In spite of the author’s claim that he has nothing to teach readers or critics, Vladimir Nabokov’s masterpiece has been read from innumerable angles. While he affirms in the Afterword to *Lolita*, “I happen to be the kind of author who in starting to work on a book has no other purpose than to get rid of that book,” critics have examined the novel’s essential critique of American culture over and over (311).[1] Given Nabokov’s strong opinions about social and moral issues, as Dana Brand has observed, “it is hard to believe that these opinions do not manifest themselves in…his most comprehensive representation of modern American life” (14). Working from this assumption, one may use an ecocritical analysis of *Lolita* to reveal the direct correlation between the depiction of a decaying landscape and American cultural criticism. Further, perceived ruination of the environment in the novel can be framed to trace Humbert’s transition from aestheticism to the hyperreality of consumerism. Humbert’s quest to possess Dolores, then, proffers a troubling metaphor of the annihilation of nature by consumerist culture.

In his 1975 essay “Travels in Hyperreality,” Umberto Eco asks, “Where does the truth of ecology lie?” (49); he finds a theater for this question during his visit to the San Diego Zoo, where the enshrined nature of the zoo’s ecology gives way to hypocrisy in “its apparently natural yet man-made labyrinths, and its conflicted allegiance to both science and the entertainment industry” (Phillips 577).[2] Eco submits that in our continual search for the real, we create a hyperreal, or a culture of imitation. In Part Two of *Lolita*, Humbert imitates a consensual relationship to pursue desires that were never fulfilled with Annabel. In reality, readers know Lolita is hardly a willing participant in this love story. The chronicling of Humbert’s hyperreal consummation in Part Two is paired with Humbert’s observations of a natural world decomposing around him. Indeed, Humbert’s new-found materialism is portrayed as hostile to the natural world: as Humbert obsessively builds a hyperreality with Lolita, readers witness the consequences play out environmentally, in the crumbling of a once-beautiful American scenescape, itself a hyperreal totem propped up by the practice of its destruction; accordingly, then, we observe how Lolita’s totemic beauty can only be observed through her eventual consumption.

Humbert is first introduced to Lolita in the idyllic Haze backyard, where he recognizes Lolita as a reincarnation of his first love, Annabel, nestled “in a sudden burst of greenery” (39). Used as a sort of Eden, this initial garden setting contrasts sharply to locations seen in Part Two: cheap motels, stucco courts, and “whitewashed clapboard Kabin, with their faint sewerish smell or some other gloomy self-conscious stench” (145). Aside from its invocation of Poe’s last poem, Nabokov’s vivid opening description of Lolita as spiritual heir to Humbert’s childhood “princedom by the sea,” with Annabel and the “blue sea-wave” swelling under his heart evokes
the Greek definition of a nymphet: “a maiden inhabiting the sea, rivers, mountains, woods, tree, etc.” (OED). In the use of a ripe landscape surrounding Humbert as he sees Lolita for the first time, readers may discern that, by mythological signification, Lolita is depicted as not only analogous to but of and within this natural pantheon. This imaging of Lolita as pure and earthly, however, inevitably amounts to a construction, and one that is always already oriented towards Humbert’s eventual ingestion of Lolita as a natural commodity, an eternal object of desire.

It follows, then, that at the outset of his encounter with her, Humbert is simultaneously fixated on the ideal beauty of both Lolita and that of the world around him. He looks forward to the “New England countryside or sleepy small town (elms, white church)” where he might “spend a studious summer…bathing in some nearby lake” (35). He frequently relates his obsession with Lolita to similar relationships found in high art and literature: Poe’s “Annabel Lee,” Dante and his Beatrice, the “pre-nubile Nile daughters” of King Akhnaten (19). It is crucial to observe that the bewitchment of Lolita’s splendor lies in her being untouched, out of reach as a figure of art might be. Furthering this depth of abstraction is Humbert’s recent arrival and resulting distance from “the American commercial and social environment” (Brand 14). Nabokov is careful to depict Humbert as someone who, as a foreigner, “is able to resist the…powerful forms of coercion” like mass culture and consumerism that define the Americans around him (Brand 14). Charlotte Haze, the best example, is characterized by her obsession with kitsch, “the banal darling of the arty middle class, van Gogh’s ‘Arlésienne’”; and, as Humbert notes, “she was, obviously, one of those women whose polished words may reflect a book club or bridge club, or any other deadly conventionality” (36, 37).

Humbert’s pursuit of Lolita takes him to the Enchanted Hunters hotel, where he takes dominion over his precious creature, effectively breaking the spell distance had afforded, subduing her and divesting her of her purity. Here Humbert moves from aestheticism, from an appreciation of Lolita’s nature, to materialism and hyperreality. Sensing the incurred necessity for artificial habitat, he says that if he were to redecorate the Enchanted Hunters murals,

There would have been a lake. There would have been an arbor in flame-flower. There would have been nature studies – a tiger pursuing a bird of paradise. . . . There would have been poplars, apples, a suburban Sunday. (134)

Humbert realizes that in his corruption of Lolita, which he vacillates between denying and accepting henceforth, he has usurped the natural beauty of his nymph. While he wishes to restore her nature, he knows that in taking advantage of her, perhaps by simply making contact, he has eliminated such a possibility. Having enacted a violence against her, Humbert considers that he is “sitting with the small ghost of somebody I had just killed” (140). After their night at the rather explicitly named hotel, Humbert gives Lolita a new purse made of “simulated calf (in which I had slipped quite a few pennies and two might-bright dimes)” (138). Here, in the usual way, Humbert’s contempt for consumerism is coopted by his newfound need for its mediation; he must now find a way to run the zoo, to recall Eco’s illustration. Brand writes that mass culture consists of “efforts to replace reality with imaginative representations that, unlike art, insist that they are real and that what they represent can actually be had” (16).[3] Part Two
of the novel is a road story in which Humbert traverses the disintegrating American landscape in search of what he experienced with Annabel. Forcing this romance upon Lolita, Humbert insists he can maintain a love story that cannot be had. It is the impossibility of possession that offers so much connective tissue between his disastrous pining and the manmade degradation of the land.

In Eco’s description of the construction of deceptive artificiality, he posits that the “oscillation between a promise of uncontaminated nature and a guarantee of negotiated tranquility is constant” (51). For Humbert Lolita is “not human, but nymphic,” a beautiful specimen that he does not wish to “impair the morals of” or corrupt (16, 62). When Humbert reverses himself and defiles her, the negotiation commences immediately: “it was she who seduced me” (132). Humbert complains that “monetary bribes…work[ed] such havoc with my nerves and her morals” that he “relied on three other methods to keep my pubescent concubine in submission and passable temper” (148). Here, to return once more to Eco, we have Humbert’s “manmade labyrinth.”

In Part Two, Humbert puts “the geography of the United States into motion” to give Lolita (and arguably himself) the impression of “rolling on to some definite destination, to some unusual delight” (152). The landscape that Humbert once revered is now something he seeks to consume and subdue, as he has Lolita. Accordingly, the “vastness of those plains, huge trees” become tainted with “flattened paper cups, samaras and discarded ice-cream sticks littering the brown ground” (153). The once captivating topography is now tainted, as Lolita is tainted, by Humbert’s anomic. In his essay, Eco remarks that American ideology “wants to establish reassurance through imitation” (57). Humbert acknowledges the same hyperreal paradox in his desperation to “keep” Lolita by using the parallelism of his environment as metaphor: he is living in “a paradise whose skies were the color of hell-flames” (166).

When Humbert tries to reenact with Lolita scenes from his childhood romance with Annabel, his narration reveals the core paradox at play within the hyperreal. He sees Lolita “on that shoddy veranda, in a kind of fictitious, dishonest, but eminently satisfactory seaside arrangement” (167). Here Humbert grasps the problem of the actual as a simulation where “…the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake” (Eco 8). Reassurance through imitation is not an avenue in the pursuit of the real but the avenue in the construction of the same. The Lolita that Humbert chases was never the real, but always already a reincarnation of Annabel. Humbert’s nostalgic image of a nymphet in a princedom by the sea projects not simply eventual ruin, collapse and decay but, more finely, its inevitability at the point of innocence—here lies Nabokov’s most salient comment on the erosion of the American countryside by an unconstrained consumerism.

NOTES

2. Phillips’s essay explores the role of ecology in literary theory, but also aptly summarizes Eco’s work and purpose in writing.

3. This quote from Brand effectively echoes Eco’s definition of American hyperreality. See pages 56 to 58 of “Travels in Hyperreality.”

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