitsch as a direct result of a new industrialised market which begged to be filled, in which kitsch constituted a commodity “destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide” (12). Further, he states that kitsch

is the source of its profits. Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money - not even their time. (12)

Because Irving's literature could be said to demand less of the reader's delicate attention and does not necessitate the use of a dictionary, nor an intricate knowledge of the arts, his work is accessible to a broader audience. Accessibility could be read synonymously with the aspirations to reach a broader audience, and also as a device for commercial purposes. Even if Irving's work isn't necessarily associated with kitsch or mass-produced art, tendencies within the classification of kitsch may be used to explain the connotations connecting popular culture and mass production. In literature which aims to be available, there exists perhaps a predisposed tendency to label the work superfluous because of the lack of effort necessary for the audience's true appreciation of the work.

Levine uses the impact of Shakespeare as an example of how culture is, and always has been, unfixed, susceptible to change in the same manner as the nature of taboos, transgression and the obscene. As Levine emphasises, growing up in a society where the works of William Shakespeare are a given part of high culture, his work deemed "almost sacred," the notion that Shakespeare in nineteenth century America was actually tremendously popular seems at first baffling. Yet Shakespeare was accessible to all structures of social class and was indeed an incorporated and well-known part of what we would refer to as 'popular culture' (4). This shows that prior beliefs Levine had about cultural categories he trusted to be permanent and immutable proved a misapprehension, apparent through the changing status of Shakespearian culture (6). It also shows the influence of our historical horizon, and the fact that historic perception can alter our assumptions about prior cultural phenomena. More importantly, it underlines the unrealistic notion of strictly separating 'highbrow' and popular culture, as if the highbrow arts are only accessible and worthy a handful of people, and too complex for the general masses to appreciate and comprehend. This is a problematic and frankly elitist way of categorising and thinking about cultural classification.

Like so many other socially rooted phenomena, "[c]ulture is a process, not a fixed condition; it is the product of unremitting interaction between the past and the present. Thus, Shakespeare's relationship to the American people was always in flux, always changing"

(Levine 33). The same is inevitably generally true of all literary works that are widely distributed; their cultural status is dependent on our own perception of the work's past and present reception and its relationship with other works' categorisations. The American population in the nineteenth century effectively experienced Shakespeare as more accessible and closer to heart because he was culturally relevant. Because culture is in constant development, later generations' relationship with Shakespeare is rooted in the fact that we as readers experience him in a different cultural and historical context. This can also be said about any work of literature and the effect of its own historical horizon; a novel's relevance, and accessibility, is unescapably dependent on the cultural structure of the present readership.

As a final point which needs emphasis, Levine claims that “[t]he integration of Shakespeare into the culture as a whole should bring into serious question our tendency to see culture on a vertical plane, neatly divided into a hierarchy of inclusive adjectival categories such as ‘high’, ‘low’, ‘pop’, ‘mass’, ‘folk’, and the like” (30). Thus, because cultural hierarchy is part of an expanding, changing culture, one could argue that these elitist and narrow classifications often become rather nonsensical and inapplicable, because they themselves are fixed and therefore unapt to discriminate and distinguish cultural nuances. Similarly, as Huyssen claims, the boundaries between high art and mass culture are becoming increasingly blurred, a development which should be seen as a process of opportunity rather than a potential loss of quality and nerve (ix). And so, before embarking on the following analysis of *Lolita* and *The Hotel New Hampshire*, I leave you with the eloquent and frank summary of Huyssen, who in his main claim states that artists and writers for some time “have lived and worked after the Great Divide. It is time for the critics to catch on” (ix).

2 Chapter 2: Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

This chapter will explore the themes evident in *Lolita* that entail taboos and the obscene. Michelson's definition of obscenity is narrowed down to "sex and its vocabulary," "the privy parts, their excretory functions and epithets about them" (xi). As Michelson also stresses, custom and obscenity are both relative to time, and in line with social and historical development, which means "violence becomes problematic as obscenity except where it is specifically connected to sexuality," in that violence in contemporary culture is common and graphically accessible in a way which sex is not (xi). Using this as a starting point, this chapter will attempt to identify, categorise, and compare obscene themes present in the novel, manifested in sexually related taboos that are present. Focusing on the taboo-laden will in turn open the text to reveal how literature manages to depict the various aspects of deviant human nature that arouse both fascination and repulsion, forces which are themselves mirrored in the reader's fascination with taboo motifs in literature. Exploring the obscene in this particular work opens up for a discussion about what this novel is really about. As I will show, several literary critics have seemingly disregarded or misinterpreted the occurrence of the obscene in *Lolita*, an aspect which should not be overlooked. This, I believe, is mainly due to its overall reception as a work of 'high art.' In relation to this, I will also include a discussion of smutty language in *Lolita*, which has also been unnoticed and ignored, which in turn shapes our expectations about the novel. The following chapter will entail a similar analysis of John Irving's *The Hotel New Hampshire* in order to illuminate how similar expectations regarding John Irving as a 'popular' writer have consequently shaped expectations and receptions of the novel reversely.

By comparing these novels on a thematic level, I wish to illuminate that despite the writers' stylistic differences and dissimilar receptions and categorisations on a cultural scale, both novels are justifiably part of Michelson's definition of a poetics of obscenity through their thematic and stylistic emphasis and their normalisation of the obscene and morally low. It is also critical to stress that because of the structural and stylistic differences between the two texts, recognising some of the taboos described relies heavily on the analysis, interpretation, and attention to Humbert's narrative, which has led me to conclude that *Lolita* primarily includes three major issues within the area of the taboo-laden that are also present in *The Hotel New Hampshire*: incest, rape, and sexual deviation/dissidence.

The incest taboo is not as immediately evident in *Lolita* as it is in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, but it is present nonetheless, as social incest because of Humbert's role as a stepfather. It also becomes an important taboo to discuss because of Humbert's elaborations concerning the exact nature of their relationship. As I will also show throughout this analysis, there are aspects of the novel that would suggest that Lolita is the victim of long-time rape, which stretches way beyond the mere definitions of statutory rape. Rape *is* sexual violence, and is therefore an important aspect of obscenity as represented by literature. The silencing of Lolita through Humbert's introspective and exclusively subjective narrative constitutes a silencing of rape victims analogous to the silencing of many of the victims of sexual assault present in *The Hotel New Hampshire*. Lastly, and most visibly, sexuality is an important theme in both novels, where sexual deviation and dissidence emerge in *Lolita* through Humbert's paedophilia, and through sexual orientations deviating from normative heterosexuality in Irving's novel.

The plot of *Lolita* takes place predominantly in the southern part of the U.S. The novel provides the story of the scholar and academic Humbert Humbert, the European focaliser and narrator of his own tragic love story. After moving to America to redeem himself and his writing, Humbert finds himself utterly, breathtakingly, and devastatingly in love with his landlady's twelve-year-old daughter, Dolores Haze, whom he calls Lolita. His only way to stay close to Lolita is to marry her mother, who, after a shocking discovery of Humbert's lust for Lolita and disgust for herself, runs out of the house in distress, only to be killed in a car accident. This allows Humbert to exploit his newfound responsibilities and role as Lolita's stepfather. Together they travel different parts of the country, staying in motels, never in the same area for too long, in fear of being caught. "This book is about Lolita" (253), states Humbert, yet it is rather a story which focuses on *him* and his love and lust. Humbert's transgressions include sexual relations with children, long-term rape and abuse, as well as lingering on the threshold of incest. The definition of the rape taboo in *Lolita* relies to a certain extent on the reader's analysis of the information provided by the narrator, which will be examined. Because of Lolita's age, (she is only twelve years old at the time when Humbert first takes advantage of her), Humbert is primarily guilty of what is defined as statutory rape. Yet, according to current definitions of rape, regardless of her age, he could also be considered guilty of long-term sexual abuse, which is evident in that the relationship goes against Lolita's will and well-being. The stylistic ambivalence and word play make it equivocal whether Lolita is a willing participant in their relationship. This will be discussed with emphasis on the style of the novel; Humbert, as

the only focaliser, ultimately silences and objectifies Lolita, leaving her side of the story difficult to approach and analyse.

Humbert's relationship with Lolita is not the first time the main character finds himself fascinated by and attracted to a minor. The reader is informed in the very first part of the novel that "there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child" (Nabokov 9). This initial information about Lolita's precursor immediately sheds light on Humbert's main transgression; he is openly, and seemingly unabashedly, a paedophile. Though he commonly refers to himself as a monster and a pervert, the novel is riddled with his criticism of society, as well as arguments and references to other literary monsters like himself, which constitute attempts to make himself appear less guilty of what society deems a massive crime. The novel is presented like a defence speech from Humbert's perspective, often interrupting the main story to address the imagined reader directly, whom he sometimes calls "ladies and gentlemen of the jury." Setting the novel in a fictional legal context suggests Humbert is well aware not only of his transgressions, but of the severity and consequences of them. Thus, he assumes and predicts harsh judgement from his readers.

These interruptions also shape the reader's attitudes towards Humbert, because they include explicitly crude remarks, and his expectations and prejudice against the implied audience. These remarks, through which he attempts to manipulate the readers' views, mostly end up doing the opposite, and present Humbert as ridiculous and tragically flawed, self-centred, vain, cold, and delusional. This also adds a humoristic aspect to the novel, one of the many layers of the novel's style. One example is Humbert's obsession with his portrayal of himself: "My gloomy good looks should be kept in the mind's eye if my story is to be properly understood" (Nabokov 104). This justification of his actions based on his good looks and apparent allure is of course an utterly ridiculous excuse for seducing children. The main character is honest about his transgressions, yet he is immensely unreliable, and unpredictable, constantly and condescendingly playing with the assumed expectations of the reader: "Then I pulled out my automatic - I mean, this is the kind of fool thing a reader might suppose I did. It never even occurred to me to do it" (280). Another distinct aspect of Humbert's narration is his use of aliases that substitute the real names of the characters he encounters, some of which ridicule, and others of which are crude. Think, for instance, of the true meaning of the word "Haze," which means obscured, suggesting a state of mental confusion. Mrs Haze and her daughter's surname could thus constitute Humbert's condescending views on these women as ignorant of his schemes and manipulation. The novel's style differs greatly from Irving's style

of writing in that Nabokov's story is solely focalised through Humbert, and rarely references the emotions and responses of other characters without being coloured by Humbert's own views, mood, and attitudes towards them.

Since its release, *Lolita* has been banned in several countries and labelled pornographic and offensive. Critic John Lennard claims that some of the accusations against *Lolita* in the 1950s can be dismissed as "sorry products of their time." He further states that critic John Gordon's review of *Lolita* as unrestrained pornography may be limited, and a product of the decadence of the 1950s, a time characterised by a handful of critics "unused to any degree of frankness in sexual matters, and unable legally or aesthetically to distinguish a frank approach to obsession from an obsessive compulsion with the explicit" (52-53). Regardless, contemporary receptions of both the novel and adaptations of the plot still evoke shock. In Nabokov's afterword, Nabokov comments on the fact that many publishers' refusals to buy *Lolita* arose not from his treatment of the theme but the theme itself, to which Lennard states that however true this may be, contemporary readers are already well aware of the horrors of habitual incest, paedophile abuse and sexual violence: "Far more physically brutal rapes than Humbert's, and of children much younger than Dolores Haze, are now commonly detailed in court cases and memoirs, so if *Lolita* still shocks and offends, as it seems to have the power to do, it cannot be simply Nabokov's theme, and must be also his treatment of it that so alarms" (Lennard 53). In terms of genre interpretation, Humbert's explicit sexualisation of the nymphet, i.e. the young female child, constitutes a species of the obscene that is so emphasised and crucial to the plot of the novel that it evokes a pornographic categorisation; In Michelson's definition of pornography, he states that it is "the representation of sexuality so as to make its obscenity conspicuous, to the point of evoking its transgression of conventional taboos" (xii). Michelson's definition of artistic pornography is arguably evoked in *Lolita* through the treatment of the sexually related themes, especially through Humbert's conspicuous lust for Lolita. Artistic pornography "may and frequently does represent explicit genital sex but integrates sexuality as a theme or rhetoric into an aesthetic context for an aesthetic purpose" (xii). *Lolita*, as I will show, represents sexuality and sex thematically, as well presenting epithets about genitalia and sex which have important aesthetic functions that affect the reading of the novel.

2.1 Incest

According to Freud, incest is the taboo most imbedded in tribal tradition and customs, a taboo so ancient and deeply rooted in history that it is inevitably universally everlasting. Originally there existed a tribal belief in demonic powers deeply imbedded in taboos, a fear which, through cultural evolution, disappeared and was replaced by “the rule of custom and tradition and finally of law” (Freud 28). Traditionally in ancient indigenous tribes, there were strict regulations and classifications for marriage that prevented members of the same tribe, not exclusively related through blood, from marrying or reproducing. A later historical development in line with this prehistoric prohibition is seen in the Catholic Church’s prohibition, which excludes marriage between brother and sister, as well as first cousins (Freud 10-11). The incest taboo later consequently manifested itself in criminal law, universally, with different jurisprudential formulations varying from nation to nation. Yet what needs to be distinguished within the definition of incest are different types of incestuous relationships, some of which also border on *other* transgressions, particularly those harmful to adolescents and children, and those which involve physical violence and are built on unjust distributions of dominance and elements of fear. Any relationship that goes against the will of any individual will ultimately also be psychologically and physically forceful and harmful. Thus, habitual incest involving children also includes rape, violence, misuse of power and paedophilia. One could therefore conclude that incestuous relationships of different natures also *function* differently when depicted in literature.

The plots in both *Lolita* and *The Hotel New Hampshire* predominantly take place in the United States, and therefore normative behaviour and reactions to taboo motifs as represented through characters would likely follow the pattern of Westernised laws, regulations, views, and attitudes towards the incest taboo. In 1964, Graham Hughes, senior professor in law, presented a discussion of the origins and implications of incestuous behaviour and its varying consequences in criminal authority, including a comparative analysis of the differences in the treatment and attitudes towards incest in England and the United States. There are interesting differences in the legislative phrasing regarding males and females between English and US law. For instance, in England, the law includes incestuous relationships between grandfather and granddaughter, but not grandmother and grandson. Nor is there any mention of the uncle-niece relationship, or the stepfather and stepdaughter relationship. English laws regarding incestuous relationships are significantly more gender-specific, targeting males as the more obvious offenders. The United States always treats incest as a statutory offence, but the concept

varies from the English one in that the grandmother/grandson element is present, as well as relationships involving cousins, nieces, and uncles, nephews, and aunts. Even second cousins fall under the same category in several American states. In this sense, American criminal authority is more specified and covers more ground, making it less loose. American states also vary in terms of different stipulations, and as Hughes states, relationships through affinity are in some areas of the US are also deemed incestuous (323). This would involve relationships such as the one between Humbert and Lolita, where Humbert as Lolita's legal guardian is legally bound from exploiting her sexually.

Despite differences between states, the US generally deems incest a felony. Commonly, in many states, the male party in an incestuous relationship is the one punished, and in states like Nebraska and New Jersey, the father will receive heavier punishment. The female's punishment can vary depending on her role as passive or active, and whether she is deemed an accomplice or not can in some cases rely on whether she participated willingly or not. Generally, the law targets men, and the female's role in incestuous relationships seems almost categorically belittled. Historically, and presently, this implies that women and children repeatedly have been the victims of incestuous and violent relationships. As we see in both novels in question, younger women are the dominant group represented as victims of sexual violence, a reflection of the lessened authority females bear over their own sexuality, and an emphasis on the outcomes of women's general physical weakness compared to men. The legislative criminal system in the US proposes that women involved in incestuous relationships are either naïvely persuaded into the relationships, or succumb to them by sheer force, as victimised, passive recipients. This arguably implies two different views on gender roles and stereotypes in this context: one, that men, more often than women, lack impulse control and thus need stricter regulations and punishments because they simply cannot contain themselves. The law, as seen from the transgressions of Humbert, targets men exactly like him. Secondly, the reverse scenario is not only less likely to happen, but also not as bad a crime when committed by a woman. The latter point will be discussed in relation to the different responses and stigma directed towards the housekeeper Ronda Ray in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, who encourages a sexual relationship with John Berry when he is only fifteen but is *not* represented as a sexual predator. The fact that there exists gender-based discrimination concerning the offences suggests that sexual offences, incestuous or not, are judged and perceived differently in line with the general depiction of females as the weaker and more fragile sex, requiring a higher level of protection by society and by the law.

The incest taboo is explicitly evident in both novels in question, as represented in the sexual relationship between Humbert and his stepdaughter, and the relationship between John Berry and his sister. The latter couple's love for each other develops exponentially throughout their lives to become a love that exceeds the limitations of sibling love, and the physical aspect of their love is resolved and finalised during adulthood. The same could be said of Humbert's relationship with Lolita, as his assumed parental role after reluctantly marrying Mrs Haze is progressively evident through his own remarks regarding Lolita as a relative, present in exclamations like "Lolita, with an incestuous thrill, I had grown to regard as *my* child" (80), and incorporations of their family relation in many of his erotic fantasies: "Lolita! Father and daughter melting into these woods" (84). The incestuous element adds another layer of fascinated repulsion and prejudice against Humbert, particularly because he glorifies it and is further excited by the exceedingly outrageous aspect of their relationship. Humbert seemingly receives more ambiguous pleasure from the increased transgressiveness of his love for Lolita.

Even though both novels depict incestuous relationships, they do depict relationships of immensely different natures, with different outcomes and circumstances. Because of the aspect of violence and power-abuse, Humbert's transgressions are arguably far worse than John Berry's, even if they are both rooted in incest. First and foremost, despite their not being genetically related, Humbert's relationship with Lolita *becomes* a legal parental relationship quite a while *after* he meets her and falls deeply into an abyss of hopeless love and lust. And whereas John and Franny Berry's short-spanned sexual relationship is built on mutual, adult consent and trust, Humbert and Lolita's is not. Victoria Ketz, in her dissertation about the portrayal of the forbidden in Valle-Inclan's theatre, notes that historically and presently, illicit relationships between parents and children are deemed the most harmful ones. She argues that the reason sibling incest is not judged as substantially is perhaps because "siblings of the opposite sex who are reared together develop a close bond which resembles a simulation of their parents' relationship," whereas "[p]arent-child incest involves a fundamental betrayal of trust with the progenitor surpassing the boundaries of the love relationship as well as exploiting the minor" (226). Mutual consent is an obvious contributing factor in how we perceive and judge any relationship, regardless of its association with taboos and transgression. Furthermore, John and Franny's relationship is arguably evoked by a mutual sense of loss and comfort in each other's mutual grief and personal battles. Their one-night affair, in which they consummate their physical relationship, reads as a necessary, ambivalent, yet beautiful catharsis for them both. Contrastingly, throughout Humbert and Lolita's affair, it becomes progressively

more obvious that the physical relationship between them is necessary and pleasing for *him*, but increasingly painful for her.

Lolita has been condemned and banned due to its pornographic nature, even prior to its associations with the Olympia Press (Lennard 49). There is reason to suspect that critics may have read *Lolita* as pornographic due to the incestuous and sexual motifs, as there is arguably an association between incest and pornography. About incest, Michelson notes that it is and remains a typical motif found in hard-core pornography, which reflects human fascination and obsession with taboos. He remarks an interesting parallel in the portrayal of incestuous motifs in female fiction by Anaïs Nin and Edith Wharton and contemporary writers such as Elanore Hill, in which accounts of incestuous fathers often depict them as malicious and driven, yet charming and intelligent men. Michelson argues that even if this may be coincidental, this may also function as “an analogue for women of what the femme fatale is for men. Men . . . are at once attractive and dangerous, as in the traditional image of the attractive Satan” (217). Were we to apply Michelson’s suggestion to the work of Nabokov, one could use it to explain Humbert’s own accounts of himself as a manifestation of the charming, intellectual father-figure and patriarchal superior. In addition to Humbert’s several remarks about his intellectual excellence, he also claims he is immensely attractive to women: “I was, and still am, despite *mes malheurs*, an exceptionally handsome male; slow-moving, tall, with soft dark hair and a gloomy but all the more seductive cast of demeanour” (25). His depiction of himself refers to notions of the allure of the dangerous, the forbidden, and the uncanny. It is also a symbol of deception, as his supposed physical attractiveness in no way mirrors his person, since “he is indeed anything but attractive” (Trilling 11).

After having stayed at the Haze residence for a few months, Humbert is presented with a love letter from Mrs Haze, who gives him an ultimatum: she is so in love with him she could not bear that he stay unless they marry, and he becomes “a father to my little girl” (68). After being presented with the perfect excuse to remain close to Lolita, he accepts the marriage proposal, and applies his delusional ideas of a normal family household as a cunning disguise to further exploit Lolita: “I imagined (under conditions of new and perfect visibility) all the casual caresses her mother’s husband would be able to lavish on his Lolita. I would hold her against me three times a day, every day” (70). Humbert therefore mainly evokes the incest theme himself, by using it as a justification and excuse to exploit his immediate closeness to Mrs Haze’s daughter. In passages in which Humbert himself expresses the ambivalence he feels towards the nature of his parental role, it therefore becomes evident that he raises the question

to his readers more as an attempt to justify his actions, rather than addressing the problem: “Query: is the stepfather of a gaspingly adorable pubescent pet, a stepfather of only one month’s standing, a neurotic widower of mature years and small but independent means . . . is he to be considered a relative, and thus a natural guardian?” (172). Whatever the natural responsibilities of a stepfather of only one month may be, they certainly do not include molesting and seducing one’s juvenile legal guardian. Additionally, by frequently describing himself as a “passionate father” (165), and Lolita as variations of his “impossible daughter” (131) in various contexts throughout the narrative, Humbert reminds the reader of the presence of the incest theme continually.

An interesting side note on Humbert’s part concerns the notion of ambiguity related to taboos, and the idea of a genuine felt interest regarding things morally deprived and low. In one of his many projected ideas about how he would be and will be perceived due to his sins, he suspects his secretive relationship with Lolita during their voyage would cause *interest*: “I often felt we lived in a lighted house of glass, and that at any moment some thin-lipped parchment face would peer through a carelessly unshadowed window to obtain a free glimpse of things that the most jaded voyeur would have paid a small fortune to watch” (180). The voyeur would be presented with a cornucopia of borderline-incest, nymphet love and explicit sex, all elements of obscene human behaviour, described by Humbert as universally appealing to watch. The simile of living behind glass illuminates how immediate and constant Humbert’s growing paranoia is, centred around his primary fear that if the truth were revealed, his endeavours would inevitably cease. Moreover, this passage also reads as a reflection on Nabokov’s own readership, consisting of readers wilfully *consuming* the narrative of a morally depraved man and his depictions of lust.

Though he is engulfed in passion and physical attraction towards Lolita, and however admirable she may be portrayed as being, Humbert’s positive illuminations of her always focus on her physical attributes and emphasise details regarding her looks, youth, or movements. Regarding Lolita’s character and Humbert’s reactions to what in actuality is a description of a very common teenage girl, Humbert actually expresses disgust: “Lolita, when she chose, could be a most exasperating brat . . . Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl” (148). Hence the relationship is neither mutually encouraged, nor is it built on what Humbert refers to as love; it is rather, and almost exclusively, built on his lust. Therefore, the nature of his desire, be it incestuous, illicit, harmful, and/or sexually deviant, is also rooted in the obscene, in that he attempts to glorify and illustrate his intentions as loving, when they are

in fact based in an objectifying avarice towards his “[p]ubescent sweetheart! How smugly would I marvel that she was mine, mine, mine” (161). This rather reflects obsessive behaviour, a desire for ownership, and neurosis, a point which will be further addressed in the discussion about Humbert’s pathology.

The nature of Humbert’s relationship with Lolita cannot, as I argue, be described as mutually consenting. Nor can it be described as a loving relationship. From Lolita’s repulsion and constant attempts to flee or seek solace in the company of others, it is evident that her initial admiration and attention to Humbert as a solacing parental authority has vanished. When Humbert first takes up residence with the Haze family, there are moments in his narrative in which Lolita shows what can be read as genuine and naïve signs of affection and fascination with her new house guest; she willingly, and without an invitation, joins her mother and Humbert on a drive downtown, snuggling neatly and smugly in next to Humbert, and clutching his hand (51). Humbert, in his “miserable imitation of blood-relationship” (48), exploits his social and familial parental role to further secure Lolita’s constant physical presence. He bluntly objectifies her and reduces her to a vulnerable bait for himself to hunt down like an animal: “My web is spread all over the house as I listen from my chair where I sit like a wily wizard . . . The bathroom door has just slammed, so one has to feel elsewhere about the house for the beautiful *warm-coloured prey*” (49, the latter is my emphasis). Through this depiction of himself in relation to Lolita, Humbert reads as animalistic and driven, malicious and cunning, which in turn strengthens the portrayal of Lolita as a helpless and fragile victim. Only later in the novel, after Lolita has successfully escaped from Humbert’s captivity, and is married and pregnant, can we begin to see traces of Humbert’s imitation of remorse and feelings that are more in line with what one associates with love and respect. After tracing her whereabouts and paying her a visit, Humbert breaks down in tears when Lolita refuses his offer to rejoice with him, as it becomes painfully evident to him that even when she is seventeen, he loves Lolita more than he ever had (277). At seventeen, Lolita surpasses the age limit and physical characteristics of Humbert’s nymphet, and the love he feels for her therefore exceeds the constraints of his pathology. When he is confronted with the truth that Lolita does not love him, there is a change in the tone of Humbert’s narration concerning Lolita’s emotional responses to the “foul lust” he has inflicted upon her (283). After the rejection, Humbert states that “It was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita’s states of mind while comforting my own base self,” and further that “[i]t had become gradually clear to my conventional Lolita during our singular and bestial cohabitation that even the most miserable of family lives was better than

the parody of incest, which, in the long run, was the best I could offer the waif” (287). This is a clear turn from Humbert’s introspective, questionable, and egocentric perspective, which indicates that Lolita has moved from being an object of lust to being a love interest whom he wishes to share his life with, in an actual effort at becoming a *real* family. He also emphasises that because the nature of their familial relationship was built on pretence and role-playing when checking in to the various hostels and lodgings, the parody of their family relation in turn makes the incest theme less legitimate in his view.

2.2 Sexual Dissidence and Deviation

Breaking certain taboos, or rather the gradual retreating or sometimes utter evaporation of certain taboos, also creates gradual visible changes in culture and what culture endures. Many recognisable breakings of taboos are direct results of social movements and vocal minorities’ demands for change. Historical revolutions such as feminism and demands for reclaiming female sexuality, the heated battle over self-determined abortion and disputed views on prostitution and pornography are very vivid and present examples. Another is of course the LGBT community’s ongoing revolution and struggle to claim its sexual preferences as normal, and to demand respect and social and legislative equality. There are several other examples of previously severe taboos in Western societies that no longer have an effective impact on the general population, regardless of religious background or social status, such as aversion to eating certain foods and extramarital sex. However, these changes have occurred primarily in the Western parts of the world. And even if such issues as these could today be deemed somewhat diminished and to some extent extinct as taboos, they remain part of our social history, which means their roles as previous taboos need not immediately be forgotten, and they can still constitute important themes in literature that reflects aversion towards certain notions.

Different societies’ taboos also cover different aspects of human behaviour. Homosexuality, for instance, is still wildly controversial, and is often a focus in media today. Whereas there are no countries within Europe where homosexuality is still illegal, a total of 74 countries worldwide are listed as still banning homosexuality, and there are even several states in the US where conservative state legislators have refused to make any changes to anti-sodomy laws. These laws spur immense reactions from other more ‘liberated’ countries, particularly in light of recent riots in one of the world’s biggest nations, Russia, where Vladimir Putin’s ‘anti-

propaganda' act of 2013 bans teachers from presenting any positive information regarding LGBT norms and rights to minors, as well as any positive mentions in media or online ("74 countries where homosexuality is illegal"). Examples such as these emphasise the different effects, roles and developments of various taboos and depictions and views of immorality and disobedience to social norms world-wide. Different attitudes towards sexual dissidence are also present in the presentation and normalisation of sexual dissidence in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, where Frank Berry, the oldest brother, who grows up in the mid-1950s, experiences injustice and discrimination because of his sexuality. It is similarly present through Susie the bear, a feminist, rape victim and lesbian. The main difference in the depiction of sexual dissidence by Irving, and sexual deviance by Nabokov, is that whereas Frank *experiences* othering through sexual violence, Humbert *expresses* it through his pathology and often aggressively separates *himself* from the rest of society by treating himself as superior and righteous.

Today, Western civilisation generally recognises and accepts the LGBT community, at least legally. Members of the LGBT community are no longer deemed as afflicted with a curable condition that could be purged out of people through religious rituals or medical treatment. None of the main characters in *The Hotel New Hampshire* would therefore be equated with a pathology, which is a crucial distinction from how we are likely to perceive Humbert; as a lover of what he refers to as the nymphet, and as a self-proclaimed "artist and a madman" (*Lolita* 17), he would be ascribed a modern diagnosis as a paraphiliac. As noted by Vanessa Place, writer and criminal appellate attorney in Los Angeles, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* uses "paraphilia" as an umbrella term which includes "pedophilia, zoophilia, exhibitionism, and fetishes, categories whose salient characteristic is desire for sex without consent, whether actual (an animal can't really consent) or legal (a child's consent is invalid)" (61-62). And so the answer to the question, 'Is Humbert a paedophile?' is undoubtedly, inevitably, yes.

Michelson proposes that as we have become increasingly aware and concerned with neurosis and neurotic behaviour, we have come to see love and relationships as more neurotically structured. This in turn has produced a large body of texts which address the problem of love, of which *Lolita* is outlined by Michelson as an example. Michelson explains how Humbert's defences addressed to the 'ladies and gentlemen of the jury' are rooted in the confusions of modern culture, a hopeless mixture of the decadent Old World and the progressive New World demonologies which made his sins inevitable. He reads Humbert's murder of his rival Quilty as a symbolic purge of the New World; similarly, Humbert's own

execution is the symbolic purge of the Old World: “We . . . are left with the neurotic modern culture that produced the neurotic characters that people the neurotic plot of Nabokov’s brilliant telling of his neurotic version of the myth of failed modern love” (Michelson 55-56). Read symbolically, Humbert’s transgressions therefore illuminate contemporary issues and could constitute criticism of modern society where the concept of love is seemingly unachievable. Hence the obscene is incorporated in the narrative as the *outcome* of despair, as well as its cause. Yet stripped of any symbolical or allegorical interpretations, Humbert’s transgressions also address a multitude of serious issues related to the pathology of paedophilia. As some of the following close readings will reveal, Humbert’s rhetoric and depictions provide the internalised reflections of a sexual predator. This point should not go unnoticed or be undermined by the many symbolical and metaphorical readings that Nabokov’s text produces.

Humbert’s sexual attraction is directed towards underaged, underdeveloped females. He normalises his pathology by proposing the existence of what he refers to as nymphets, maidens between the age limits of nine and fourteen, “who, to certain bewitched travellers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac)” (16). By proposing there exists a variety of young girls who possess this enchanting power, Humbert projects some of the blame onto the girls in that they possess a seductive power. He also suggests that the ability to distinguish the nymphets from other girls, for not all girl children are nymphets, is an ability found in artists and madmen (17), which could either read as enhancing the notion that even though he seems to sanction his lust towards minors, he simultaneously acknowledges the madness, shame, and deviance in claiming their sexual appeal. This could also be an instance of Humbert ironically distancing himself from the assumptions and accusations directed towards him because of his sexual desires. Regardless, sexualisation of the minor female remains an important aesthetic theme in the narrative from the very beginning, as we see in Humbert’s first “love,” Annabel. In his reminiscences about his seduction of Annabel, the vocabulary becomes key because he openly and unabashedly refers to her, and his future lovers, as *children* and *girls*, as opposed to *women*. These references often include descriptive elements that emphasise the childishness of their manners, such as with Annabel: “when my hand located what it sought, a dreamy and eerie expression, half-pleasure, half-pain, came over those childish features” (14). And thus, “that little girl” whom Humbert presented with his “sceptre of passion” (Nabokov 15), is the first in a line of the children Humbert exploits sexually, as he employs the argument that the child is to be enjoyed sexually, because she is inherently eroticised. Nor should it go unnoticed that Humbert, in this

rather explicit penis-euphemism, employs a quite connotatively violent and monarchic symbol of a sceptre, a sign of power, domination and superiority; or worse, a potential weapon.

Prior to Humbert and Lolita's road-trip, during which Lolita is knowingly part of their sexual relationship, Humbert refers to an incident involving Lolita in which he achieves climax from having her rocking childishly and playfully back and forth on his lap (60-61). In retrospect of this incident, Humbert states that "I felt proud of myself. I had stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor," and further that "[t]he child knew nothing" (62). Humbert expresses relief, perhaps mostly because this seemingly went unnoticed by Mrs Haze and her daughter, but also a sense of pride in that he was able to achieve selfish pleasure from an unknowing participant. The notion that she remains ignorant of the situation also means Humbert invalidates the presence or her consent and reduces the importance of her free will because it is as if he "had done nothing to her" (62). The night before Humbert embarks on his sexual relationship with Lolita, Humbert notes that "[i]f I dwell at some length on the tremors and gropings of that distant night, it is because I insist upon proving that I am not, and never was, and never would have been, a brutal scoundrel" (131). As his last remark, a large portion of the narrative is structured as if to normalise and justify the pathology of paedophilia, or what Humbert regards as nymphet love. For example, Humbert incorporates several references to different regional laws that allow copulation and marriage with underaged women, or heroic fictional characters who take on a child lover. His justification fails to remain unbiased, reliable, and consistent, in moments where remorse and guilt are beginning to meddle with his memories. He also constantly refers to himself openly as a monster, showing that he is well-aware of the nature of his transgressions. He remains unable to convince either his reader or himself that he might not in fact be a brutal scoundrel: "I am nature's faithful hound. Why then this horror that I cannot shake off? Did I deprive her of her flower? Sensitive gentlemen of the jury, I was not even her first lover" (135).

The proposal of the existence of nymphets constitutes, as Vanessa Place claims, a version of the "sexy child argument," a thesis presented by James Kincaid in his book *Child-Loving*, where he claims that the concept of the child in post-Victorian Western culture has been fashioned as to make its eroticism necessary, and further that the eroticised child is a reflection of the fact that children are sexual, making the relationship between children and adults necessarily erotic:

Any analysis is suspect that insists that because a certain perspective exists (or persists), it must have a legitimate point. Particularly when the perspective inherently involves power differentials. Saying that there has always been adult/child eroticism, and therefore adult/child eroticism is natural, is very different in this way from saying that homosexuality is natural. The more apt analogy would be to say that master/slave sexual relationships are natural. (Place 86)

Kincaid's arguments mirror the arguments employed by Humbert in *Lolita*, as he uses literary characters like Virgil and Dante to support his eroticising of the child. Humbert also criticises the idea that he found himself "maturing amid a civilization which allows a man of twenty-five to court a girl of sixteen but not a girl of twelve" (18), and that he hopes he is addressing himself to readers unbiased and unaffected by the mid-century ideas concerning child-parent relationships (285). These claims are arguably one of several reasons why *Lolita* evokes shock; the idea that children are to be eroticised or included in erotic fantasies or sexual intimacy will for most people be considered not only illegal, but immoral and unnatural. Vanessa Place herself notes the similarity of Kincaid and Humbert's ideologies: "Many of Kincaid's arguments are elegant recapitulations of pitches that have been made by everyone from Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* to the North American Man/Boy Association. I don't buy them" (89). Justification, as well as the mere sexualisation of the child, constitutes a species of the ugly because in Western society it is generally deemed sinful, harmful, and violent. In line with Lennard's claim, Humbert's *treatment* of the eroticised child, as well as the theme itself, therefore induces strong reactions.

2.3 Rape

Rape is an issue which exceeds social and cultural categories, and gender roles. It affects men and women of different classes, professions, and backgrounds, yet remains a problem which is often silenced by society or the victims, and is in many cultures not dealt with, or treated as a crime at all. As phrased by Vanessa Place,

Rape is culture. There is no separate "rape culture" bubbling beneath our otherwise sunny American society, just as there is no rape culture that is not Indian culture, British culture, or Mexican culture . . . Fraternity culture is rape culture, celebrity culture is rape

culture, sports culture is rape culture, university culture is rape culture, military culture is rape culture – even literary culture is rape culture. (vii, x)

Whereas some motifs may arguably be present in art purely to evoke disgust and thrill, the subject of rape also raises awareness and knowledge, and reminds us of its presence in all parts of human society. In that respect, both Irving and Nabokov are addressing a serious, relatable, and current global issue by incorporating aspects of rape culture in their novels. Rape remains a social taboo that leads many of its victims not to accept or share their stories, leaving rapists to walk freely and the victims' traumas unresolved. Literature has the power to illuminate different characters' responses to this global issue, and is an important way of portraying how men and women are affected by sexual violence; their reactions and the aftershock of rape become eye-opening depictions of how the rape taboo projects trauma and long-lasting effects. It is often the case in portrayals of rape that the actual victim, and not solely the violator, also becomes the victim of *exclusion* by others, in terms of conversation and fear of physical contact. Freud claims that the individual who violates a taboo becomes himself taboo because "he arouses envy," and through his action sets a tempting, triggering and contagious example to others around him, who secretly or unconsciously want the same extent of liberation of social norms that accompanies certain taboos (38). This, however, does not constitute a prime example of the exclusion of all taboo violators. It suggests that sexual perpetrators, murderers and necrophiles obtain this major extent of othering, social and political exclusion based on a twisted sense of colloquial *envy*. Yet it is an example of how one taboo may prove so powerful that it affects everyone involved in the transgression, regardless of guilt and engagement.

Victoria Ketz, in her dissertation, puts the rape taboo into an important historical and social context by emphasising the historical development of rape; whereas rape today is almost always deemed a transgression and a victimising and violent act, historically rape was more socially acceptable as means of acquiring a wife, or as an act of proving physical and hierarchical dominance (17). This stands in drastic contrast to the ways Western civilisation views rape now, where social justice, respect, pacifism, and gender equality are pillars that define the legal, social, and cultural norms and regulations we are demanded and expected to obey. Rape in *Lolita* is represented as sexual violence thematically. Further, because of the narrative role of Humbert in *Lolita*, it is also represented through the perspective of the sexual predator, who consequently justifies and familiarises his intentions and actions. It is no wonder that this aspect of the novel arouses anger, shock and horror, when we take into consideration Western society's general attitude towards sexual predators: "Consigned to the bottom of the

criminal heap, sex offenders are the most loathed of the loathsome. We require them to register with police post-release, commit them involuntarily to mental institutions post-sentence, and add a life sentence for each illicit penetration” (Place 3). The narrative of *Lolita* establishes insight into the reasonings of a rapist, consequently worsening the reception of the novel because it forces the reader to experience sexual violence from the standpoint of someone who encourages it.

Popular culture, film, media, and literature also play an important role in shaping the popular views, associations, and responses to taboos and transgressions of different natures depending on setting and, more importantly, gender. Regardless of the ongoing battle of feminism, women continue to be portrayed and deemed the more obviously fragile objects of victimisation, which arguably leads readers of Nabokov and Irving to react differently to the occurrence of what is today classified as statutory rape. Humbert, a man almost four times Lolita’s age, is arguably far more likely to be immediately associated with the stereotype of the disgusting, lurking and compulsive paedophile than Ronda Ray in *The Hotel New Hampshire*. This is, of course, also due to the narrative style of *Lolita*, which, in spite of its efforts, does not quite manage to persuade its readers that the sexual relationship was mutually encouraged and agreed upon. Because of the afore-mentioned ambiguity present in Nabokov’s style of writing, readers rarely grasp the emotional and factual responses of any other characters but Humbert. He is mainly so engulfed in his own lust and intent on conquering Lolita that his own perceptions are riddled with biases. His obsessive intentions leave his perspective extremely single-minded. During one of his many depictions about his longer journey with Lolita after the death of Mrs Haze, Humbert remarks:

[h]ow sweet it was to bring that coffee to her, and then deny it until she had done *her morning duty*. And I was such a thoughtful friend, such a passionate father, such a good pedestrian, attending to all the wants of my little auburn brunette’s body . . . On especially tropical afternoons, in the sticky closeness of the siesta, I liked the cool feel of armchair leather against *my massive nakedness* as I held her in my lap. There she would be, a typical kid picking her nose while engrossed in the lighter sections of a newspaper, as indifferent to my ecstasy as if it were something she had sat upon, a shoe, a doll, the handle of a tennis racket, and was too indolent to move. (165, my emphasis)

This particular passage emphasises how Lolita is in fact opposed to their relationship. The passage is also filled with constant contradictions where subtle evidence of Lolita’s *actual*

responses differs vastly from the initial claims made by Humbert. The very first line makes it clear that Humbert views their relationship's power structure as imbalanced in his favour, where Lolita's sexual services constitute her mandatory duties as female and as his subordinate, and their relationship is not necessarily to her advantage or by her own willingness. There is also a massive contrast between Humbert's alleged passionate attention to the needs of Lolita's body and the response he portrays when she is presented with his "massive nakedness," a physical opposition to Lolita's petite and underdeveloped form. Rather than expressing apprehension, she is described as lethargic and psychologically absent from the sexual acts. Knowing she has "absolutely nowhere else to go" (142), Lolita meets her violation with apathy, a psychological defence mechanism protecting her mentally from the impact of the situation.

Lionel Trilling, in his review of *Lolita* in the 1950s, bluntly states that "our response to the situation that Mr. Nabokov presents to us is that of shock. And we find ourselves the more shocked when we realise that, in the course of the novel, we have come virtually to condone the violations it presents" (14). Trilling's proposal is extremely problematic, partly because it generalises and assumes the "correct" response and reaction to the novel in question. Also Trilling's justification of the gradual sympathy with Humbert relies on the fact that

his depravity is the easier to accept when we learn that he deals with a Lolita who is not innocent, and who seems to have very few emotions to be violated; and I suppose naturally incline to be lenient towards a rapist - legally and by intention H.H. is that-who eventually feels a deathless devotion to his victim! (14)

The classification of Lolita as "not innocent" undoubtedly refers to Humbert's claims that she, in fact, seduced *him* (Nabokov 132), and the assertion that she had had a prior sexual experience at camp. There, Charlie Holmes accompanies Lolita. He is "the camp mistress' son, aged thirteen - and the only human male for a couple hundred miles" (Nabokov 137), with whom she shares her first sexual experience. Trilling, in his justification, supports Humbert's implication that Lolita has a promiscuous nature, and this in turn lessens the reader's projections of guilt onto Humbert. Humbert's ambiguous narrative, as previously stated, should evoke suspicion to his every plea and claim regarding almost everything he states. It is therefore more believable and likely that Humbert chooses to portray his sexual exploitation of Lolita as her seduction of *him*, as part of his plea to the 'ladies and gentlemen of the jury.' More importantly, there is an obvious discrepancy between Lolita's alleged seduction of Humbert "and her sobs

in the night – every night, every night – the moment I feigned sleep” (176). The outcome speaks more loudly than the intentions; she remains, seductive or not, the victim.

Peter J. Rabinowitz compares the character and novel *Lolita* to other works which include abusive and damaging relationships that victimise younger females. *Lolita* is succinctly different in that she openly and immediately rebels and expresses repulsion towards Humbert, and “spends years trying to figure out how to escape from him” (326). Because of *Lolita*’s complete lack of interest and unwillingness in participating in the illegal and immoral relationship with Humbert, Rabinowitz argues against other critics who have labelled *Lolita* a temptress. Rabinowitz’s main claim is that due to the effect of readers’ interpretations and the influence of *Lolita*’s classification as ‘Literature,’ both the character and the novel *Lolita* have been thoroughly misread. He also wants to underline how the impact of abstraction within academia has not only affected the reading of *Lolita*, but simultaneously literary works in general. Common among critics who read *Lolita* as corrupted and promiscuous is a failure to see beyond Humbert’s depictions of her, which leads to a failure to read the underlying revolting attitudes that are subtle, yet present in the narrative. These critics have arguably misread the novel and the character because *Lolita* has been viewed and received continually as a work of ‘high art.’

Rabinowitz points to how readers perceive and read works depending on their labels. Genre interpretation is a rhetorical act, he says, and in this sense any text can be open to several interpretations. Yet the initial genre-specific information provided to the reader regarding a certain text will ultimately also function as encouragement to the readers which shapes their interpretations (329). Trilling’s note on *Lolita* as an American love story will ultimately suggest a particular reading of the novel; thus, the reader is perhaps left more susceptible to Humbert’s claims that he *does* love *Lolita*. Rabinowitz has illuminated four different reading strategies within the field of genre interpretation which affect and influence the reader’s experience of a literary work. The first, which he calls rules of notice, are rules which affect where the reader’s attention is focused. For instance, the title *Lolita* suggests that our attention should lie primarily on this character.

Secondly, rules of signification allow readers to draw different meanings from different objects or situations in the text, be they political, psychological, or metaphorical. Third, rules of configuration allow readers to systematise elements that emerge into a formal pattern which leaves the reader with a sense of expectation and completion. And lastly, Rabinowitz points to

rules of coherence, rules which give the text a generalised meaning based on the total experience of the piece. He calls the latter category “rules of aboutness,” in which we gather a sense of themes (328). When faced with a work labelled “popular,” readers and critics apply slightly different rules of interpretation than if the work is labelled “highbrow”: “within the rules of signification, we read what we take to be popular art more metonymically, while we read what we take to be high art more metaphorically” (330). Whereas reading something metaphorically results in reading an object or an action as a substitution for something else, reading metonymically is reading by association. Further, he states that “in the current academic climate, taking something as high art means emphasizing coherence rather than configuration, treating plot as less important, for instance, than character and especially theme; it also means taking wholes as more important than details” (330). If one were to disregard and pay less attention to details present in Humbert’s narrative, chances are that the rape of Lolita, Humbert’s ambiguous emotional responses to his own pathology, and the tension between the two characters would go unnoticed or be misread. This would in turn have substantial consequences for how we observe and analyse both Humbert and Lolita as characters, and accordingly how we understand the nature of their relationship.

Rabinowitz points to a particular scene which highlights the different readings produced from reading *Lolita* metaphorically and metonymically, respectively. After the night of their first sexual intercourse, Humbert stops to buy Lolita various items which he lists for the reader, among which are comic books, garnets, and sanitary pads (Nabokov 141-42). According to Brian Walter, the sanitary pads purchased for Lolita constitute a metaphor. Thus Lolita’s later complaints about pains, saying Humbert “had torn something inside her” (141), are read by Walter as menstrual cramps. Walter suggests that the sexual violence Lolita has experienced has also matured her, and the sanitary pads are meant to be read as a symbol of her transition into womanhood. Walter reads the entire scene metaphorically, wherein physical discomfort and blood are transformed into something beautiful, as aspects of Lolita’s metamorphosis. This is not only outrageous, as he therefore suggests that rape has a positive, maturing power, but it is also a claim which is both ludicrous and inconsiderate of the actual severity of the scene and rape in general. Read metonymically, however, the meaning of the sanitary pads “is both evident and chilling; there is good reason to believe that she’s been physically ripped up by the encounter - and the sanitary pads are a result of the brutality that . . . lurks beneath virtually every chapter of the novel” (Rabinowitz 334). The passage further reminds the readers of the physical polarities and tension that exist between Lolita and Humbert. The petite, skinny female

figure is often portrayed as being among the most appealing aspects of the nymphet, in addition to underdeveloped breasts and lack of pubic hair (Nabokov 20). Yet, met with Humbert's "massive nakedness," Lolita proves physically incompatible and suffers the inevitable, extreme consequences of the force of Humbert's lust. The different outcomes between reading literature metonymically and reading it metaphorically also underline how potentially misleadingly a text can be comprehended if we are to disregard the actual text as it stands for itself. Focusing solely on the symbolical and allegorical could result in an immensely restricted approach to analysing and deciphering literary works, and as Walter has illustrated, it need not always be the most logical or sensible method of analysis.

2.4 Smutty Language in *Lolita*

In addition to the similar obscene themes that are raised in Nabokov and Irving's novels, both writers in various ways also employ subtle or explicit forms of obscene language. Obscene language also contributes to the reception of each novel respectively, and serves as a tool which can undermine or highlight the effect of the obscene in different contexts. As previously stated, the novelists in question employ very different styles of writing, which results in contrasting narrative techniques, articulation, and vocabulary. Aside from both novels' obscene thematic functions, other significant aspects to explore are instances of obscene, explicit, and indecent language, as well as the impact and significance of the lack thereof. This can be seen in the differences between Humbert's and John's dialogue, as well as the narrators' own elaborations and depictions. For instance, in the violent confrontation towards the very end of the novel between Humbert and his rival Quilty, Humbert refers to Quilty's dialogue thusly: "Under the condition you stop pointing that [he swore disgustingly] gun" (301). Humbert actively censors any explicit accounts of obscene language. John, however, frequently recollects his sister's foul mouth, such as in an argument between Franny and her brother Frank in their early teens, when Franny is heard screaming; "You weirdo fink, Frank! . . . You fart! You turd in a birdbath!" (Irving 86). Language and vocabulary play important roles in both narratives in terms of how they are used to depict individual characters and their reactions. In *Lolita*, Humbert is excessively preoccupied with presenting himself as an elite academic, well-read, and intellectually imperious, all aspects which manifest themselves in Humbert's elaborate and intricate vocabulary, literary and artistic references, and lyrical style of narrating. Contrastingly, John Berry's narrative voice could be said to represent a more diverse portrayal of colloquial

language, which is seen in his and others' more direct and often lewd responses to pain, anger, and spontaneous reactions wherein the dialogue is often coloured by profanities; in general, language which is not immediately associated with high etiquette or academia. This sense of language-related spontaneity is lacking from *Lolita's* narrative because all dialogue as portrayed through Humbert is manipulated by his personal preferences and views, and perhaps ironically his concern with maintaining an elitist, high cultural and profound characterisation of himself.

Michelson notes several different effects of language, as well as the complexity of smutty language in literature; it can be used for comedic effect, wherein Michelson lists how language is used as a social index of knowledge of and ease with social propriety. Historically and presently, comedy and satire are associated with vulgarities and obscene language, and dirty language allows for writers to "get away" with opposing ideas or uttering ideologies that would otherwise be unpermitted and unaccepted. Originally, the preference in "lower-class" speech for obscene language and smutty words is thought to derive from the Angles and Saxons, and subsequently other indigenous "lower classes" in their traditions, who favoured their own words over Roman imports, of which Michelson uses examples like "fuck" as preferred to "copulate." Later Christian sublimation and academic pretensions divided preference and classification of language even further, as proper, academical, non-offensive language prevailed, and profanities and smutty language became associated with the lower strata of society (Michelson 49).

Arguably, the presence or lack of smutty language in the speech of each narrator contributes to a heightened or weakened sense of realism and truth, especially in character portrayals. Both narrators possess the opportunity to withhold information according to their own preference and personalities, allowing the reader only certain information regarding different types of transgressions. A key example is that there is narrative evidence of Franny's mutual love for her brother, but evidence of *Lolita's* ambivalent feelings for Humbert. And in terms of obscene language, Humbert loathes *Lolita's* constant profanities, but does not choose to tell the reader explicitly what she says. In relation to indecent and obscene language, Humbert simply refers to incidents of *Lolita's* and other characters' profanities, but never repeats the actual words and phrases employed: "Lo still struggling with a scrunch and swearing at me in a language that I never dreamed little girls could know, yet alone use" (170), or as represented in another argument between Humbert and *Lolita*, *Lolita* is simply said to have said *unprintable* things (205, my emphasis). The unwillingness to comprehend or accept *Lolita's* knowledge of

so-called indecent language is of course also immensely ironic, and emphasises Humbert's neurotic interpretations of her character. She is apparently old and mature enough to be indulging in a sexual relationship with her guardian, yet the existence of profanities in her vocabulary seems a shocking discovery to Humbert. Through Humbert's censorship of Lolita's utterings, she is further silenced, and is thus not allowed a proper narrative outlet for genuine anger; this too remains ambivalent and open to interpretations for the reader. In this instance, *lack* of obscene language leaves Lolita's portrayal all the more distorted by Humbert's sense of propriety, etiquette, and concern with proper decorum.

"True, not a single obscene term is to be found in the whole work" (6), states the fictional Ph.D. John Ray in *Lolita's* foreword, written by Nabokov himself. This is far from being true. And considering the ambiguous nature of the novel overall, which has been discussed so far, why should we not question this claim? Eric Naiman has raised questions about the presence of obscene language in *Lolita*. He also found it intriguing that attention to smutty language in Nabokov had for so long been completely ignored by other scholars. In a discussion regarding the motel called the "Chestnut Lodge," other critics were examining the possibility that this motel was a reference to an old insane asylum of the same name in Baltimore, to which Naiman suggested that the name of the motel could rather constitute an anagram: The Cunt's Lodge. To his astonishment, the response to his enquiry was primarily outrage from other Nabokov scholars. How dare he? Critics like Kartsev and Wendel accused Naiman of ludicrous speculation (Naiman 17-18). Naiman was baffled by their reactions; as he points out, *Lolita* is, after all, a crude book, whose subject matter is nothing but conspicuously controversial. He further notes the reluctance

to tackle in any systematic fashion the bawdy linguistic games played in the novel or to discuss their purpose in the context of the novel's larger meaning. In part, this hesitancy may be due to the uneasiness still experienced by readers about the sexual nature of the novel's central plot - the theme of sexual abuse has provoked outrage from both the Left and the Right. (18)

Another explanation for this reluctance may stem from the notion that Nabokov has been, and still is, considered a conspicuously literary writer, and that *Lolita* would therefore not immediately be thought to succumb to bawdy vocabulary at this level, which would simply be beneath it; perhaps the smutty vocabulary associated with the 'low' lacks consistency with the implications of high art.

One key element that separates the respective styles of Irving and Nabokov is the way that humour manifests itself in their novels. Whereas the humoristic aspects of Irving's novel mainly arise from absurd and ludicrous *actions*, most of Nabokov's humour derives from word play, irony, and formalistic idiosyncrasies. What is striking about the word play in Nabokov's novel, especially in the fictional names of characters and geographical spaces, is that many of them function as ways of subtly mocking the referenced person or place in question. Further, the nature of Nabokov's word-play is described by Naiman as "school-boy humour," as we see, for instance, in the list of employees at Beardley School, where Lolita attends. Naiman points to names such as Miss Redcock, Dr. Pierce and "Miss Pratt, whose surname faces back and front and who insists that Lolita is 'shuttling between the anal and genital zones of development'" (18). As Naiman explains, the English word 'pratt' is a double entendre which refers both to the older meaning of buttocks, and to the vagina. Miss Pratt's name constitutes a reference to her own criticism and fixation on Lolita's developmental stage, but is simultaneously a well-constructed *pun*, and an incident where obscene language is subtly, yet visibly incorporated into the narrative. As Mikhail Bakhtin has noted on the use of punning, it is a playful alteration of linguistic rules, under the category he calls *grammatica jocosa*; in which a grammatical order is "transgressed to reveal erotic and obscene or merely materially satisfying counter-meaning" (Stallybrass & White 10-11). As Bakhtin argues, the pun violates a structure of prevailing convention, thus provoking laughter. He further sees punning as one of the tropes of the discourse of the carnival (Stallybrass & White 10), which is primarily associated with the low. Nabokov's use of punning therefore stresses the significance and existence of obscene and transgressive language in *Lolita*.

The novel also includes several other interesting instances of word play, some of which aren't quite as cleverly disguised. Think, for instance, of the obvious erotic undertones in the name Lake Climax, the lake where Lolita supposedly lost her virginity, or the subtle misspelling of another contemporary writer's name: as explained by Melissa Frazier, Nabokov was known to have had a problematic relationship with other writers like Dostoyevsky, a relationship which was just as troublesome with the French writer Honoré de Balzac. And even if Balzac is not as predominantly featured in Nabokov's works as Dostoyevsky, he does make an appearance in *Lolita* during Humbert's short encounter with Lolita's friend from Beardsley School, Mona Dahl (Frazier 487). As Humbert fishes for information about Lolita, Mona quickly changes the subject and picks up a book close at hand, and inquires, "[d]o tell me about Ball Zack, sir. Is he really that good?" (Nabokov 192). Nabokov's word play on the name Balzac in this scene could

read as a mocking reference to Mona's apparent mispronunciation of the writer's name, thus mocking *her*. Yet considering Nabokov's troubled relationship with Balzac, it is very likely that the name is also deliberately misspelled to evoke an obscene and vulgar pun that in fact bluntly suggests that the writer Balzac is reduced to nothing but a sack of balls. Considering the uncanny similarities between the spelling of Ball Zack and ball sack, this deduction need not even be remotely far-fetched.

In addition to the several puns found in Nabokov's novel, Naiman also points to Nabokov's use of sexual language, a trait he suggests Nabokov has adopted from Shakespeare. According to Nabokov, Shakespeare was one of the world's greatest poets, a writer whom he was inspired and influenced by. Regarding Shakespeare's role in contemporary culture, Levine highlights Shakespeare as one of the leading figures within 'highbrow' art. He points to the gradual change throughout the twentieth century, in which critics started referring to the works of Shakespeare as substantially elevated, as his work gradually reached its status as 'classic.' Not only that, but other works deemed classics, like those of Ibsen and the Greeks became increasingly hard to sell within average community situations (32). Might this sense of elevation connected to the works of Shakespeare have affected the works of Nabokov, who was so deeply influenced by Shakespeare? It is certainly plausible that Nabokov *intended* his work to be associated with and read as highbrow, and therefore aimed for his style to be equally elevated. Regardless, there is even a resemblance in the disregard for Nabokov's sexually charged language in *Lolita*, and the disregard and sanitisation of many controversies found in the works of Shakespeare; from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, Shakespeare studies were shaped by reticence towards the controversies in his plays, resulting in censored editions published for children (Naiman 22). Even aspects of obscene language and obscene acts in Shakespeare's plays were attributed by poet Robert Bridges as Shakespeare's efforts to communicate to the lowest members of society, whom he deemed "the most vulgar stratum of his audience" (Levine 35). Generally speaking, it seems instances of the conspicuously obscene have often been attributed to the uneducated, the unworthy, or simply been excused or pushed aside.

Furthermore, Nabokov is suggested to have been immensely influenced by the publishing of Eric Partridge's *Shakespeare's Bawdy*, a book which inspects and discusses, celebrates, and defends a glossary of eroticised words and explorations of female sexual features in the works of Shakespeare. There is an evident coincidence in the publication of this book and Nabokov's *Lolita* which has caught Naiman's attention. Using Shakespearian sexual

terms, Naiman illustrates how *Lolita* is not only influenced by Shakespeare, but also how there are many possible readings of the novel which evoke the obscene on a linguistic level (24). An interpretation Naiman takes into consideration which is worth noting in this context is his attention to the word “nymphet.” Whereas Diana Butler has noted that the word “nymphet” could read as a substitution for the word “pupa,” a butterfly-cocoon, Naiman writes that “Butler may have taken a secondary metaphor for the primary one; the term *nymphet* owes its genesis as much to anatomy as to lepidoptery. The labia minora have traditionally been referred to as ‘nymphaea.’” Further, “[t]he association between butterflies and genitalia had particular significance for Nabokov, who used genitalia as a key innovation in scientific classifications,” referring to Nabokov’s dissection of butterfly genitalia (30). The nymphet read synonymously as the labia minora, thus, means Humbert is subsequently transforming and reducing Lolita “into nothing but vulva” (Naiman 30). Generalisations and genitalisations such as these are further examples of how Humbert’s narrative, read on a linguistic level, objectifies and eroticises the child Lolita is. Obscene language therefore becomes another vital contributing element which reveals underlying taboo issues and species of the ugly, masquerading as the lyrical and the beautiful.

As this analysis has shown, *Lolita* is a book that textualises several controversial topics of an obscene and taboo nature, some cleverly camouflaged yet still visible in the ambiguous narrative style of Humbert. As literature is always open to several interpretations and approaches, reading the book for what it *is* remains immensely important, particularly when content has been overlooked and overshadowed by a celebration of style by so many; the narrative remains a rape narrative, singularly filtered through the ideologies of a neurotic sexual offender. Whether the work is read overall as a political allegory of modern society, a neurotic perspective on love, or indeed a tragic love story, one should still take into consideration the novel’s underlying plot. Failing to read the rape of Lolita as such leaves the story and her character vulnerable to wrongful criticism, accusations, and misleading deductions. Falling for Humbert’s persuasive deceptions leaves the reader blind to other perspectives than Humbert’s. But most importantly, the possibility of *resisting* the idea that *Lolita* is ultimately a novel containing obscene themes and language speaks volumes about what Nabokov in reality is getting away with: obscenity camouflaged in stylistic excellence. In the following chapter, I will perform a similarly structured analysis of the plot of John Irving’s *The Hotel New Hampshire*, which focuses on the same taboos found in *Lolita*. My hypothesis is that the novels, although structurally and stylistically dissimilar, have more in common thematically than one

would perhaps initially suspect. This comparative analysis of these stylistically disparate works underlines how exposing the aesthetic function of the obscene can be applied as an investigative approach that breaks with and blurs restrictive cultural categories.

3 Chapter 3: John Irving's *The Hotel New Hampshire*

Like *Lolita*, *The Hotel New Hampshire* predominantly revolves around three major taboo issues: incest, rape, and sexual deviance. This forms the basis for a comparative reading. Throughout this chapter I wish to illuminate how Irving's use of obscene themes and language in *The Hotel New Hampshire* transcends his straight-forward style. Regardless of Irving's alleged stylistic accessibility and the novel's classification as a mass-cultural work, the novel depicts and expresses crucial truths about individual imagination and the myth of love. And like *Lolita*, it conspicuously introduces species of the ugly represented as beautiful. An exploration of the obscene in this novel reveals how a work that is not reliant on intricate narrative style still manages to be culturally significant through treatment of serious issues like rape, feminism, and sexuality.

The relationship between the novel's protagonist John Berry and his sister Franny is an explicitly incestuous one, as they are blood-related siblings. Despite its mutual consent, this relationship also constitutes species of the ugly, represented as beautiful. The issue of rape is very present in John's narrative, where the reader encounters several rape victims, which allows for a discussion of rape both as a taboo, as a representation of obscene violence, but most importantly as a trauma for those involved. The narrative also presents characters who deviate from hegemonic normative sexuality through homosexuality. Unlike Humbert's pathology, the representation of sexual dissidence in Irving's novel can be said to promote sexual tolerance and normalisation. In this chapter, I will also include a discussion of the subject of prostitution, a key topic in Irving's novel because the prostitutes living in the second hotel, the *Gasthaus Freud*, become an incorporated part of the lives of the main characters. There is an important interrelationship between the element of prostitution and sexual dissidence and fetishism, represented through some of the working-girls' customers, as the prostitutes' *profession* is of a sexual nature. The different niches the prostitutes fill illustrate a spectrum of sex and sexuality that allows for an insight into different forms of obscene human lust, some of which are associated with notions of shame. Because the working-girls develop a close relationship to the main characters, we are given a more diverse and sympathetic portrayal of them as individuals, and thus they are not solely reduced to their sexual favours, nor are they represented purely as 'low' members of society.

The Hotel New Hampshire was published in 1981 by John Irving, a contemporary American writer, who is still alive and still publishing to this day. *The Hotel New Hampshire*

is his fifth novel, and although it is not his most praised or well-known work, it is an interesting novel to examine due to the many varying taboos and issues it presents. Irving introduces transgressions such as rape, severe sexual harassment, prostitution, sexual dissidence, and incest. His story also borders on the absurd and grotesque, through notions such as bestiality, violent deaths and different, sometimes even ridiculing explorations of the grotesque body, a term employed by Bakhtin which will be discussed in relation to obscene language. This novel also primarily takes place in the US, as indicated by the title, in New Hampshire, not far from the whereabouts of the Haze residence in *Lolita*. The story arguably fits into the category of the traditional family saga, as it is built around the Berry family, and narrated by John, the middle child. John's narration is riddled with references to other characters' thoughts and emotional responses, and is consequently experienced as more sympathetic and less biased than the narration of Humbert. John's narrative also provides the reader with probing insight into a large spectrum of different characters he encounters, which makes room for diversity and analysis of different social roles and norms. The story traces its origins back to the time when John's parents first met, and follows the family up to the moment of John's writing, when he is in his forties.

The novel can be divided into three different parts according to the locations of the three different hotels run by the Berry household. The first part takes place in New Hampshire, after the family's father decides to purchase an old school for girls, which they renovate and turn into the area's only hotel business. This part of the novel primarily depicts the childhood and adolescent years of the narrator and his siblings. The second portion of the novel depicts the lives of the family in Vienna, where they run the second Hotel New Hampshire, called the *Gasthaus Freud*, alongside prostitutes and radical extremists. The family are devastated after the loss of their mother and the youngest sibling, Egg, who we are told never make it to Vienna after their flight crashes in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Their loss is important to the plot, in part because it drives the remaining family members closer together, especially John and Franny, who become even closer; it is during the family's stay in Vienna that John and Franny explicitly admit their love interest in each other. In the second hotel, the family are reunited with the Jewish character Freud, whom John's parents met initially in their teens. Freud, who is now blind, is accompanied and led by the character Susie the bear, a rape victim who has created an alter ego involving wearing a bear suit. Susie functions as Freud's "seeing-eye bear" and acts as the protector of the group of prostitutes who live in the hotel. The third part of the novel follows the Berry family's return to the US after all hell breaks loose in Vienna; The

radical extremists' plan to blow up the Opera House is sabotaged by Freud, who sacrifices himself by bashing his baseball bat into the radicals' very explosive car, prematurely detonating what was actually a disguised bomb. After returning to America, the family purchase what is to become the last Hotel New Hampshire, which in reality becomes a shelter for abused women. The shelter is administrated and run by John, and his father who is in need of care after being blinded by the car explosion.

Throughout the narrative, we are given an insight into the upbringings and troubles of the Berry family, with particular focus on the children. The Oldest, Frank, a homosexual who struggles with his sexuality and general awkwardness. Frank deliberately makes it clear that the experience of being a homosexual is anything but simple, and it becomes obvious throughout the story that he not only finds it shameful, but it also becomes a cause for despair. As the novel is set in the 1950s and 60s during Frank's teenage years, it is evident that his sexuality was perceived as more sinful and transgressive compared to the general attitudes towards homosexuality in contemporary society. Yet homosexuality, to some extent, remains an important social taboo which is heavily stigmatised. Thus Frank's sexuality will be taken into consideration in the following analysis under the subcategory of sexual dissidence. Frank, as well as other characters who deviate from normative sexuality, could be said to raise awareness and project sexual tolerance, based on various characters' reactions. Lastly, Franny, the oldest sister, experiences rape during the family's stay in the first Hotel New Hampshire, an event which affects not only her, but also the rest of the family to a large extent. Franny's rape, like *Lolita's*, constitutes a treatment of rape as obscene violence, and as physical and psychological trauma.

As I have previously shown, Michelson's definition of artistic pornography applies to Nabokov's novel in that Humbert's animalistic, obscene lust is presented as, and merged with, the prospect of love. Michelson distinguishes the mode of artistic pornography from soft and hard-core genres in that complex/artistic pornography has the unique ability to synthesise the myths of animality with those of love, thus fusing naturalistic premises with complex psychic consciousness. He further points to the characteristics of artistic pornography, distinguishable by "its matrix of consciousness, obscenity and the myth of love" (55). *Lolita's* main focus lies on Humbert's sexualisation and objectification of Lolita, who suffers over the long term from sexual abuse involving incest and statutory rape. Given that the novel *Lolita's* main concern is Humbert's neurotic lust represented as love, the mode of artistic pornography is more applicable as a characterisation than it is for *The Hotel New Hampshire*. The latter's focus is

not sexually centred to the same extent. Pornography is further an immensely controversial concept, susceptible to various interpretations and criticism, some of them biased in regarding pornography as degenerating and harmful, especially to female sexuality. Thus, labelling the work of Irving as species of pornography risks generating a potentially narrow reading of the text. However, I propose that specifically in Irving's treatment of obscene themes, he exhibits an aesthetic treatment of some subjects which is in line with Michelson's definition of complex or artistic pornography, especially in terms of the incest theme. Michelson suggests that "obscurity is not simply a cultural aberration but a complex expression of human imagination," and that the erotic imagination in itself is a species of the ugly, or the unspeakable: "The very act of speaking it, then, is aggressive and implicitly political (Michelson 39). Thus, the obscene can also be read as a display of human individuality and an exhibition of sexual imagination and sexual preference, in which John Irving's agenda can justifiably be read as cultural and social commentary, as well as portraying a range of private needs and 'forbidden' lusts.

The themes raised in the *Hotel New Hampshire* could be said to be equally repulsing as themes evoked in *Lolita*. However, Irving's display of these themes varies significantly from Nabokov's in that they have different functions. Irving's novel revolves around a family and its children's upbringing, involves a multitude of different major and minor characters, and is told chronologically in what resembles a traditional coming-of-age story. Critic Gabriel Miller refers to the novel as "kind of a fairy tale," which is how the narrator also often refers to the story. Miller uses Bruno Bettelheim's characteristic of the fairy tale narrative to illuminate how *The Hotel New Hampshire* corresponds to its methods:

in a fairy tale, internal processes are externalized and become comprehensible as represented by figures of the story and its events . . . The unrealistic nature of these tales is an important device, because it makes obvious that the fairy tales' concern is not useful information about the external world, but the inner processes taking place in the individual. (Bettelheim, qtd. in Miller 129)

Irving includes several characters in which internalised emotional responses appear as externalised visual representations, as we see in the extreme measures of Franny's altered habits and self-image after her rape. John also undergoes a physical transformation through excessive body building as a response to his feeling of helplessness after Franny's assault, thus transforming his body and habits to the point of obsession. Frank's awkwardness and introversion similarly reflect his insecurity revolving his homosexuality and the prejudice

against his deviation from social expectations of normality. The most visually striking externalisation of trauma and internalised process is evident in Susie the bear. Mutual to many of these characters' external representations is the fact that their internalised processes are all rooted in sex and sexuality, i.e. the obscene. My claim is therefore that Irving's novel is more preoccupied with the *effect* and *impact* of the obscene and taboo-laden, than what drives and motivates it, as we see through Humbert.

3.1 Incest

In *The Hotel New Hampshire*, the relationship between John and Franny arguably never evokes the same extent of disgust and judgment as do Humbert's transgressions. This is partly due to the mutual consent and true aspect of love present in John and Franny's affair, which, unlike in *Lolita*, is unambiguous because of the structure of John's narrative; it is less introspective and more inclusive of other characters' reactions, and aims to present dialogue, events, and people more multidimensionally. From the very beginning, as throughout the novel, the narrator John keeps referencing his older sister Franny to such an extent that readers gather a very good picture of her personality and traits, in addition to John's feelings about her. It is therefore evident that Franny has a vital role in the novel, and to her surrounding characters, but that most of all, she is very important to John.

The incestuous relationship between John and Franny is consummated and finalised towards the end of the novel. One could argue, on one hand, that their one-night affair, in which they succumb completely to their love for each other, is the result of a series of traumatic events and hardships experienced together; these include Franny's rape, as well as the loss of their mother and brother Egg. Furthermore, John and Franny experience exclusion from their surrounding environments and society in Vienna, and already from early childhood, they present mutual feelings of having a stronger connection to each other than their other family members. All these elements in turn strengthen their bond. But their relationship is represented as exceeding a typical sibling relationship from the very beginning. Because of the novel's long time-span, their relationship's development and their unique connection within the family are traceable from their early childhood, as when John asks Franny, "Why do we like each other more than we like Frank?" I asked her. 'We just do,' she said, 'and we always will'" (76). It becomes increasingly obvious that they seek solace in each other's company during hard times,

or when being scolded by their parents, which happens on one depicted occasion in which they sneak off together to John's room and contemplate the difference between their bond and their relationships with their other siblings: "Upstairs Franny whispered to me, 'You see? It's just you and me. Not Lilly. Not Frank'" (80). Their strong feeling of unity in turn also enhances their sense of normalcy in each other's eyes, making it easier to admit and accept their love for each other. Eventually, they openly address their moral dilemma of whether to ignore their feelings towards each other or to give in to them, rather than leaving the issue completely unresolved and unmentioned.

There are several examples of how Franny's affection towards her brother is often violent and immediate. Although they are seemingly typical incidents of loving, "normal" and playful sibling rivalry, they constantly linger between play and sexual tension, as when Franny sticks her tongue in John's ear, which he finds both teasing and pleasing. As John states, "Franny, whether she was eight or ten or fifteen or twenty-five, would always roll her eyes and elbow me, or tickle me, and whenever I tickled her back she'd holler, 'Pervert! Feeling up his sister!'" (17). This tendency of deliberately directing the reader's attention to the notion of incest is similar to Humbert's intentional inclusion of the subject. In addition to highlighting the ferocious attitude Franny constantly shows, instances like these foreshadow the direction John and Franny's love will take later in the novel. And whereas Franny shows fierce affection, it is similarly evident that John is very susceptible to her and her attention to him. Because the older John retrospectively narrates the story, there are two layers to John's emotions, the ones as he remembers them and the emotions of his adult self which colour the portrayal of his childhood. Evidently John always has, and still does, idealise Franny: "And Franny was forceful - I frequently believed her. Even Franny's language was ahead of her time - as if she always knew where she was going; and I would never quite catch up to her" (27). John's idealisation of Franny later becomes stronger when the family lose their mother and youngest brother, and Franny becomes intent on adopting a mother's responsibility for her family.

In the description of their love making, Irving combines humour, the obscene, pain and pleasure. Franny and John break into nervous laughter as John climbs naked into Franny's bed, still wet from his shower: "'Your balls are all wet,' she said. 'I dried myself!' I said. 'You missed your balls,' she said. 'Nothing like wet balls,' I said, and Franny and I laughed as if we were crazy. We were" (450). This passage reads as a manifestation of all the themes that constitute artistic pornography as articulated by Michelson; it addresses the myth of love through juxtaposing sibling love and sexual love, which exceeds moral inclinations. It

comedically induces the obscene through the presence of wet balls, the touching of skin, Franny's breasts against John, and John's rather casual reference to the "more or less conventional position" they first made love in (450). Adding to the element of humour, the siblings get interrupted by their younger sister Lily, whose unawareness of the situation makes the scene all the more ridiculous when Franny insists on privacy because she is writing something. "In a sense, of course, Franny *was* writing something: she was the author of how our relationship would turn out – she took a mother's responsibility for it. She went too far – she made love to me too much. She made me aware that what was between us was *all* too much" (Irving 451). Addressing Franny's substitution for the family's lost mother, Miller reads the lovemaking scene as a fulfilment of John's Oedipal dream, and, in line with the fairy tale mode which the novel imitates, self-realisation is portrayed as a painful experience (166-67). Reading the scene as analogous to an Oedipal dream not only links the scene to one of literature's oldest taboo motifs, but also evokes dream analysis, psychoanalysis, and Sigmund Freud, whose presence saturates the entire novel.

John also consciously points to his awareness of their current neurosis, and his ambivalence, as he lingers between excitement and resentment, by referring to their actions and behaviour as *crazy*. Moreover, this scene is a turning point, and a cathartic necessity for them to rid themselves of their improper attraction towards each other. They actively induce pain by loving each other too much, exceeding their bodies' limitations by transforming their pleasurable association with each other into something painful. In including a purifying element in the incestuous affair, the incestuous lovemaking reads as a positive solution and a cleansing for both characters, who now stand free to develop beyond their infatuating need for each other. The incest theme as it is presented in the novel is therefore an explicit example of a species of the ugly akin to the beautiful, yet John, unlike Humbert, does not glorify or advocate incest. Rather, John utters that "[i]t is improper to describe making love to one's sister. Does it suffice to say it became 'great,' and it got even greater? And later it grew worse, of course – later we got tired" (451). Despite the discrepancy between John's reluctance to describe the lovemaking and the act itself, the aspect of impropriety addressed by John emphasises his awareness of the transgression they have completed. He even expresses feelings of tremendous shame and ambivalence revolving around his sexual desire for his sister, and ponders whether his mother, had she known the deviance of his desires, would have loved him: "I wondered: the son who cleaned up his language, but wanted more than anything to make love to his own sister. And Franny wanted to, too!" (408). Because incestuous lovemaking becomes the ultimate *solution*

to incest, the theme overall can be read as an analogy for managing unresolved issues, wherein leaving issues unsolved causes more harm than the pain of exhausting the problem directly.

Critic Benjamin DeMott has described the structure of *The Hotel New Hampshire* as “a succession of shrewdly prepared explosions of violence, each of which blends the hideous and the comic, and projects a fresh length of story line that hisses forward into the next blowup almost before the dust from the last has settled” (94). DeMott’s reading of the novel accurately describes the style of Irving, especially his mixture of tragedy and comedy, the farcical and the serious. Because of Irving’s resolutions to some of the issues raised in the novel, as well as its tendency to mirror the structure of a fairy tale, *The Hotel New Hampshire* could also be compared to a comedy in its use of absurd slapstick humour, found both in Irving’s language and in the scenes the novel presents. The incestuous attraction between Franny and John is resolved and handled, Susie the bear finally comes to embrace her human form and gradually learns to accept herself, and Franny’s obsession with her rapist Chipper Dove sees an end. Key to many of these resolutions is the juxtaposition of sex constituted as violent and damaging, and consensual sex, wherein the latter involves a healing power. Sex comes to constitute the ultimate antidote to John’s sexual attraction to Franny, just as Franny’s overhearing her parents making love in the first hotel over the old intercom has a positive outcome: “in the darkness I knew that Franny had been cured of taking baths. It was overhearing my Mother and Father that did it; I think that made her own smell seem perfectly natural to Franny again” (186). Towards the very end of the novel, even Susie slowly heals from her obsession with her own views of herself as damagingly ugly, where John’s obvious desire for her gradually changes her self-image: “‘Convince me,’ she tells me, and I know what that means. That’s our euphemism for it – whenever we want each other. She will just say, out of the blue, to me, ‘I need to be convinced’” (527). Portraying sex and the obscene as healing and beautiful further allows for mutually encouraged sex to remain a polar opposite to rape, the traumas of sexual violence, and discrimination.

3.2 Sexual Dissidence and Deviation

There are three major characters in Irving’s novel who, to different extents, break with heterosexual norms. Among them is Frank, the oldest brother. Other vital characters who explore their sexuality are Franny, in Vienna, as an effect of her sexual assault, and Susie the

bear, who similarly has turned away from any sexual relations with men after being brutally raped. Some of the prostitutes also express fluid views on sexuality and sexual love privately. These characters challenge their contemporary circumstantial views and attitudes towards expected standards of sexuality. The novel itself similarly challenges remaining controversy involving sexual dissidence, during the period from the novel's release until today, through its normalisation of the topic.

Frank, the oldest Berry sibling, identifies as homosexual and is open about this identification quite early in the novel. His homosexuality leads him to be victimised by his peers during a violent confrontation in which he is forced to “fuck a puddle” by a group of ruthless, uncaring members of the school's football team. The leader of the pack is also Chipper Dove, whose role in this assault reads as a forewarning of the attack of Franny which is to come later in the story. Frank's assault is sadly not indicative only of the 1950s, as discrimination and violence against the LGBT community is a reoccurring issue world-wide in the present, in spite of general gradual changes. Frank's assault could read as an instance of political and social commentary, established and developed specifically to evoke the reader's sympathy and engagement with Frank as the victim. It effectively reminds contemporary readers of the trauma and ongoing stigma resulting from the long history of labelling homosexuality as unnatural, perverted, and taboo, as well the hardship prior generations went through as a result of this. The graphic representation of the obscene and violent attack is supplied through John, who, rather than simply referring to the incident, includes very specific details that enable readers to imagine the scenario vividly:

Harold held on to one of Frank's arms fully extended; Lenny Metz stretched Frank's other arm. Frank lay belly down with his balls in the heart of the mud puddle, his astonishing bare ass rising up out of the water and submerging again, as Chipper Dove pushed it down with his foot, then let it up, then pushed it down. (111)

John's description addresses both the violent and the sexual aspects of the assault in detail, making the obscene conspicuous, and, following Michelson, bringing onstage what is customarily kept offstage in Western culture (xi). The description involves a movement with male sexual connotations, i.e. the thrusting of hips, and naked skin, which is combined with a brutal and degrading element of force including Dove's foot. Frank is symbolically and literally stepped on and submerged in filth and mud. What this passage effectively does through its detailed descriptions is to increase the reader's discomfort and repulsion towards the assault,

mirroring the discomfort felt by Frank, the victim, and John and Franny, who are forced to watch the incident.

Critic Joseph Epstein has noted that sex, ranging from incest, to lesbian love to adolescent sex, is often central to Irving's work, and all of these forms are present in *The Hotel New Hampshire*. Epstein claims that the centrality of sex is peculiar in these novels, as "Irving often goes well out of his way to make plain his hatred of the sexual exploitation of women and his sympathy for the general tendency of their liberation from the old regime under which, presumably, women were treated as sexual objects. More than one of Irving's novels manages to be both liberationist and pornographic" (40). Epstein's claim is important to this discussion because pornographic motifs are often subjectively interpreted and in themselves controversial. Yet Irving's combination of pornographic and liberationist material need not read as a puzzling interrelationship; literary pornography need not be interpreted as solely and negatively targeted against women. As Michelson has noted regarding the evolution of literary pornography addressing female sexuality, there is a gradual increase in feminist literature exploring and validating pornography as a genre which viably explores and depicts sexuality and its functions related to women's general situation in society (186). Irving includes a variety of scenes where female sexuality is both depicted and portrayed positively, and is thus celebrated, in focusing on the female characters' actual pleasure, sexual liberation, and consent. In Vienna, Franny and Susie the bear develop a sexual relationship, which is an instance of the celebration and positive reinforcement of female sexuality and same-sex love.

In his reading of Irving, Daniel Remåker claims that Irving promotes sexual tolerance through representing differing forms of sexuality in his novels, and points to Franny and John's reaction to Frank's coming out as homosexual (Remåker 7). Even though they insist on Frank's being weird and specifically *queer*, they do not refer to his sexuality, but rather his personality. Further, after Frank exclaims that "I really am queer, you know," Franny simply states that she knows, whereas John comfortingly states that it's okay, "because what else could a brother say?" (Irving 115). Remåker's analysis of the normalisation of Frank's homosexuality is applicable to John and Frank's discovery of Franny's later relationship with Susie the bear. John's initial reaction to Susie's reluctance to go out with men (323) leads to his warning Franny about Susie because she is supposedly a lesbian. But rather than this warning reading as John's scepticism towards Susie's sexual orientation, Franny's remark makes it obvious that John's warning rather stems from a protective responsibility, and more importantly, a repressed sense of jealousy, which Franny is aware of: "You think about me too much" (324). The

relationship between Susie and Franny is initially encouraged by John himself. He feels he has insufficiently dealt with Franny's rape, and dreads the consequences and reality of her ongoing letter correspondence with Chipper Dove, as well as the eerie presence of one of the radical extremists Ernst, the hack pornography writer. Ernst's pornography will be discussed in relation to obscene language, and it is worth noting that his pornography is depicted rather negatively, not simply because it is pornography, but because his pornography is described as an abomination.

Because of the looming presence and effect of Ernst, John wishes for Susie to be a positive influence on Franny, as she is able to provide Franny with a feminine perspective that John is incapable of providing. Susie the bear functions as the safe haven for Franny in dealing with her rape, and therefore their sexual relationship becomes positively loaded, and can thus be seen as further promoting sexual tolerance. Similarly, Franny's response to John's enquiry as to whether she is now a lesbian reflects a more liberal sense of fluid sexuality. She promptly states that she doubts she is a lesbian, she just likes Susie. And unlike Frank, who is convinced, Franny is "not convinced of anything - except, maybe, that this is easier for me. Right now" (341). Franny's reflection on her sexuality reads as non-static, a more radically open-minded take on the nature of sexuality than the patriarchal standards of heterosexual relationships would dictate.

In one particular and key instance of John's depictions of sexual pleasure, he uses the metaphor of song, depicting sexual noises and climax as something lyrical, musical and beautiful, whence female sexual pleasure transcends the physical and purely sexual, and becomes laden with artistic connotations. On the night John and Frank first realise that there is a sexual relationship between Franny and Susie the bear, John describes the sounds they hear as novel and surprising: "The sound seemed to bear no relationship to sorrow; there was too much light in the sound to have anything to do with sorrow, there was too much of the music of water to make Frank and me think of fucking for money, or even lust . . . It was the song Susie the Bear made Franny sing" (335). Through John's focalisation, the reader is presented a graphical image combining the bear motif and lesbian love making in a cunnilingus scene where Susie the bear is still wearing the bottom half of her bear costume;

Franny lay on her back with her arms flung over her head and her head thrown back, and between her long, slightly stirring legs (treading water, as if she were very buoyant), in my sister's dark lap (which I shouldn't have seen) was a headless bear – a headless

bear was lapping there, like an animal eating from a fresh kill, like an animal drinking in the heart of a forest. (336)

The scene leaves John and Frank shocked and frightened, which is a coupling of fascination and distress, seen from their primary curiosity and fascination with Franny's sounds, which initially drew them to the scene: "It was Franny's song that drew us – both keen and soft, as nice as Mother, as happy as Egg" (336). Susie's bear costume combines same-sex love with animality in a graphic depiction of lust as an animalistic force. This lingering bestiality theme makes the scene ambivalent, where Franny's lyrical song is juxtaposed with John's analogy of an animal eating from its prey. But whereas the first animal analogy connotes violence in Susie's eating from a fresh kill, the latter comparison of an animal drinking in the heart of a forest produces a tranquil, calm reading of the scene which mirrors Franny's feet treading water and the calm melodious tone of her song. This in turn highlights John and Frank's reaction, which combines fascination, fright, and a sense of observing the forbidden, as in the parenthetical (which I shouldn't have seen); the brothers are not only peeking in on a sexual encounter, but on their sister's love life, thus merging the elements of voyeurism and John's growing sexual interest in Franny. The brothers' shock needn't be immediately connected to the horror of sex or same-sex love, because Franny's physical relationship with Susie is later acknowledged by John as positive when he later says that "[t]his is a world where what strikes us, at first, as ominous can grow to become commonplace, even reassuring" (Irving 340). As a comment about the positive outcomes of Susie and Franny's sexual encounters, this also reads as a statement about normalisation of sexual dissidence and sexual tolerance in general.

Judith Halberstam points to the twentieth-century invert as the model for the constructedness of desire and embodiment, which, rather than marking the end to homophobia and gender stigma, resulted in a much more subtle and devious homophobic response. Halberstam pays attention to the rejection of feminine masculinity, which Halberstam argues is generally portrayed as connoting ugliness and undesirability, traits that are often ascribed to lesbians: "Lesbianism has long been associated with female masculinity and female masculinity in turn has been figured as undesirable by linking it in essential and unquestionable ways to female ugliness" (2650). Signifiers of the ugly occur in literature through "freak" characters like the bearded woman or excessively hairy females. In showing different attitudes toward gender stereotypes, Irving's characters both adapt and reject this attitude towards female masculinity. Susie the bear has adopted this characterisation of *herself* as a physical manifestation of female masculinity and the ugly. She openly and frequently refers to herself

as unattractive, as seen from her comparison with herself to Frank as a homosexual: “You may get discriminated against, but let me tell you: there’s no discrimination quite like the Ugly Treatment. I was an ugly kid and I just get uglier, every fucking day” (302). Susie’s dismissal of her own appearance is further extended through her use of the bear costume, which transforms her into an actual fur-covered beast. She thus conforms to the extreme depictions of the female ugly, yet uses the alter ego of the bear to her advantage to feel superior: “No one fights you if you’re a bear” (303). Susie constitutes a physical representation of a species of the ugly, but her function in the narrative is rather heroic, as she is both Freud’s eyes and the prostitutes’ important guardian. Also, she is not solely reviled by others, notions she has projected towards herself due to trauma; she becomes an object of sexual desire by both Franny, and later John, the latter of whom she marries, confirming her lovability and physical appeal.

3.3 Rape

Sexual violence is a reoccurring subject throughout the entire narrative of *The Hotel New Hampshire*. As Joseph Epstein writes, rape is at the centre of the novel; the rape of Franny, the recovery, and the revenge scene are what bind the story together (47). What is most striking about the similarity between Irving and Nabokov is that both writers represent female rape victims and rape issues through male focalisation. Whereas *Lolita* focalises through the actual perpetrator, Irving’s novel provides an entirely different male perspective, which also includes an insight into how the shocking effect of rape repulses and disturbs various members of society regardless of sexual orientation and gender. Chronologically, the first rape in Irving’s novel involves the gangbang of Franny Berry when she is fifteen, and is assaulted in the woods on Halloween by the same members of the football team who assaulted Frank. The attack is led by Franny’s crush Chipper Dove. Throughout the narrative, we also encounter other female rape victims such as Sabrina Jones (the sister of Franny’s friend Junior Jones) and Susie the bear. John Irving’s treatment of the issues of rape and sexual assault varies significantly from Humbert’s portrayals; whereas *Lolita* emphasises the male perspective and the animalistic drive that leads to sexual assault, the portrayal of rape in *The Hotel New Hampshire* stresses the different mental aftermaths of rape, seen from the trauma it manifests in the rape victims and their closest of kin. Rape functions in John Irving’s novel rather as an occasion for social and cultural commentary as the novel incorporates life-altering sufferings of characters whose mental health, response to sex and sexuality, and self-image alter because of sexual abuse. Carol

Harter and James Thompson claim that the horror of rape is provided almost solely as a social and cultural issue in *The Hotel New Hampshire*. They base this argument on the fact that they see rape as *discussed* more often than dramatically embodied in human experiences in the novel (124). However, it is through the discussion of the horror of rape in Irving's novel that the long-lasting effects of rape are truly illuminated, in portrayals of various responses and lasting effects sexual assault may have on the lives of the victims. Furthermore, what *is* rape, if not a social and cultural issue? It certainly isn't beautiful. Consequently, Harter and Thompson dismiss Miller's reading of the novel in terms of the fairy tale. Miller's comparison of the novel to the structure of a fairy-tale *illuminates* an individual's internalised processes through speech and action. Thus, Miller's reading differs from Thompson and Harter's in that he is able to appreciate dialogue as more than mere representation of speech.

Rather than graphically describing the rape scene of Franny, as in the descriptions of Frank's assault, the rape incident focuses more on the distress and helplessness of the narrator. Sabine Sielke, in her book *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790-1990*, notes that "texts mean just as much by what they leave unsaid as by what they say, by what is absent as by what is present, those texts that explicitly employ rape in turn raise questions about their silences, their absent centres, about what they chose to obscure" (13). Choosing to obscure the actual rape of Franny is key in Irving because it is *Franny's* rape, not John's, and the focalisation of John could further obscure Franny's assault because he lacks insight into the experience of rape. Prior to meeting Sabrina Jones, Junior Jones's sister, John becomes insecure because he suspects it is the same sister who he knows suffered a brutal rape in her youth:

'He only has one sister,' Franny said, looking straight at me. 'Does it matter to you that she was raped?' Of course I didn't know what to say: that it *did*? That one would not discuss rape with someone who'd been raped, as opposed to launching into the subject right away with someone who hadn't? That one would look for the lasting scars in the personality, or not look for them? That one would *assume* lasting scars in the personality, and speak to the person as to an invalid? (204)

This, in turn, is highlighted to portray how rape as a taboo becomes a difficult topic to address, particularly for John as a bystander. John puts into words the exact insecurity and ambivalence arguably often felt regarding rape and the response one is expected to display. In that sense,

The Hotel New Hampshire is not a rape narrative in that it breaks the silence of the *victim*, but rather, it provides a male perspective on an issue which predominantly affects women.

Rape is also presented as a social taboo in Irving's novel. Franny's rape involves major character changes within the Berry family household, the most obvious ones evident in Franny herself, but also in her brother in terms of his fear of offending her and losing their bond. John develops an urge to become her protector and struggles with chronic notions of failure to prevent her assault, which leads him to take up body building with his grandfather, and to gain the physique which represents what he assumes represents a brother's natural role as the sister's guardian. Franny's trauma manifests itself in her obsession with taking baths, as a feeling of never getting rid her 'uncleanliness' and the 'filth' of the experience. The baths constitute different attempts to transform and move away from the rape, with water symbolising a fresh start and actual cleanness. It is also a strong image of how deeply the experience has affected Franny, as obsessive cleanliness doesn't fit the prior description provided of her by John: "she had a cheerful curiosity about strong things. She could go the longest, of any of us, without taking a bath" (91). Taking place in the 1950s, the narrative of the rape of Franny reveals tendencies and attitudes towards the frequency with which rape happened and still happens, in highlighting how rape cases were rarely dealt with or even discussed. Pinned under the knee of one of the older students, Harold Swallow, John pleads for him to help Franny instead, warning Harold that he will get in trouble for the attack too. Harold responds by dismissing the situation quite bluntly: "That happens . . . They never get in no trouble. Nobody ever tells" (140). Through this short exchange of words, Irving highlights the regularity with which sexual violence and assault are kept in the dark, as well as their taboo nature; the topics offend, shock, and make people extremely uncomfortable. The way the school board deals with Franny's assault is also indicative of how society treats rape as a taboo: "It was an incident that was hushed up in the best private school tradition; it was remarkable, really, how a school as unsophisticated as the Dairy School could at times imitate exactly the decorum of silence in dealing with distasteful matters that the more sophisticated schools had learned like a science" (155). We later learn that the three boys who gangbanged Franny are expelled, but importantly that the school saw it necessary to silence the incident because of its distasteful nature, much as Franny silences herself because of the many aspects of violence it inflicted upon her.

It is also made obvious how the rape manifests itself in Franny's consciousness and becomes her own taboo, a violation she long refuses to address by its actual name: "'Beaten up' would remain Franny's euphemism for it, although everyone knew she had been raped.

'Beaten up' was all Franny would admit to, although no one missed the point; this way it would never be a *legal* point, however" (149). This goes against Franny's otherwise outspoken, often vulgar nature and her usual eagerness to address sex and sexuality in conversation, a contradiction which truly shows her refusal to acknowledge the gravity of her assault and the experience of her offenders' transgressions. Such is the way Irving manages to address the multitudes of internalised changes projected by the horror of rape by addressing it through dialogue and John's retrospective narrative.

Gabriel Miller notes on the rape of Franny that it "is certainly a horrific experience, a violent way for a young girl, even a sexual tease like Franny, to be introduced to sex. For John, whose one true love is his sister, the rape can be seen as a projection of his own (so far suppressed) desire to have sex with Franny" (159). Miller's claim is problematic in more ways than one; reading Franny as a sexual tease insinuates that her curiosity, openness and frankness revolving around topics of a sexual nature automatically makes her promiscuous. This is also a discriminatory reading of gender, as John's sexual relationship with the older woman Ronda Ray, a worker at the first Hotel New Hampshire, isn't taken into consideration in comparison by Miller as a representation of adolescent sexuality; it is merely addressed by Miller as John's being introduced to sex, without further elaboration. Prior to Franny's rape, Franny tells John that she is still a virgin, because no boys at the Dairy School were worth her loss of virginity, and Franny claims that her first lover should be of importance: "'It's *the first time*, that's why. It stays with you forever'" (129-30). In addition to foreshadowing the rape and highlighting that her first time comes to constitute a scar which indeed tragically stays with her forever, Franny's comment leaves John to speculate and fantasise sexually about Ronda Ray and her sexual experience: "I thought of Ronda Ray: what had the first time meant to her? I thought of her night-clothes, smelling – ambiguously – like her wrist under her watchband, like the back of her knee" (130). This suggests how John as a teenager is similarly as concerned and fascinated by sex as his sister, and even if his fantasies remain unspoken in dialogue, they are represented. Miller's sexual tease comment is furthermore frankly unnecessary, as it suggests that the promiscuity of a female's character should automatically diminish the effect of sexual assault. In this respect, Miller's claim risks mirroring Trilling's classification of *Lolita* as not innocent, and further moves some of the blame onto the victim.

Secondly, Miller's reading of the rape scene as a projection of John's desire is an unelaborated statement with no further textual evidence, suggesting that John's sexual desire is of a necessarily violent nature, or even insinuating that the incestuous aspect of their

relationship automatically suggests obscene violence. It is further a misleading reading of John as a character, who, throughout the narrative is angered and bewildered by the concept of rape, and even later claims that “Rape really puzzles me...because it seems to me to be the most brutalizing experience that can be survived; we can’t, for example, survive our own murder. And I suppose it’s the most brutalizing experience I can imagine because I can’t imagine *doing* it to someone, I can’t imagine wanting to” (417).

Critics who insist on reading serious issues like rape themes in literature metaphorically, as signifying issues beyond themselves, also consequently belittle the severity of the theme as a social and cultural issue. Hence, the rape motif is treated as a taboo even by critics in that it is expected to be eloquently transformed to signify something not as gruesome as the act of rape itself. Robert Towers, in his review of Irving’s works, is critical of the writer’s treatment of delicate subjects, in particular Irving’s often presented rape motif, which is not only a major part of the narrative in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, but also plays a big role in his previous best seller *The World According to Garp*. Towers has argued that Irving eloquently, yet seemingly aimlessly, includes rape as an important theme in his novel. Yet the subject is referenced and discussed in great detail, through Franny’s rape and its aftermath, as well as the experiences of other rape-victims such as Sabrina Jones, Susie and the residents at the last Hotel New Hampshire, which has been turned into a rape crisis centre. After the Berry family move from Vienna, Franny has created a successful acting career and is situated in New York. After John coincidentally bumps into Franny’s rapist Chipper Dove, Franny is faced with the unresolved trauma of her assault when Chipper decides to contact her. Accompanied by Lily, Frank, Susie and two of Susie’s friends, “the wounded women from the West Village Workshop,” they set out to enact a rather fantastical revenge scene, the plot written and directed by Lily. The scene, scheduled to constitute the ultimate revenge on Chipper Dove, stages the pretend rape of Chipper where Susie the bear is in her full bear costume, playing “a bear in *heat!*” pretending to show aggressive lust for him (Irving 482).

In reference to the conjoining of the bear motif (also a recurring subject in Irving’s novels) and rape motif in this scene, Towers states that “the significance of neither motif has been enhanced,” and consequently the scene reads “about as funny (or profound) as a fraternity initiation in high school” (36). Towers’s lack of approval regarding Irving’s treatment of the rape subject ultimately goes against Irving’s intended reading of his work. As Carol Harter and James Thomson stress, Irving effectively avoids approaching cultural issues such as rape, abortion, and feminism as abstracted or in symbolic terms; rather, he dramatically embodies

these themes in characters and actions to further concretise material which frequently in contemporary art is treated as “unassimilated rhetorical material” (13). Irving’s own artistic visions and intension stem from his notion that “art has an aesthetic responsibility to be entertaining. The writer’s responsibility is to take the hard stuff and make it as accessible as the stuff can be made,” and further from the fact that he has no interest in writing material which requires academic middlemen to decipher an eloquent hidden meaning (qtd. in McCaffery 10-11). In this sense, Irving is unabashedly un-elitist, in that he approaches taboo motifs, often graphically, as a means of representing serious issues and taboos *as* serious issues, evoking repulsion that mirrors the repulsion violation and discrimination create.

3.4 Prostitution

At the Gasthaus Freud in Vienna, the members of the Berry family find themselves living alongside radical extremists and a line of prostitutes. They all share this residence over the course of seven years, during which they develop a strong relationship with many of the characters. The presence of the working-girls constitutes a representation of the lower strata of Viennese society, as their profession is of an obscene nature. As Miller writes concerning the roles of the prostitutes and extreme radicals, none of the characters develop three-dimensional personalities; rather, they all serve as grotesque caricatures known primarily by specific traits and quirks (159). Yet not all of these quirks are rooted in their professions or their political views, and it is therefore evident that their characterisation does not solely rely on their social status. Among the prostitutes are Old Billig, the veteran, Babette, Jolanta, Screaming Annie and Dark Inge. The narrator connects sexual preferences with each whore, claiming that

[i]f you wanted a frail flower, or a little French, you asked for Babette. If you wanted experience, and a bargain, you got Old Billig. If you courted danger – if you liked a touch of violence – you could take your chances with Jolanta. If you were ashamed of yourself, you could pay to steal a look at Dark Inge. And if you desired the ultimate deception, you went to Screaming Annie. (309)

John’s overview of the different niches the prostitutes represent also serves as an overview of sex as a commodity; each prostitute mirrors various obscene appeals and demands. The description of the different prostitutes in the hotel connects their physical appearances with the different demands they fulfil.

Dark Inge, the eleven-year old 'tease,' is never allowed to be touched by the clients, and is never left alone in a room with a man; Susie the bear always keeps them company. The role of Dark Inge as a sexualised object, available for purchase at this time, is immensely controversial, and even though she isn't obtainable for 'the real thing,' she constitutes a commodity as a result of an actual demand. The young prostitute emphasises the existence of pubescent sexual appeal and the harsh reality of sexualised children, wherein the narrator and his siblings' response to her clients mirrors the general attitudes towards this: "to us children the worst customers were the shame-faced men who masturbated to only the most modest glimpses of Dark Inge" (309). These men are immediately portrayed by John as sexual predators who arouse repulsion, and described as shame-faced to further induce an image of repulsion and fascination, the twin poles that are essential to many taboos. This description becomes even more crucial because the other working-girls' clients are not portrayed in the same shameful or repulsive manner despite their intent on purchasing sex. It is evident that it is never John's intent to criticise the act of purchasing, nor selling sex, but rather, he lays shame on those whose transgressions exceed prostitution.

The thematic coupling of death and sex is seen frequently throughout the plot in *The Hotel New Hampshire*. It is present in Franny's rape, where the reason for John and Franny's trip through the woods is to get help after Police Inspector Howard Tuck dies of a heart attack outside the family's first hotel. A later coupling of death and sex occurs in the Gasthaus Freud, when Screaming Annie wakes the entire hotel after one of her customers drops dead after copulating with her. Screaming Annie's name results from the fact that the sound of her fake orgasms carries across the hotel for everyone to hear, often waking and even scaring the Berry family and hotel customers. John often refers to Screaming Annie's cries during climax, which he long believes to be fake, as cries of tremendous force, unpleasant cries that "could raise the corpses of the heartless Hapsburgs out of their tombs" (363). It is only later that Screaming Annie reveals that she indeed never fakes an orgasm: "'They're *all* real,' Screaming Annie said. 'Why in the hell do you think I'm such a wreck?'" (415). Screaming Annie's views on her sexuality and the sheer force of how she experiences the effect of sexual pleasure is portrayed as negative and damaging. Her views on the overwhelming effect of sex could be read as a possible insight into a personal perspective on sex as a commodity. This allows for a reading of the prostitutes not only as sexualised caricatures with social and obscene functions, but as more multidimensional individuals.

John's descriptions of the cries of Screaming Annie are opposite images of the positive connotations connected to female sexuality and to Franny. This might be rooted in the fact that John expresses a sense of separation between pure sex and love, seen from his reflections on his relationships with the women in his life:

It did not occur to me to visit the whores – one or all. Ronda Ray had not really been like them. With Ronda Ray, it was just sex with a fee attached; in Vienna, sex was a business. I could masturbate to my imagination of Jolanta; that was exciting enough. And for . . . well, for love there was always my imagination of Franny. (342)

In the division between sex and love as portrayed by John, he stresses that Franny at this time, as a love interest, is never associated with his experiences of pure sexuality and lust. This calls readers' attention to a delicate division between romance and sex, which may go hand in hand, but in John's mind do not, to the extent that sexualising Franny would involve objectifying her. This notion stresses why we are likely to perceive John as more sympathetic than Humbert, who actively objectifies Lolita. John simultaneously calls direct attention to the aspect of sexual imagination, in which the mere images and thrill of the forbidden associated with Jolanta's dangerousness are enough to spur sexual pleasure and erotic fantasies in John. As Michelson claims regarding pornography, it is an exploration of the knowledge and insight into human consciousness. This exploration "is either spiritual or has the potential of telling us something of the human spirit" (40). In evoking the obscene in terms of sexual imagination and self-pleasure, John's perspective reads as a portrayal of a self-realised introspection and acceptance of sexual fantasies. Even if his confession includes mentions of taboos like masturbation and explicit lust, it is not portrayed as if to connote notions of shame in the same manner as his feelings towards Franny. As such, it is made conspicuous that not all notions of the obscene evoke shame in John; his biggest sin remains his attraction towards Franny.

The role of the worker Ronda Ray in the first hotel also arguably fits into the larger discussion about sex as a commodity, because her role in the narrative is predominantly sexual, and because she charges for her sexual favours. As previously mentioned, her role as an older woman who presents John Berry with his first sexual encounter is vastly different from Lolita's sexual encounter with Humbert. Although Ronda Ray is in no way related to the narrator, she is an older woman engaging in sexual intercourse with an underaged boy, three years below the age of sexual consent in the US today, and one year younger than the age of consent in the UK.

Vanessa Place points to the differences in stereotypical depictions of the seduction of the adolescent young man/older boy

by the mature woman, invariably cast as a sun-dappled, vineyard-heavy marvel of sexual initiation, [which] carries no comparable sense of intellectual mentoring or social education . . . The male naïf is a budding philosopher, the female a prêt-à-prendre. Post-seduction, there's no more use for the Woman, as there's nothing more she can teach the now-Man. (86-87)

Place's reference to the seductive woman as the educator fits very much with the portrayal of Ronda Ray's importance and role in the narrator's life. After Ronda Ray has fulfilled her role as John's sexual mentor, her overall role in the narrative vanishes, and her sole importance in the story is reduced to John's sexual introduction. Nor is their relationship a representation of love or tenderness; rather sex with Ronda is always "immediate and genital, but Ronda refused to let me kiss her on the mouth" (Irving 221). There are no negative consequences depicted by the narrator after the reoccurring sexual relationship with Ronda Ray. On the contrary, the relationship is encouraged, celebrated, and slightly mocked by his older sister Franny, who even provides him with money for his first encounter in case she charges. Ronda is reduced to a sexualised character whose sole purpose is to supply John's first encounter with sex, enhancing the discrepancy between representations of the seductive older male and the seductive older female, both in society and as a literary trope.

3.5 Smutty Language in *The Hotel New Hampshire*

As I argued in the previous chapter, the use of colloquial and dirty language in Irving's novel is more prevalent than in Nabokov's. Especially through dialogue, obscene language is made conspicuous as means of depicting various characters' vocabulary and their differences in tone compared to others. Smutty language is explicitly present through dialogue from John Berry's encounters, even during his childhood, primarily through Franny's often vulgar and frank tone; obscene words are therefore particularly crucial aspects of the characterisation of Franny.

The analogy which Greenberg uses to illustrate how kitsch art is more appealing to the general masses may in fact be a good example to explain how Irving as a writer is generally

depicted as a writer or popular fiction. Greenberg uses the analogy of a Russian peasant, an example which derives from the famous New York critic Dwight Macdonald, where the peasant is theoretically situated in front of two paintings, one by Picasso and one by Ilya Repin, seemingly representing the avantgarde and kitsch, respectively. Greenberg proposes that when the peasant casts his eyes on the painting by Repin, it is not necessarily the style nor its technique - as technique - which catches the peasant's attention. Rather, it is the painting's values which seems vividly recognisable: "In Repin's picture the peasant recognizes and sees things in the way in which he recognizes and sees things outside of pictures - there is no discontinuity between art and life" (16). Greenberg is referring to Repin's ability to utilise realism in his images, a realism which deviates from Picasso's use of symbolism and metaphors. As opposed to Repin's straight-forwardness and blunt depictions, Picasso's abstractions and imagery allow for endless interpretations that demand effort from his spectators. Were we to apply to the same analogy to Irving and Nabokov, as representing the same artistic divide as Picasso and Repin, Irving's general appeal may in fact rely heavily on his ability to represent things more boldly and unabashedly. Thus, he demands less strenuous attentiveness from his readers than Nabokov could be said to do. In part, this is particularly evident in language, where obscene language becomes a key element in terms of depicting realistic dialogue. Exploiting a sense of familiarity through language could spur recognition. As Peter Michelson notes concerning the general population, "the culture is a good deal more prepared for a smutty poetics than it knows, considering that most of us are better equipped by it to enjoy a dirty joke than a Keats ode" (49). Michelson's argument highlights how Irving's explicit use of smutty words and colloquialisms mirrors a tone of language more familiar and realistic in terms of the general population's own use of language.

At one point in John's life, he chooses to stop swearing to honour his deceased mother, who was upset by the constant swearing in the Berry household. He decides to cease swearing as the only thing he sees fit to do when unable to ever fully grow up or become responsible enough. Yet even if *he* is reluctant to swear, he does not omit the colourful language of his sister Franny, or other characters in his proximity, from his narrative. Franny's response to John's commitment is a prime example of how John's ideologies does not morph or transform the reflection of events and utterings as they actually happened: "'You mean you're not going to say 'fuck' or 'shit' or 'cock-sucker' or even 'up yours' or 'in the ear' or *anything*, anymore?' Franny asked me. 'That's right,' I said. 'Not even 'asshole'?' Franny asked. 'Right,' I said. 'You asshole,' Franny said" (318-19). This brief exchange of words between John and

Franny primarily reads as ironic and immensely hilarious, given the distinct discrepancy of John promising in one sentence to clean up his language, followed immediately by a list of lewd and imaginative profanities. The irony of this inconsistency is also an extended emphasis of the irony and hypocrisy Franny later points out bluntly to John: ““He lives in a second-rate whorehouse with people who want to start the world over and he wants to clean up his language . . . Beat your meat all night and dream of tits, but you want to sound *nice*, is that it?”” (319). Her outrage is a rephrasing of the notion that actions speak louder than words, and that hiding behind feigned propriety is basically false pretence. Franny’s claim may further be used to emphasise some of the underlying hypocrisy in Humbert’s narrative regarding his censorship of Lolita’s verbal outlets. Additionally, it highlights the general inconsistency in the portrayal of Humbert as a decadent, well-spoken gentleman. Humbert’s objectification and rape of Lolita should frankly discourage any regard of his discourse-façade; his academic language reads more as an ironic juxtaposition of pretention and poor moral standards.

Franny, of course, blatantly refuses even the idea of censoring herself like John: ““I’m *not* going to clean up my language. I’m going to aim my language wherever I want,” she told me. ‘It’s the one weapon I’ve got” (319-20). Michelson notes an important function of the use of smutty and offensive language as means of letting off steam; that is, obscene language also has the power to maintain a sense of psychic balance (49). In situations where individuals suffer from oppression or a sense of inadequate or unjust treatment, channelling their anger and frustration through language is a more socially appropriate and accepted mode of conduct than turning to violence. Following Franny’s rape and the realisation that even her physical aggression has failed to protect her virtue and her body, language remains Franny’s prevailing weapon; the epitome of her personality and her strength is her frankness, her wits, and her verbal aggression.

Whereas John Berry’s narration, as opposed to Humbert’s, is notably more frank and conspicuous in his accounts of both dialogue and events throughout the plot of the novel, there are some depictions John refuses his readers proper insight into. The lack of these depictions stands out in relation to the general narrative because we as readers are made aware that John chooses firmly not to describe them: In Vienna, the Berry family have crossed paths with prostitutes, and also developed a close relationship to many of the radical extremists situated on the fourth floor of the building. Whereas some of the radicals read as sweet natured and more or less harmless, the young extremist Ernst is not. This is mainly because his character mirrors Franny’s rapist Chipper Dove’s, and because of Ernst’s pretentious, cynical nature. He

is also a pornographer. Or at least he claims to be, although we are told that Ernst's pornography "bore no resemblance to the truly erotic, which is never pornographic" (327). Regarding the nature of Ernst's writing, John states "I do not like to describe the pornography . . . Ernst's pornography gave us headaches and dry throats" (327). At this point in the narrative, it is worth recollecting the terrible incidents John has thus far encountered: Franny's rape, the loss of Mother and Egg, violence, incestuous feelings, child prostitution. The fact that John thus limits the information regarding the pornography is tremendously revealing concerning how truly horrific he finds it. Another noteworthy incident John refuses to address explicitly is of course the love making with Franny later in the story. Such, we as readers gather a rather revealing insight into John's limits in terms of narration.

We are never told the extent the pornography goes to in being obscene and violent, yet we know that the pornography "was not about sex: it was about pain without hope, it was about death without a single good memory . . . It was the one called *The Children on the Ship to Singapore*; they never got to Singapore, not even one precious child" (327). Given the brief evidence of the title and the siblings' revulsion, one can only begin to assume the transgressions depicted in the pornography. In a sense, leaving the reader to assume its contents, rather than explaining explicitly what it entails, makes for even stronger reactions to Ernst's writing because the possibilities are essentially endless, shaped solely by the reader's expectations and imagination. The notion of dying children of course also suggests that the content is not only appalling, but borders on a number of immoral and violent transgressions. When Frank decides to read Ernst's pornography to his siblings, Lily starts crying, John vomits twice, and Frank is provoked into a fury. What is interesting is of course Franny's response: she simply responds with a frown and is seemingly a little intrigued by the question of why Ernst would write this. Franny's response, on the one hand, is another example of the ambivalent response to even the tremendously taboo, namely fascination and repulsion. Yet in this case it also reads as an extension of Franny's sexual trauma, in that she seems more intrigued by Ernst's intentions rather than his final product. Her response is revealing of how in comparison with her sexual trauma, even Ernst's pornography fails to thoroughly rattle her core at this point.

As means of depicting the different receptions and depictions between high and low, I wish lastly to turn to Bakhtin's notion of the 'classical' versus the 'grotesque' body. As explained by Stallybrass and White: "[i]n Bakhtin the 'classical body' denotes the inherent *form* of the high official culture and suggests that the shape and plasticity of the human body is indissociable from the shape and plasticity of discursive material and social norm in a

collectivity” (21). Therefore, the discursive forms of ‘high’ and ‘low’ could be recognised as extensions and reshaped modes of the Bakhtinian dichotomy between the classical and the grotesque. As seen in Nabokov’s use of punning, *Lolita* includes instances of discourse associated with the ‘low,’ although Humbert’s narrative includes puns and sexual language less evidently than John’s. Because Irving explicitly introduces language associated with the grotesque, his cultural reception may also rely to some extent on the imbedded association and relationship between depictions of the ‘low other’ and middlebrow/lowbrow culture.

Bakhtin sees a fascinating difference in the human body as represented in carnival, and the representation of body through the classical statuary in the Renaissance. He notes how the two forms of iconography embody completely contrasting registers of being. Stallybrass and White explain how the classical body, which is an extension of the iconography and discourse of the classical statue, is recognised as “elevated, static and monumental” (21). Further, the significance of the classical body “was far more than an aesthetic standard or model. It structured, from the inside as it were, the characteristically ‘high’ discourses of philosophy, statecraft, theology and law, as well as literature” (22). As opposed to the discourses and trademarks of the grotesque, the classical body showed no gaping orifices or exaggerated buttocks, genitals, nor any significant emphasis on the excretory part of the body: “In the classical discursive body were encoded those regulated systems which were closed, homogenous, monumental, centred and symmetrical” (22). The relationship between the classical body and language-related decorum is explained by Stallybrass and White, who state that “[c]learly, as often as they are able, ‘high’ languages attempt to legitimate their authority by appealing to values inherent in the classical body” (21). Assuming Nabokov intended for his work to be received as literary and of high virtue, we can start tracing Humbert’s depictions of *Lolita* as a means of comparing how Nabokov aimed for allusions to the classical body. Contrastingly, there are examples in John Berry’s narrative in which John Irving rather appeals to the grotesque body, for farcical, comedic, and obscene effect. For instance, Humbert’s depictions of *Lolita* generally focus on her body and her appearance, and rarely on her personal traits. A crucial example is the first time Humbert encounters *Lolita* in the Haze residence, when he gazes admiringly upon her and describes her traits thusly;

It was the same child – the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair . . . I saw again her lovely indrawn abdomen where my southbound mouth had briefly paused; and those puerile hips on which I had kissed the crenulated imprint left by the band of her shorts. (39)

Humbert's depictions fundamentally glorify the apparent inherent virtues or her frailty, purity, and symmetry. Humbert's emphasis and praise of Lolita's appearance consequently elevates her, particularly through focalisation and perspective. This elevation is strengthened from the image of Humbert lowering his head to kiss the indrawn abdomen, which situates her physically above him. Lolita becomes, like the classical body, the "radiant centre of a transcendent individualism, 'put on a pedestal', raised above the viewer and the commonality and anticipating passive admiration from below" (Stallybrass & White 21). Bakhtin also notes how the grotesque body has its distinct discursive norms too, in which he lists impurity, clamour, physical needs and pleasures of the 'lower bodily stratum,' materiality and parody (Stallybrass & White 23). The discourse of the grotesque is thus directly rooted in the obscene in its emphasis on the privy parts and pleasures associated with them.

It is thus not only through depictions of lust and sexual enjoyment that Irving invokes the grotesque, but it is evident particularly through depictions of various characters' exaggerated physiques and appearances. Because many of these characters are very sympathetic, invocation of the grotesque body could constitute Irving's method of embracing diversity, much like his promotion of sexual dissidence through normalisation. Susie the bear constitutes an example of an exaggerated, grotesque depiction through her bear-like appearance even when she is out of costume. Similarly, other vital characters in the novel evoke notions of the grotesque and physical othering, such as the youngest Berry sister Lily, who suffers from dwarfism. More explicitly, through discourse, Irving portrays the grotesque in instances where the obscene is enhanced to evoke parody and humour. In the rape-revenge scene in the last part of the novel, one of John and Franny's accomplices is described as having "raised up one cheek of her enormous ass and farted. 'You ain't fucking me,' she told Chipper Dove" (481). Her farcical action adds a ridiculous aspect to the otherwise severe scene, consequently reminding the reader that the revenge-scheme is an act. The character's actions also introduce means of using the grotesque as a defence mechanism; she aggressively and actively makes herself more repellent through an emphasis on the repulsive and connotatively low, through both flatulence and excessive swearing. As opposed to Nabokov's invocation of the classical, Irving explicitly incorporates notions of the grotesque, associated with the discourse of the lower strata of society. Thus, language and discourse could partially strengthen readers' overall receptions of the writers respectively as 'high' and 'low.'

As this analysis has shown, Irving's treatment of the obscene is culturally and personally significant; through incorporation of obscene themes and obscene language, Irving portrays a

spectrum of individuals' different responses and reactions to trauma and transgression. The treatment of issues like rape and homosexuality could read as a promotion of sexual dissidence and a promotion of feminism. Irving's work could also be deemed a vital portrayal of individuality and imagination, which allows for a multidimensional inspection of contemporary society. Because the novel portrays a family saga through the framework of a fairy tale, its structure is recognisable, yet it plays with the reader's expectations because it presents more realistic and serious issues than the traditional fairy tale mode. This analysis has also argued against critics' dismissals of Irving's accessible treatment of serious issues, by illuminating exactly how the narrative manages to process the obscene so as to offer relevant commentary about trauma and social stigma. The explicit presence of obscene themes and language in *The Hotel New Hampshire* need not constitute an easy solution to tackling serious issues. It rather promotes a more accessible approach and insight into contemporary views on relevant matters. Furthermore, this analysis has highlighted how critics' dismissal of plot over style could have damaging effects, as it results in a general de-emphasising of the topics presented.

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to illustrate how an analysis of obscene themes and language can help diminish the dated and redundant cultural division between different works of literature. Through an inspection of taboo motifs in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and John Irving's *The Hotel New Hampshire*, I have pointed out inherent similarities in how the obscene is used to depict the myth of love and portray human desire, and have also shown how species of the ugly depicted as beautiful can be used to situate both works within a poetics of obscenity. As I have argued, many critics have overlooked and miscomprehended the functions of the obscene in both works. In the case of Nabokov, critics have wrongfully interpreted the rape motif and instances of obscene language in *Lolita*, arguably because their focus relies too heavily on stylistic innovations and the ambiguous allure of the narrator Humbert. Similarly, Irving's use of obscene themes and language is often belittled and criticised as a consequence of the novel's accessible style and conspicuous incorporation of discourse associated with 'low' culture. The conclusion of my analysis is that however dissimilar Nabokov and Irving may be, both works allow for an inspection of manifold taboos and their effects, which makes both novels culturally significant because they reveal attitudes and truths about how we perceive and respond to transgression.

The significance of redirecting our attention away from cultural classification is that it allows us to approach art and literature in a less biased way, and to remain more aware of inherent similarities in art's depictions, stripped of literariness and stylistic trademarks. Literature shouldn't be reduced to plot or style alone; it is crucial to appreciate and acknowledge both. A work's aesthetics and aboutness should be deemed equally important elements of a work's entirety. It is justly as important to open up to a diverse and multidimensional approach to literature, keeping in mind that any literary analysis is subjective, but also immensely affected by pre-existing norms and attitudes towards stylistic characteristics. As I have shown, culturally rooted bias may result in narrow readings of significant texts. The preliminary favouritism caused by the cultural dichotomy fuels a larger misapprehension of literature in general. This is not a question of taste or appreciation; rather what is at stake is the lack of genuine recognition of *content*. This comparison of John Irving and Vladimir Nabokov embarks on a larger discussion about the effect of lament cultural divisions in general. The inspection of the unjust treatment of obscene themes and language in these novels could potentially spur a larger debate about how cultural divisions create biased readings of other aspects of literary works.

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Appendix



“If Lolita had a Susie the bear”

Illustration by Evita Lill Bergstad, pencil, April 2018.