Chapter II: “The Friendly Abyss”

“To understand the cause of Humbert’s obsessive behaviour towards Lolita, we must consider his character [...] as a cultural exile [...] whose ignoble fate it is to wander aimlessly with Lolita along the margins and byways of American society, sans roots [...] sans anything save his glorious memories of an older European world.”


“If I wanted to destroy a nation I would give it too much, and have it on its knees, miserable, greedy and weak,”

John Steinbeck, in a letter to a friend, 1959.


Lolita’s cultural backdrop is inseparable from the post-World War II. The novel’s core action begins in the spring of 1947, when Humbert meets Lolita in Ramsdale, and ends in 1952, with Humbert’s death in jail, followed by Lolita’s some months later on Christmas day.

The Second World War had come to an end only seven years before, on August 15, 1945. The Japanese surrender had been arduous and lengthy, culminating in President Truman’s controversial launch of two atomic bombs on Japanese territory. While America enjoyed a victory coupled with few causalities and a rising economy, Europeans dealt with the destruction caused by the Nazi invasions. Most of the losses suffered were not on American soil, but on European and Japanese (Vide Annexes 1 and 2).

The lack of bombed buildings and invaded cities did not mean America was deprived of the effects of WWII. A new awareness of the depths of human cruelty had been uncovered by the Nazi genocide and America’s imperviousness had been challenged by the Japanese successful attack to Pearl Harbour in 1941. Nagasaki and Hiroshima would later put an end to the war and darken the Allies’ victory.

Aware that its geographic distance from the theatre of war did not mean total safety any longer, Americans became familiar with the pangs of anxiety. Moreover, after the peace settlement
and the dissolving of war-created alliances, the Soviets had begun to move stealthily into the position of America’s mightiest opponents. Following the devastating effects of the atom bomb, warfare escalated to a new level of toxicity that, if unleashed in another worldly conflict, could threaten human survival. The Cold war set in.

Regardless of these unsettling factors, America’s economy flourished during the war years based on the production of warfare materials. Thus, after Roosevelt sudden death in 1945, giving way to the Truman’s Administration, the threat of another economical crash set its shadows on these years of new-found peace and newly elected democrat president. The fears of a new economical depression hang in the air through the late 40s and early 50s.

America’s technological progress and the resulting benefits dispelled such threat and provided the means to help the war-struck Europe. Around 1947, the “Plan Marshall” was conceived to aid the devastated European territories. Under the Truman Doctrine, America adopted an attitude of undeniable power, demonstrating its superiority, a display which replaced aggressiveness with goodwill. Postwar America became a symbol for the largely advertised Puritan values - honesty, faith and generosity. Betting on the importance of collective aid, the United States proved that its global power had not corrupted its moral fibre. As a true “city upon the hill”, it beckoned to those less fortunate and still living in oppression peoples. These ideas are manifest in the political speeches of the time.¹

1947 was a pivotal year in the postwar period, the same way 1955 would be for the second half of the 50s. 1947 was not just the chronological beginning of Lolita’s main plot, but it was also a year of rebuilding national pride and trust, a year to see the war dust settle, breathe in and enjoy a trouble-free life back into familiar spaces, old values and commodities. It was also a time when monetary security still felt like a blessing and advertisement was just a fun, inoffensive novelty.

It was the year Tennessee Williams’s A Streetcar Named Desire was published, hinting already at a strong drive pulsing underneath the surface of suburban serenity; it was the year the expatriate British poet W.H. Auden published his influential “The Age of Anxiety”, an iconic poem which denounced a pervading state of mind fitting the United States of America’s circumstances. It was also the year Tourneur’s atmospheric Out of The Past was released, a movie which is nowadays considered the gem of all film noirs, and the forerunner of its downfall as a genre; it was the year Otto Preminger dared to make Daisy Kenyon, an apparently conventional format, a "ladies’ picture,” that already dealt with the polemic subject of child abuse, thus steering movies into a more true-to-life and complex ground, allowing him to grow into the bold filmmaker who in 1955 would direct The Man with the Golden Arm, a groundbreaking film about heroine addiction starring Frank Sinatra.
Television and cinema became pivotal instruments in Americans’ daily lives. From 1945 to 1955 there was a notorious tendency to silence one’s inner doubts with televisual representations of solid “family images”. These enforced the idea of “[...] the home as the centre of leisure [...]”, and also underlined the era’s policy of keeping one’s problems in the privacy of one’s house, far from public scrutiny. This notion was, of course, run by a double standard – not only the family ties grew closer, reinforcing the notion of family as a central unit in the postwar culture, but it also maintained outward appearances inconspicuous. After the horrors of the war, people were more focused on the joys of simple entertainment, such as the one TV offered.

In an age enthralled by appearances, and after the impact of TV, came a period when movies regained their importance in public entertainment. A new generation of heroines, featuring the simpleminded and innocent-looking teenagers set in. Cathy O’Donnell’s tepidity (*The Miniver Story* 1950) or Donna Reed’s propriety (*It’s a Wonderful Life* 1946) were matched by a natural sweetness that proved them innocuous. The dangerous ash-blonde/raven-black-haired women wanting to pull the leading men astray, like Jean Harlow and Carole Lombard, were becoming less popular; the War and Depression years had been ripe on those types.

The girl-next-door look was now en vogue, and so were the wholesome looks of William Holden, in opposition to the tough, brooding anti-hero Humphrey Bogart, Alan Ladd or James Cagney played in former decades (*Vide Annexe 5*). Humbert belongs to this last group, describing his appearance as “[...] a great big handsome hunk of movieland manhood” (39).

Humbert’s virile appearance, however, is an “adult disguise” (39), which protects him from the “[...] pair of sunglasses for only witness” (12), the public scrutiny observant of any deviant social behaviour. And so Humbert wears his good looks to mask “the vacuum of [...] his soul”, as many other characters surrounding him do in order to hide their unpleasant traits (13).

The postwar humorous sitcoms would be another landmark of this era. Its conscientious nice-boys, like the Carter kid in *Peyton Place*, and their dotting domestic mothers like June Cleaver in “Leave it to Beaver” became standard models; its crime-free communities that Delbanco describes as “[...] the place where [...] horrors could not happen. It was the country where no citizen need fear the approaching sound of the hobnail boot [...]” (66). It was the time for arboreal neighbourhoods, soda-shops and drive-ins, which Humbert would be acquainted with through Lolita’s eager eyes.

The era’s brightest stars were the manicured beauties Elizabeth Taylor and Grace Kelly, living fairytale lives in the big screen as they supposedly did in real life, decked in jewellery, attending the best parties, marrying royalty, sending out to America the same irresponsible message the glittering ads did – that feeling safe and winsome could be translated in goods, fame and wealth
Suburban, dreamy teens like Lolita could hardly resist such an avalanche of gilded promises, especially the promise of an easily achieved life in Hollywoodland.

Hollywood fantasies harboured, however, a disturbing side, as in 1947 a gruesome murder would unveil. The victim was a twenty-two-years-old girl, Elizabeth Short, who had moved to Hollywood in search of success. Instead of finding fame and fortune, she found a disfiguring death and a dubious celebrity at the expenses of her own life. From then on, she would be known everywhere as “The Black Dahlia,” the nickname reporters gave her due to a flower she always pinned behind her ear. James Ellroy would make a fortune relating his fictional account of Elizabeth’s journey and murder in 1987, and Brian Palma would try to make one for himself, unsuccessfully, with his homonymous 2006 film adaptation of Ellroy’s novel, *The Black Dahlia*.

The symbolic Lolita, a character who can be seen as a legitimate avatar for the star-struck American teens, also “[...] sees herself as a starlet [...]” although Charlotte only considers her child “[...] a sturdy, healthy, but decidedly homely kid” (65). Charlotte is also quick to notice that Lolita’s misconception is “[...] the root of [all] our troubles” (66).

Actually what captures Lolita’s attention in the first place is Humbert’s resemblance to a certain Hollywood crooner she has a crush on. Secondly, what convinces her to follow Quilty is his status as a celebrity combined with his promise to take her “[...] to Hollywood and arrange a tryout for her, a bit part [...] in a movie picture based on a play of his [...]” (276). “Alas, it never came to that [...]” rejoices Humbert afterwards (66). As a matter of fact, Quilty’s pledges only came down to some “[...] crazy things, filthy things [...]” done in a remote ranch amid some rent boys and a camera Quilty himself operated (277). Still, Charlotte was right in her assumption that Hollywood’s insidious marketing techniques had turned Lolita’s head around. Lolita’s Hollywood fantasy is then dumb-downed into a parody of art, quite like Marilyn Monroe’s dumb heroines were a direct product of Hollywood’s tendency towards the “[...] dumbing down of the American heroine and the redefinition of the female movie star.”6

Notoriously, Marilyn played, in her daily life as well on the big screen, one of 50s pivotal dialectics: she masked her collapsing mental health with the vamped jolliness of a dumb blonde. Her sad laughter gleamed beneath the lacquer of a funny bimbo as early as John Huston’s *The Asphalt Jungle* in 1950. Later on, in Huston’s *The Misfits* (1961), she would be raw and defiled, “the sweet angel of sex” changed into an aging neurotic woman peaking under the baby-doll mask, a sight which left audiences unsettled and uncomfortable (Harvey 67). For her candid realness, Marilyn gained entrance into the pavilion of 50s legends, as did the equally forlorn Brando, Dean and Clift, all self-destructive, all living fast, all dying young, all producing good-looking corpses, except for Brando, who survived them all only to become a parody of his former gallant self.
Nonetheless, movies were mainly about beauty and youthfulness in the postwar years. Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Blvd.* (1950) beautifully scrutinises Hollywood’s ruthless obsession with youth and the marks of time in the Norma Desmond character. Gloria Swanson is terrifying and pitiful in her denial to accept her decline and the fast-paced age of talking pictures. In order to avoid such infamous decline, various tricks were employed to fake youth and liveliness on screen. One “[…] remedy for men stars that was not available to the women who were aging [was] vastly younger co-stars.” (Harvey 56) Mixing Cary Grant with Shirley Temple and Jeanne Crain (*The Bachelor and The Bobby Soxe*r 1947; *People Will Talk* 1951), or Audrey Hepburn with Gregory Peck and Gary Cooper (*Roman Holiday* 1953; *Love in the Afternoon* 1957), presented a version of Hollywood’s hackneyed formula: older charming man successfully seduces a girl half his age (*Vide Annexe 6*).

This trick became a popular trend in postwar films, fundamentally creating the springboard for Lolita’s interest in Humbert and Quilty. A romantic aura enveloped the paring up of middle-aged men with pubescent girls. During the decade of 40 many young stars enhanced the myth of the nymphet on the big screen, such as Judy Garland, Shirley Temple, Peggy Ann Garner, Deanna Durbin, and Margaret O’Brien among others. Behind-the-scenes affairs between largely younger starlets and their adult producers, such as Judy Garland and Louis Mayer, or Natalie Wood and Nicholas Ray, also kept the nymphetic allure alive (*Vide Annexes 4 and 5*). On this topic, Kelly Schrum shrewdly argues that Hollywood moviemakers,

> “preferred to envision high school girls as innocent and asexual, not noticing [or preferring to ignore] their strong preference for handsome or glamorous adult characters played by Rodolfo Valentino, Clark Gable […], over wholesome juvenile characters played by Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland” (6).

Humbert alludes to turning this preference to his advantage, so he can lure the impressionable movie-lover Dolores Haze into an illicit liaison. The narrative represents it through his inconclusive chain of thoughts that “[…] a modern child, an avid reader of movie magazines, an expert in dream-slow close-ups, might not think it too strange, I guessed, if a handsome, intensely virile grown-up friend […]” (49). The attentive reader is aware that Humbert plots to manipulate the United States’ stereotypical teens and expose them as sexual beings.

This devotion for cinematic or televsual role models denotes a shift from national to individual priorities; simultaneously, it brought on a recrudescent interest in psychology, leading Lacan to review Freud in the 50s. The overemphasis on a general panacea for people’s neurosis shows that the United States of America were still riddled by many anxieties and neurosis. Americans’ escapism into the familiar realm, and into their TV sets and drive-ins, may not have been as idle as it sounds at first glance. It calls attention to the “[…] vulgarizations’ of Freudian ideas – very often about fathers and daughters […]”, a theme present in *Lolita*, and thoroughly analysed in the next chapter of this dissertation (Devlin 20). Nabokov’s Humbert satirises these
“‘vulgarizations’” in the scene where he reads formulaic self-help books. Maladroitly, these try to teach Humbert how to be a better stepfather for his charge Lolita, the nymphet he ironically wishes, not to educate, but seduce.

Another filmic liberty in the mid-50s placed unruly kids like Humbert’s Lolita in the centre of torn families: apathetic fathers, alcoholic mothers, and unwholesome companies. By shifting the blame to a dysfunctional background, audiences could identify the bad seeds by applying safe psychoanalytical clichés of unresolved Oedipal complex for frisky girls, domineering mother and absentee father for the aggressive boys.

Nabokov’s Humbert also mocks these platitudes, proving them ineffectual and predictable, when he openly admits to rehearse a seaside connection with his Lolita, only in order to relive a past experience with his dead Annabel Leigh. By owning up to this futile attempt to unconscious relive a bygone event, Humbert endows the psychological cliché with a comic slant. He sardonically refers to this American fad as “[...] regurgitated neo-Freudian hash”. Nabokov’s character mirrors Nabokov’s own reference to “poshlust”, a concept that the author described as “[...] corny trash, vulgar clichés [...] Freudian surrealism, roric smudges, and Rorschach blots” (124).

_Lolita_ deals with one of those “vulgar clichés” the misleading façade of suburban bliss and how Americans came to master it. Nabokov discusses this myth through a metaphor involving Lolita’s “[...] tender, nectared, dimpled [...]” and how she learnt to switch it on/off in the presence of strangers (European Humbert qualifies as such) (284). This passage serves as a synecdoche for America’s split state of mind in the postwar years. In Humbert’s unreliable eyes Lolita uses that smile for masking her unhappiness, but simultaneously as a weapon of manipulation and seduction.

Metaphorically Lolita’s, as American ads’ “[...] so beautiful, so endearing smile [...]” did not mean a thing of course [...]”; it was an artificial shield and not a reflex of tranquillity. The congenial smile could be reduced to a mere “[...] atavistic token of some ancient rite of welcome – hospitable prostitution, the coarse reader may say [...]”, or so it is suggested by Humbert, a despondent foreigner desperately seeking for that kind of hospitality (285).

That same vacant smile greeted the American soldiers back in 1945, and that same smile prevailed as a 50s trademark, being repeated over and over again by the girlish faces lighting up on the (big and small) screens all across the country. They sang and twirled so wonderfully, like Ginger Rogers and Judy Garland in their fabulous gowns, not even a “coarse reader” could be indifferent to such a display of national confidence (Vide Annexes 4 and 5). Following a tradition that harked back to the Depression days, Americans and their younger movie stars (especially in the then popular musicals) mimicked Lolita’s smile. They sported that same “[...] absolutely enchanted smile for strangers [...] a magic gene that automatically lighting up [...]” Another elusive
quality of this smile is how quickly it lights up or “[...] lose[s] all its light and become[s] a frozen little shadow of itself [...]”, notoriously when Lolita witnesses a manifestation of affection between Avis and his son, opposed to the parody of fatherhood she experiences during her cohabitation with Humbert (285).

The elusiveness of those smiles is one of the reasons why later critics, namely Eric L. Goldman, dismissed the 50s as “The Stuffy Decade.” He also declared that “[...] the climate of the 50s was probably the dullest and dreariest in all our history [...] personified by a President, an overwhelming public hero, who persist[ed] in talking platitudes straight out of the old days” (59). Nonetheless, postwar culture was a “culture tilted toward youth” and youth is always connected with ever-changing growth and modification, the exact opposite of the apathy these years would be remembered by in opposition to the agitated 60s (Lhamon 5).8

McCarthy is greatly responsible for some of the agitation happening in the 50s. With his speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, February 9, 1950, he incensed public opinion when he accused Communists of lurking in the government and enjoying its protection. Rapidly and absurdly, the accusations escalated from a public attack on the Truman Administration to overspread frenzy across the nation.

Conformity was, therefore, a value highly treasured in the 50s, although like a Midwestern housewife declared in a Time’s piece on suburbia, people were never “peas in a pod”. In 1951 this magazine interviewed a series of youngsters in order to find out which traits defined the younger generation. The general description provided by the journalist is of an anaemic group “[...] waiting for the hand of fate to fall on its shoulders, meanwhile working fairly hard and saying almost nothing [...]” (54). Even the older Lolita seems to fulfil that inane prophecy judging by her final outcome as Mrs. Richard Schiller. She too seems to only “[...] want to marry, have children, found homes, and if necessary defend them [...]” (55).

Social relevance, thus, ceases to be gained exclusively through the purchase of a flashy car or a bigger house but also through the participation in collective activities. Prestige was gained by being a valuable member of the community. In Nabokov’s novel, Charlotte Haze is the bastion of this middle-class trait. She is a paradigm for middle-class suburbia – a handsome housewife, well off, status-aware – but she is also a symbol of New England’s particular mixture of romantic morality with practical materialism. Charlotte values her social prestige so highly she sees her marriage to the distinguished scholar Humbert Humbert not just as an amorous endeavour, but as the perfect lever for social ascension.

Many are now the movies celebrated for unveiling American middle-class hypocrisy. Nicholas Ray’s Rebel without a Cause (1955) scrutinises the cultural gap between parents and children and it lays bare the Time’s misconstrued idea teenagers were silent because they had little
to say. In Sirk’s *Written in the Wind* (1956), a Cinderella’s version where the humble secretary marries the rich heir though in love with his penniless friend, marriage is revealed as a farce, an unsatisfactory relationship where money does not buy happiness after all. It also exposes that behind the grandeur of a Southern mansion madness, drunkenness, lewdness, and finally bloodlust, run amok.⁹

The turning point came when the 50s optimism and negativity reached their prime. A keen reader acknowledges this shift as pointed out by Lhamon,

“[…] all elements of American contemporary culture were in place by *the year of 1955*, when the civil rights movement began, when the TV takeover had reached the majority of the nation’s homes, when rock’n’roll surfaced, when the consumer society and its energy problems were as visible as the fallout and bomb shelters beginning to obsess American citizens, and when the baby boom’s outriders started coming into their own” (28, Italics mine).

Culturally and creatively 1955 was a year of significant shiftiness. Nabokov’s *Lolita* first edition was being scandalously published in Paris after many American publishers had refused distributing it due to its polemic content.¹⁰ 1955 was also the year MacDonald’s appeared in the United States; *Playboy* first printed nude photos and Elvis’ career shot up suddenly.¹¹

Also in that year, Richard Brook’s *The Blackboard Jungle* scared many conscientious parents with its raw depiction of classroom disturbance and juvenile delinquency; Tennessee William’s published his Pulitzer winner play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, a very sultry masterpiece about family life; Douglas Sirk’s movie *All That Heaven Allows* shocked many decent suburban housewives by shedding light into the secrets kept behind closed doors; and the chilling *The Night of the Hunter* appeared with Robert Mitchum playing an ambiguous religious figure, who under the cloak is a vicious murder, again hinting at the danger of false appearances. The United States never seemed as prolific and frantic as in that year, when consumerism, middle-class power, teenagers, artistic creativity and electronic appliances, such as TVs, portable radios and movie drive-ins, were riding high.

Americans would wake up with a start though, in October 5, 1957, when the bleeping of the Soviet *Sputnik I* scintillated in the nightly sky.¹⁸ A pervading fear afflicted America by the time *Sputnik I* was launched into the space by the Russians - the long-lasting suspicion of loss, of a downfall, or as Paul A. Carter succinctly puts it, by the mid-late 50s “[…] the only thing Americans had to fear was fear itself” (187).¹²

Panic of national degradation was early on linked with references to the fall of Rome. In 1953, Elmer Davis, still optimistic, observed that although the decline and fall of the Roman Empire loomed over any great Western country, America, as an icon for freedom and progress, was protected by its sturdy intellect and its practical common sense.²⁰
The main question was then, what would become of America as a nation if this collective intellect weakened and faded. Since the postwar years, education had been firmly set on adjusting kids to the general joys of life, represented by Miss Pratt’s Four D’s in *Lolita*. Teaching American children about Drama and Gymnastics was now more important than the old formative landmarks: Arithmetic, Writing and Reading. So if Americans’ intellects were weaker, did this mean Russians were bound to overthrow them? Was America not the predestined New Jerusalem after all, but the New Babylon?

As an example of this widespread suspicion, Professor Arthur Bestor from the University of Illinois explained the reasons why he thought Americans were falling behind the Russians in the race for space. Education was, from his point of view, the obvious landslide, as well as the progressive ideas the early 50s had sponsored. Bestor insists and probably fictionalised Humbert would agree that the teachers in love with the “progressive education,” of which Nabokov’s Miss Pratt is a caricature, were the ones who had pushed the country into such bleak state. They had been focused only on “[...] the things children were already excited about and choose themselves [while] the intellectual interest and intellectual curiosity had been deadened” (39).

His verdict was strict and final: if things continued down that inert path there would be no reversing of America’s unfortunate situation. Views similar to Bestor’s opened the door to criticism and reformation in which Eric F. Goldman revelled by January 1960, as seen on his article in *Harper’s Bazaar* entitled “Good-By to the 50s – And Good Riddance.” For Goldman the late 50s main problem was very straightforward: America had lost the ability to laugh of its own wonderful nonsense. He then speedily proclaims a solution to avert complete boredom and stagnation: abandon the past platitudes and add a good dose of humour.

In this context, Nabokov’s satirical tone, employed in several of Humbert’s amused or horrified diatribes against American culture, is a breath of fresh air, a visionary reply to Goldman’s call to arms against America’s stuffiness. As one rapidly understands, Eric Goldman actually believed the 50s could be summarised by Americans’ pervading fear of Communists and a tragicomic penchant for tedium. In Goldman’s mind the United States’ enemies in the late 50s were as intimate as they seemed to be in McCarthy’s’ days, only not foreign. They were the common Americans who, in their fishbowl of apathy, were dragging the country down until the American civilization had gone “[...] down with a whimper or a bang […] with us just sitting solemnly on our lawn chaises, overfed, oversanitized, and overbearing, talking a suicidal stuffiness”⁸ (29, Italics mine). In Nabokov’s fictional world, Humbert would probably agree with this statement, especially after meeting Charlotte and her friends, the insipid Farlows, whose mirroring names, Jean and John, seem a rather droll pun on their unimaginative culture.
Coincidentally, on that same month and year, Schlesinger dredged out the fear of self-made national decline, ranting that “[...] while we will overstuff ourselves [we] let the national plan run down [...] this condition has led to the fall of empires” (51). Repeatedly, America is charged with those two, now classical trademarks of the 50s – being on the brink of oblivion and being overfed.

Even when the object of reproach is the younger crowd excess and abundance seem to walk hand by hand, so that “everything that is wrong with them is the result of ‘too much’ – malts magazines, leisure and pleasure” (Nash 125). This emphasis on exaggeration mirrors Steinbeck’s initially quoted perception that to destroy America one only has to “give it too much”.

This chapter comes now full circle. Lolita’s main action is set in 1947 because this date marks the beginning of a unique era for America.17 That “fatal summer of 1947” (6), as John Ray Jr. dramatically announces in the novel’s fictitious prologue, is but a liminal zone, a time when the teasing, harmless term “bobby-soxer” was becoming passé, and the more forceful nomenclature of “teenager” was beginning to emerge. The following chapter analyses that specific period and the inchoate culture that came with it – the youth culture. It also tries to devise Lolita as a prototype of this epoch’s fads and trends and to investigate how Humbert connects with them.