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This study seeks to trace the trajectory of American sexuality and gender identity as they relate to late capitalism. Meditating on the intertextuality of *The Great Gatsby* and *Fight Club* and on the cultural trajectory depicted in the novels, I will argue that the American myth of exceptionalism comes at the expense of the female body. Inasmuch as the grounding principle of the American dream is the freedom to garner capital and to consume and inasmuch as the female body symbolically figures the American landscape, the American identity is traumatized. Examining the text of *Lolita* and the commodification of the image of Lolita vis-à-vis a “reading” of the pop-stardom and social controversy of Britney Spears, I will argue that the trauma issues in a morality fetish – a condemnation of the overt sexuality of the young girl that represses the guilt of complicity in the very culture and economy that collude to exploit her in the first place.

LOVE IS ALWAYS A CIGAR: *GATSBY* AND *FIGHT CLUB* WITH RECOURSE TO
FREUD and BRITNEY, *LOLITA* AND THE AMERICAN MORALITY FETISH

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LOVE IS ALWAYS A CIGAR: <i>GATSBY</i> AND <i>FIGHT CLUB</i> WITH RECOURSE TO FREUD.....	1
Works Cited.....	23
BRITNEY, LOLITA, AND THE AMERICAN MORALITY FETISH.....	25
Works Cited.....	40

LOVE IS ALWAYS A CIGAR: *GATSBY* AND *FIGHT CLUB* WITH RECOURSE TO
FREUD

In the afterword of the 2005 paperback edition of *Fight Club* author Chuck Palahniuk indicates that his novel is something of a rewriting of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: "Really, what I was writing was just *The Great Gatsby*, updated a little. It was 'apostolic' fiction – where a surviving apostle tells the story of his hero. There are two men and a woman. And one man, the hero, is shot to death"¹ (216).¹ The intertextuality, however, is stronger, more complex, and more culturally revealing than Palahniuk is willing to admit in the afterword. *FC*, like *TGG* before it, is the inheritor of the American novel's preoccupation with the creation of a national mythos, the attempt to register the American dream, something Fitzgerald was acutely aware of as he wrote *TGG*. In a letter written to his editor just before publication of *TGG*, Fitzgerald boasts, "I think my novel is about the best American novel ever written" (*The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, 166). In a 2001 interview, Palahniuk identifies *FC*'s central theme as one that is quintessentially American, and in so doing comes closer to disclosing the novel's deeper connection with *TGG*:

I think that the central, most American literary theme is the invention of self. We see it in Henry James's *Bostonians*; we see it in *The Great Gatsby*; we see it in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. People who move to the city from the country and reinvent themselves, or move to the frontier and reinvent themselves. It's the poor person becoming the rich person. You know, the nobody becoming the celebrity. It's such

¹ All subsequent references to *Fight Club* and *The Great Gatsby* will appear in the abbreviated forms "*FC*" and "*TGG*", respectively.

an American genre, this whole idea of reinventing and creating your self based on your dream, or how you perceive yourself to be, or not to be, whatever. And I've always seen that as the most American literary device or literary theme, so I really wanted to play with that. (Interview)

According to Leslie Fiedler, “The typical male protagonist of our [American] fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat – anywhere to avoid ‘civilization,’ which is to say, the confrontation of a man and woman which leads to the fall to sex, marriage, and responsibility” (26). This assessment aptly describes the male protagonists of both *Fight Club* and *The Great Gatsby*, who demonstrate an allergy to woman and at the same time see the female body as representative of the American dream – conquest and consumption.

Westward Ho!

Returning from the Great War, Nick Carraway, narrator of *TGG*, finds his parochial “Middle West” home to be the “ragged edge of the universe.” Disillusioned that it is no longer not the “warm center of the world” of his childhood imagination, Nick decides to move to the East Coast in search of a more worldly, urbane existence far away from the “country of wide lawns and friendly trees” (3). His relocation, furthermore, provides him the chance to succeed in the burgeoning bond industry. In a sense, Nick is making a journey whose end is the establishment of independence and, as I will discuss later, manhood. Inasmuch as his father finances the move for the entire year, however, Nick has the luxury of failure; he is, in fact, already doomed to failure given the subtext of his quest for manhood. Thus when the allure of the sophisticated city and its promise of wealth lose their luster, giving way to decadent wasteland, Nick eagerly returns home.

At least, Nick would have the reader believe that his morality is what drives him away from the East. Nick becomes, then, the moral judge of the East.

If the locus of American culture and economy during the Jazz Age is symbolically the East, more specifically New York City, then Nick even becomes something of the moral judge of an entire nation and an entire generation. His verdict: The East lacks “uniform[ity]” and “moral attention,” and that a “foul dust” covers its landscapes (2). With this condemnation Nick’s self-proclaimed boast in the opening lines of the narrative that he has the capacity to “reserve all judgments” is comically undermined; and the reader is given his/her first indication of the narrator’s unreliability. Undaunted by hypocrisy and self-contradiction, Nick claims it is precisely this virtue of reserving judgment that has made him a confidant to “many curious natures.” Specifically, he admits to having been “privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men” (1). Nick says, “The intimate revelations of young men, or at least the terms in which they express them, are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions.” It is quite ironic, then, that he would have the reader believe that his dalliances were “unsought” by him, that he “frequently... feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity” in order to avoid the aforementioned intimate revelations of young men, as if he were exempt from said “suppressions” as the narrator of his own story (1-2). Clearly, Nick’s homoerotic desire is not suppressed well enough to avoid detection.

Perhaps the most curious of the events that Nick narrates is his encounter with Chester McKee at an impromptu party in the city apartment rented by Tom for the purpose of trysts with his mistress, Myrtle Wilson. Nick describes McKee as “pale” and

“feminine,” in contrast to his “handsome” and “horrible” wife (30). The inversion of his descriptions foreshadows the ambiguous sexual encounter to come. When McKee exits the party sometime later, Nick hastily follows him. That McKee’s wife is preoccupied with caring for the broken, bloody nose Tom gives Myrtle Wilson, however, may explain Nick’s hasty and silent exit, for McKee leaves the party alone; and in the aftermath of the melee no one even notices that Nick departs with him. The reader should recall, however, that Nick rode into the city with Tom and is therefore forfeiting his ride home. Prior to narrating these events Nick is careful to point out that he was drunk that afternoon – for only second time in his life – and that “everything that happened has a dim, hazy cast over it” (29). This statement turns out to be less of an admission of rare indulgence and more of a lie, for Nick says in the next chapter that he is “roaring drunk” at one of Gatsby’s parties later in the summer (42). The confession to having been inebriated is intended to distance Nick from what happens later in the evening, providing him recourse to blame the actions he is about to narrate on impairment, not on conscious will.

After leaving the party with McKee, Nick apparently wakes-up in the bedroom of his new acquaintance:

... I was standing beside his bed and he was sitting up between the sheets, clad in his underwear, with a great portfolio in his hands. ‘Beauty and the Beast...Loneliness...Old Grocery Horse...Brook’n Bridge...’ Then I was lying half asleep in the cold lower level of the Pennsylvania Station, staring at the morning Tribune, and waiting for the four o’clock train. (38)

A host of details point to the sexual nature of the encounter. First, if it is “some time toward midnight” when Tom and Myrtle argue and Tom subsequently breaks her nose, then Nick leaves four hours between leaving the party and waiting on the train unaccounted for, suggesting that he and McKee do more than look at photography in McKee’s bedroom. Second, the names of the photographs, particularly “Beauty and the Beast” and “Loneliness” indicate McKee’s understanding of his marriage and signify a justification for the imminent intimacy. Keith Fraser points to two latent admissions in the narrative that signify the sexual ambiguity of Nick and his encounter with McKee. First, the elevator boy’s admonishes McKee by saying, “Keep your hands off the lever,” seemingly in response to McKee’s proposal that he and Nick meet for lunch sometime – the phallic image of the lever and curt manner in which the elevator boy speaks suggests that McKee’s offer is more than a friendly lunch. Second, Fraser points out that before Nick joins McKee in the elevator and later in the bedroom, “No rapport between the two men at Myrtle’s party is established – except for Nick’s having wiped a spot of dried lather from McKee’s cheekbone” (141).

Nick’s relationship with Jordan Baker further attests to his sexual ambiguity and reveals a certain misogyny on his part. Nick labels Jordan as “incurably dishonest” and attributes her flawed character to her “inability to endure being at disadvantage.” Coupled with his speculation that Jordan “had begun dealing in subterfuges when she was very young,” Nick’s belief that she “instinctively avoided clever, shrewd men” implicitly links Jordan’s “disadvantage” to gender, something innate. Hence the so-called disadvantage is most apparent in the presence of men. To be sure, Nick says,

“Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply” (58). In one fell swoop, Nick simultaneously provides a reasonable explanation for their eventual break-up and validates his masculine identity. Tom echoes a similar disdain for Jordan’s independence, saying, “She’s a nice girl, . . . They [her family] oughtn’t to let her run around the country this way” (18). Both men react to the independence and assertiveness of Jordan with a contempt that belies anxiety.

Following the work of E. Anthony Rotundo and Michael Kimmel, Greg Forster aptly summarizes the historical trajectory of masculine subjectivity in modern America. He points out that at the turn of the century “to be a man was to create oneself in the capitalist marketplace – to achieve economic autonomy, self-sufficiency, and ownership of productive property” (296). The “competitive vigor” of a man, then, issued in an “instinct for domination that was rooted in the male body.” The turn of the century, however, saw an explosion of “monopoly capitalism that reduced men to dependents in a large bureaucratic structure,” thereby effectively denying all but a few the opportunity of complete economic self-sufficiency. To be sure, Forster quotes the statistical findings Rotundo: ““The number of salaried, non-propertied workers (virtually all white-collar) multiplied eight times between 1870 and 1910,”” so that ““twenty percent of the total male workforce was white-collar”” (297). As the role of passive, dependent salary earner became increasingly associated with male subjectivity, male identity became detectably split.

Of course, the Women’s Suffrage movement, culminating in 1920 with the Nineteenth constitutional amendment, was further evidence that the ground of traditional

gender identities in America had forever shifted. Fitzgerald registers the historical male anxiety over perceived emasculation by using the automobile as “a symbol of masculinity” and “having the women (Jordan and Daisy) who drive cars do so badly,” thus wreaking havoc, “even killing people” (Fraser 146). Nick’s anxiety, however, is not merely that masculine identity is jeopardized by the growing social equality of women; his anxiety also stems from the attraction he feels toward Jordan apropos his view of her in traditionally masculine terms: he describes her body as “hard” (58). Similarly, Fitzgerald observes in his essay “Echoes of the Jazz Age” that over the course of the 1920s “Americans were getting soft” – a point he qualifies by appealing to the waning athleticism of an entire generation. He says, “Even golf, once considered an effeminate game, had seemed very strenuous as of late” (188).

In contrast to his depiction of Jordan as untruthful, Nick boldly claims, “I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known” and thereby convinces himself that he succeeds where Jordan fails; that is, that men succeed where women fail (58). Of course, in a span of two pages Nick has unflinchingly claimed both that his attraction to Jordan is not actually love, but more of a “tender curiosity” (57) and that if only he could first get himself “out of that tangle back home” by formally putting an end to the “vague understanding” of a commitment to a “certain girl,” who also happens to be an athlete, then perhaps with a clear conscience he would be free to love Jordan (58-59). That he settles on being “half in love” with Jordan is none-too-surprising, for it is in so doing that the heteronormativity and hyper-morality of his super ego is protected: he wanted the

girl, but in the end had to sacrifice his desire, as their moral incompatibility proved too much (177).

Because Nick narrates Gatsby's story, making him the one closest to the events, Gatsby's demise implicitly serves as his evidence that the fall into civilization is to be avoided. After all, Nick has witnessed what happened when Gatsby left the frontier in search of civilization. Thus when he frames the events of summer by saying, "I see now that this has been a story of the west after all" he is again conveniently relocating the drama of the summer into a great moral struggle (176). In point of fact perhaps it is a moral struggle, but not one that can reasonably include Nick, Gatsby, and the Buchanans on the side of righteousness. The moral struggle is with the seductive ideology of an inchoate late capitalism.

Borrowed Time: Gatsby's Dream of the East

The only guarantor for Gatsby of a successful journey from the metaphorical frontier to civilization is his ambition fueled by an "extraordinary gift for hope" (2). It is, of course, his chance meeting with Dan Cody that first opens the door of opportunity for a young Gatsby. Cody, the self-made millionaire whose wealth came from the western metal rushes, drops the anchor of his yacht over an obscure flat of Lake Superior, where a seventeen year old Gatsby was living at subsistence level as a clam-digger and a fisherman. Tellingly, Nick says of Cody since his early retirement at the age of fifty, a once "physically robust" man now "verged on soft-mindedness, and, suspecting this, an infinite number of women tried to separate him from his money" (98-99). Nick observes a portrait of Cody in Gatsby's bedroom, describing him as "a gray, florid man with a

hard, empty face – the pioneer debauchee, who during one phase of American life brought back to the Eastern seaboard the savage violence of the frontier brothel and saloon.” While Gatsby learned of the dangers of overindulgence in liquor from observing Cody, he did not learn of the dangers of women. Nick implies, however, that he *should* have learned this lesson by reporting that Cody “inhospitably died” when a love interest, Ella Kaye, came aboard the yacht (100). For Nick, the threat of castration at the hands of a woman is matched only by the threat a woman poses to a man’s very life.

During the five years spent with Cody, “the vague contour of Jay Gatsby had filled out to the substantiality of a man” (101). Gatsby, the man, however, was surely neither as innocent nor naïve as James Gatz the child. The naïveté of young Gatsby’s aspirations – symbolically of American ideality – is apparent in the adolescent scribble left inside the cover of a copy of *Hopalong Cassidy*, including a daily “SCHEDULE” and “GENERAL RESOLVES.” As a boy, James Gatz structured his day so that he arose early (6:00 a.m.), exercised, “stud[ied] electricity,” worked a full day, practiced “elocution, poise and how to attain it,” and studied “needed inventions” (173). The inclusion of going to bed early and waking early and the curious “study [of] electricity” on the list alludes to the aphoristic wisdom and famous kite experiments of Benjamin Franklin, or “the Father of all Yankees” as Carlyle dubbed him (qtd. in Watkins 251). Young Gatz’s list of “GENERAL RESOLVES” is no less predicated on Franklinesque idealism, alluding as it does to Franklin’s list of thirteen virtues. As Floyd Watkins points out, however, Gatsby’s list “is often comic as well as pathetic” when compared to its predecessor:

Franklin's "Cleanliness" becomes for Gatsby "Bath ever other day"; "Industry" is "No wasting time at Shafers or [a name, indecipherable]"; "Frugality" is "Save \$5.00 [crossed out] \$3.00 per week"; "Temperance" is "No more smoking or chewing"; "Sincerity. Use no harmful deceit" and "Justice Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty" possibly become for Gatsby more specific and less inclusive: "Be better to parents." ... In every single parallel Gatsby took Franklin's general and listed in its stead one concrete and very specific resolution which was less demanding than that found in his source. (251-252)

Watkins seeks to vindicate Franklin by pointing out Gatsby's philistine application of the virtues, as if they have been sullied by misuse. Of course, as Max Weber has demonstrated, the values touted by Franklin are inextricably linked to the spirit of capitalism; they are simply the ideal means by which one attains capitalist profitability and its resulting social advancement (14-19). As such, Gatsby's use of Franklin's wisdom actually shares the same spirit that inspired Franklin, even if it does not retain all of the same ethical dictates. Gatsby would not accept the crystallization of his status imposed by the East Egg bourgeoisie and this stubbornness indirectly gets him killed. On Fitzgerald's telling, the age of a boom economy that inspired big dreams was on "borrowed time," for the jig was soon to be up and a whole generation of Americans who had to reckon with the fact the ultimately only "the upper tenth of a nation" could sustain the "insouciance of grand ducs and the casualness of chorus girls" ("Echoes of the Jazz Age" 183).

The shadiness of Gatsby's business dealings and the underworld to which he seemingly belongs recalls a certain aspect of the mythological American Wild West, where lawlessness and ambition ruled a seemingly untamed land. After the gold rush and with the rise of the railroad, however, the land had been tamed/used up. This is precisely

why Gatsby's self-improvement list is copied on the inside a copy of *Hopalong Cassidy* – the cowboy as hero has been usurped by the robber baron. Gatsby apparently finds some level of wealth. He owns a colossal Mansion at which he continually throws lavish parties. He owns a new sports car, a hydroboat, and a plethora of shirts – “shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple green and lavender and faint orange with monograms of Indian blue” – that he eagerly, and pathetically shows off to Daisy in what amounts to a childish gesture of demonstrating his new found socio-economic status – one he hoped would finally prove him worthy of having Daisy for his own (92).

Judith Fetterly notes that the female archetype serves as a metaphor for America in popular imagination, including *TGG*:

In the archetypal American experience of romantic nostalgia, in which the sense of wonder is intimately and instantly coupled with the sense of loss, women are the symbolic counters. It is hardly irrelevant that the Carraway/Fitzgerald vision of a lost America is so clearly linked to Gatsby's vision of Daisy, for in the male mind, which is at once Gatsby, Carraway, and Fitzgerald, the impulse to wonder is instinctively associated with the image of woman, and the ensuing gambits of the romantic imagination are played out in female metaphors. In this fable of the New World in which Gatsby is the incarnation of the American dreamer and his history is the history of the “American Dream” it is Daisy herself who is America, the “fresh green breast of the new world. (73)

Daisy, then, is the land – the seemingly virgin land that prompted the European explorer to hold his breath, “face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder” (180). Two problems arise if we follow this symbolism to its logical conclusion. First, part of what makes Daisy desirable for Gatsby is the fact that “many had already loved” her. According to Nick, this only “increased her value in his eyes” (148). What enchanted the first explorers of the Americas, however, is precisely

the opposite: the blank slate of opportunity on what they mistakenly perceived to be an untouched world. Second, Gatsby is not looking for new frontiers; he is metaphorically and somewhat literally fleeing the frontier for civilization. Freud says of virginity:

The high value set upon her [a woman's] virginity by a man wooing a woman seems to us so deeply planted and self-evident that we become almost perplexed if called upon to give reasons for it. The demand that the girl shall bring with her into marriage with one man no memory of sexual relations with another is after all nothing but a logical consequence of the exclusive right of possession over a woman which is the essence of monogamy – it is but an extension of this monopoly on to the past. (60)

In contrast to Fetterly's description of Daisy, Fiedler sees her as "the girl who lures her lovers on, like America itself, with a 'voice . . . full of money'" (312). He continues by dubbing Daisy "the abusing woman, symbol of an imperialist rather than a colonial America. The phallic woman with a phallus of gold, she remains still somehow the magic princess To Fitzgerald, however, her fairy glamour is illusory, and once approached the White Maiden is revealed as a White Witch, the golden girl as a golden idol. On his palette, white and gold make a dirty color; for wealth is no longer innocent, America [is] no longer innocent" and "the Girl who is the soul of both turned destructive and corrupt" (312). So, a pure, virginal Daisy is an illusion inasmuch as she represents a fallen, imperialist America.

Fiedler notes, "Fitzgerald manages to convey the whole world of aspiration which Daisy has represented to Gatsby, and transforms the book from a lament over the fall of the Fair Woman to an elegy for the lapsed American dream of innocent success" (315). Both the feminine essence and the dream of innocent success, however, were illusions in

the first place. This perhaps explains the loss of which Fetterly speaks. Slavoj Žižek contends, “In the figure of the lady, this inaccessible absolute other woman as sexual object, reaches existence. Woman exists, yet at the price of being posited as an inaccessible thing.” Gendered, or “sexualized, she is transformed into an object that precisely insofar as it gives body to sexuality as such renders the masculine subject impotent” (*Interrogating The Real* 70). Gatsby, despite his obtuseness, may have known as much. On Nick’s telling, at least, “He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God” (110). The bodily presence of Daisy, then, displaces the infinite, eternal voice that otherwise “couldn’t be over-dreamed” and is “a deathless song” (96). The novel leaves the reader with a sense of the female body as a disturbing, disruptive, and ultimately lethal presence.

Westward Ho! Redux

The vision of America proffered by *FC* is of a land that has lost its soul. Like Fitzgerald’s Valley of Ashes, it is “contiguous to absolutely nothing” (*TGG* 24). Unlike the Valley of Ashes, however, it is a land full of franchise businesses (Starbucks, McDonalds, Jiffy Lube) and service industry drones, a place where the aspirations of West Eggers have been resurrected, and time has once again been borrowed. Hence Tyler Durden’s interpretation of the masses: “You have a class of young strong men and women, and they want to give their lives to something. Advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes they don’t need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don’t really need” (149). His condemnation of pop

culture is equally pointed: “We are the middle children history, raised by television to believe that someday we’ll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won’t. And we’re just learning this fact,” Tyler said. “So don’t fuck with us.” (166). Tyler Durden is angry. The crisis of masculinity is also the crisis of American identity – a promise failed. This is why Tyler Durden’s vision is not merely a return to the frontier, but of recreating the frontier. In the apocalyptic vision of Tyler Durden, there is, however, nothing worth saving: “Recycling and speed limits are bullshit, . . . They’re like someone who quits smoking on his deathbed” (125). Thus Tyler is intent upon “destroying every scrap of history” (12). For Tyler, one “shouldn’t just abandon money and property and knowledge” but should “run from self-improvement” in the direction of self-destruction (70).

Here we see the connection between late capitalism and masculinity. What appears to be a clarion call to hyper-masculinity is first a desperate attempt to break the stranglehold of a culture obsessed with image and wealth. Omar Lizardo, in fact, interprets the role of fighting in the narrative “as the last recourse for the establishment of a sacred (homoerotic and sadistic) masculine bond, but also as a class-based reaction against the commodification of sociability . . . in the post-industrial society” when human contact is no longer a “non-commodified act of interpersonal exchange.” Instead, interpersonal exchanges are “commodified operation, subject to the dictates of instrumental rationality and key resource in mediating economic exchange” (234). Lizardo is correct when he points out that on the narrative stage fighting is a form of

“human interaction that has not yet been ‘colonized’ by the logic of profit and commodification of the system” (235). Indeed Tyler indicates this when he says:

Fight Club is not football on television. You aren’t watching a bunch of men you don’t know halfway around the world beating on each other live by satellite with a two-minute delay, commercials pitching beer every ten minutes, and a pause now for station identification. After you’ve been to *Fight Club*, watching football on television is watching pornography when you could be having great sex. (50)

Back in the Saddle Again: Yippie Ty Ty Yo!

The Narrator of *FC*, appropriately remains nameless in the novel, stripped as he is of identity and symbolizing as he does a disgruntled silent majority. His crisis of identity has two discernable antecedents: He is a victim of his own success – like Gatsby, he has paid a high price for a singular dream. Historically situated in the boom economy of the mid-1990s, he too can barely fail to grasp his dreams. In fact, he seems to have all that he desires: a career, a “really nice” car, and a condominium full of lavish accoutrements (49). Nevertheless, he clearly lacks meaningful human connections, is distressed by the unethical nature of his job, and is possessed by his possessions. He is not, however, “the only slave” to his “nesting instinct.”

The world that he inhabits is full of people just like him, people “who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography,” but who now “sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue” (43). A trendy furniture catalogue (photographic representations of items available for consumption) replaces pornography (photographic representations of the human body posed for consumption). In other words, an inferior substitute for human

intimacy is usurped by the fetishistic promise of inanimate objects. The Narrator's condo, in fact, is full of these catalogue items, as is the home of everyone else he knows:

We all have the same Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern. Mine fell fifteen stories, burning into a fountain. We all have the same Rislampa/Har paper lamps made from wire and environmentally friendly unbleached paper. Mine are confetti. . . . The Alle cutlery service. Stainless steel. Dishwasher safe. The Vild hall clock made of galvanized steel. . . . (43)

The proper name of each object is suggestive of a unique, organic identity that attempts to conceal its true essence of inanimate, non-organic object. The slight variations available of a given product (the confetti style paper lamp shade as opposed to some other textured style of the same paper shade) give the illusion that the item is unique, owing to the particular taste of the discriminating consumer. However, there is nothing unique about the items; after all, everyone has one. These objects also attempt to evade the consumer's implied ethical concerns. For instance, the "environmentally friendly unbleached paper" of the lamp shade and the "hand-blown green glass dishes with the tiny bubbles and imperfections, little bits of sand, proof they were crafted by the honest, simple, hard-working indigenous aboriginal peoples of wherever" (41).

Unlike Gatsby, the Narrator chases his dream while staying on the right side of the law; yet like Gatsby, the narrator's profession is ethically dubious, even if legal. Working as a "recall campaign coordinator" (31) for an automobile manufacturer, the Narrator's job is to mechanically apply a simple equation to automobile accidents involving cars made by his employer:

You take the population of vehicles in the field (A) and multiply it by the probable rate of failure (B), then multiply the result by the average cost of an out-of-court settlement (C). $A \times B \times C = X$. This is what it will cost if we don't initiate a recall. If X is greater than the cost of a recall, we recall the cars and no one gets hurt. If X is less than the cost of a recall, then we don't recall. (30)

Here the car symbolizes capitalist greed and its threat to society. In pursuit of his career and lifestyle obsession, the Narrator finds himself disturbingly lonely. This is ironic considering that the "marketing brochure promised a foot of concrete floor, ceiling, and wall between me and any adjacent stereo or turned-up television" (42).

In an attempt to connect with others, the Narrator attends various support groups, such as "Above and Beyond," a brain parasite group, under false pretenses (18). The "therapeutic physical contact" of hugging and the guided meditation, however, prove ineffective. The group's inability to help is signified by the Narrator's inability to cry, despite the cathartic spirit of the group meetings – the hugs and the compelling stories of survival and/or imminent death. He says, "I didn't cry at my first support group . . . I didn't cry at my second or my third support group, either. I didn't cry at blood parasites or bowel cancers or organic brain dementia" (20). Finally, he finds a group that makes him feel "more alive" than he ever had: "I was the little warm center that the life of the world crowded around" (22). "Remaining Men Together," a testicular cancer support group provides the relational fulfillment he has been looking for. Particularly, the embrace of "Big Bob," an ex-bodybuilder whose steroid use had caused testicular cancer (21) and the subsequent surgical removal of his testicles (17), makes the Narrator cry, provides him a human connection. Because people believe he is dying, "they give. . .

their full attention,” they “listen instead of just waiting for their turn to speak” (107). Having finally found the “only place I ever really relax” from work, the Narrator’s “vacation” is interrupted by Marla Singer, the “only woman. . . at Remaining Men Together.” In fact, with Marla present, the Narrator is no longer able to cry (18).

The Narrator creates Tyler not only as a means to escape his lifestyle obsession, but also as a means to achieve what he assumes is the masculine ideal of heteronormativity. It is Tyler, not the Narrator, who begins a sexual relationship with Marla. In a moment of candor, the Narrator admits, “I’m a thirty-year-old boy, and I’m wondering if another woman is really the answer I need” (51). While the Narrator, then, questions his sexuality and is paralyzed by Marla’s presence, Tyler provides unflinching heterosexuality. He certainly does not fear castration. To be sure, he has sex with Marla for the first time shortly after noticing a dildo on her bedroom dresser (61). Thus the Narrator says, “I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent... Tyler is capable and free and I am not” (174). Tyler’s freedom thus lies in both his ability to transcend the ideological trappings of consumer culture and to shamelessly express his heterosexuality.

Caroline Ruddell contends, “Tyler in himself is a myth, a fantastical representation of ‘hyper-masculinity’ born of the Narrator’s invulnerability in a rather terrifying consumerist culture” (502). We might see Tyler as born of the Narrator’s desire for intimacy, hence for invulnerability in the wake of consumerist culture. Affected as he is by the gendered economy of consumerism, an economy that calls for an active rather than passive participation, the Narrator misguidedly creates a hyper-

masculine ideal-ego. Of course, this creation amounts to a mere inversion of the terms of the initial problem – the feeling of emasculation is replaced by the confidence of masculinity. In their analysis of Fincher’s cinematic adaptation of *FC*, Bainbridge and Yates speak to the narrative’s – both novel and film – potential as a site for resistance to ideology:

It is as though the history of Western hegemony, with its idealization of phallic power, is to be understood as the source of the symptom and that the experiences of men trapped within its workings are increasingly verging on the pathological as a result. However, the film also articulates the tensions between psychic fantasies of phallic power grounded in the symbolic domain of masculinity, and it thereby confronts the actualities of men’s rising anxieties and fears of inadequacy. This combined with the film’s revelation, at the end, of the fact that Tyler and Jack are in fact the same person, alerts the spectator to the schizoid status of contemporary masculinity. . . . (307)

Ironically for the Narrator, the gendered economy of consumerism always, already leads to narcissistic isolation. So, the creation of Tyler as the ideal-ego actually serves to further isolate the Narrator. Although Tyler is recreating the frontier and reasserting masculine subjectivity, the Narrator, through the very creation of Tyler, is sexually returning from the frontier inasmuch as he seeks heteronormativity.

FC makes use of the same symbolism found in *TGG* where the female body is described in terms of land, or property. The Narrator says, “We have sort of a triangle thing going here. I want Tyler. Tyler wants Marla. Marla wants me. This isn’t about love as in *caring*. This is about *property* as in *ownership*” (4). The acquisition of property, of course, is precisely why Gatsby finds Daisy Buchanan so attractive. For Gatsby, there is a “ripe mystery” in the casual manner in which Daisy indulges in the

family's wealth (148) and the fact "that many men had already loved Daisy... increased her value in his eyes (149). Tellingly, when Daisy catches a cold, making "her voice huskier and more charming than ever," Gatsby becomes not only "overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves" but also of Daisy herself, "gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor" (150). The presence of Daisy, then, is no presence at all. In fact, she is disembodied – a mere voice, but one "full of money" signifying that "High in a white palace" resides "the king's daughter, the golden girl . . ." (120).

Reality Check

One can trace the trajectory of a preoccupation with reality, of understandings of the real, over the course of the Twentieth-Century. This concern is clearly reflected in *TGG* and in *FC*. In *TGG*, the dream is real, even if always behind the individual. In a sense, the disillusionment of the Lost Generation that is so evident in *TGG*, signifies a reality the loss of which is cause for disillusionment. Thus the novel's conclusion:

[Gatsby] had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.
Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – to-morrow we will run faster, stretch our arms farther.... And one fine morning ----
So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.
(180)

In fact, Nick's lamentation of Gatsby's failed dream, points to a dissimulated real, a space and time where the promise of wealth, love, happiness – the good life – is equal

parts illusion and lie. It did exist, but only in the past. If nothing else, it exists inasmuch as it is sustained by its status of failure. So, it is a lie; and when the lie is exposed and Gatsby surely realizes that he will never get the girl, never be a West Egger, Nick imagines that “[Gatsby] must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream,” for the treasures he sought were not what they seemed. He “found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass.” The rose (Daisy) and grass (land) were, in fact, present, but they had been demystified and defamiliarized: “A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about” (161).

FC takes the question of reality, or the real, to an even greater point of crisis. For the Narrator, even the question of what is real vs. what is not becomes suspect in world where, “everything is so far away, a copy of a copy of a copy” (21). The Narrator may protest Tyler’s existence: “This is a dream. Tyler is a projection. He’s a dissociative personality disorder. A psychogenic fugue state. Tyler Durden is my hallucination.” Tyler, however, retorts, “Fuck that shit, . . . Maybe you’re my schizophrenic hallucination” (168). Neither voice proves ultimately more convincing than the other. The seeming revelation that Tyler Durden and the narrator are, in fact, the same person hinges on the reliability of the narrator’s memories and perceptions as presented in narrative. For this to be, the reader must find these memories to be reliably unreliable. The Narrator, apparently institutionalized, finds his existence to be “better than real life” (206).

The phrase “sometimes a cigar is just a cigar” is famously attributed to Freud. While the quote never appears in Freud’s writings and no source has been able to verify the statement otherwise, it is a part of Freudian folklore – and with good cause. After all, if it is my cigar that is in question, then I may never know. Žižek says of true love:

There is always a gap between the object of desire itself and its cause, the mediating feature or element that makes this object desirable In love the object is not deprived of its cause; it is, rather, that the very distance between object and cause collapses. This precisely is what distinguishes love from desire: in desire . . . cause is distinct from object; while in love, the two inexplicably coincide – I magically love the beloved one for itself, finding in it the very point from which I find it worthy of love. (*Fragile Absolute*, 21)

The question that must be posed, then, is whether or not the success of the film version of the narrative, and subsequent *FC* franchise actually undermine the narrative’s position vis-à-vis late capitalism. Inasmuch as Tyler Durden says, “I just don’t want to die without a few scars. . . . It’s nothing anymore to have a beautiful stock body,” it is not a little ironic that Brad Pitt plays the role of Tyler in David Fincher’s film version of *FC*. The franchise success of *FC*, recalls Fitzgerald’s position on the Jazz Age, and implicitly *TGG*. He says of the era that the “looks back to it with nostalgia,” for it “bore him up, flattered him, and gave him more money than he had dreamed of, simply for telling people that he felt as they did, that something had to be done with all the nervous energy stored up” (178). The green light is still flickering, but we’ve been forced into a certain complicity with it.

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BRITNEY, *LOLITA*, AND THE AMERICAN MORALITY FETISH

As for marrying your mother, you're not the first man to dream that dream. Every man is his mother's lover in imagination or daydreams. It is commonplace. (Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*)

Three Traumas, Or the Girl You Love is Not the Woman You Love

From the beginning of his confessional narrative, Humbert Humbert is eager to provide an explanation to – and hopeful defense of – his obsession with Delores Haze. He asks, “Did [Lolita] have a precursor?” He hastily answers the question in the affirmative, saying, “In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child” visiting his father’s hotel, or his “princedom by the sea” (*Lolita* 9).¹ Humbert’s childhood love, Annabel Leigh, is a none-too-subtle allusion to Edgar Allen Poe’s eponymous poem “Annabel Lee,” wherein a maiden who lives “in a kingdom by the sea” tragically dies in childhood (957). Likewise, Humbert says that his Annabel Leigh died unexpectedly in childhood, leaving him, like the narrator of Poe’s poem, haunted and lamenting the passing of his dead love. Identifying himself with Poe’s poem as such is a rhetorical posturing, if not comical and parodic, posturing on the part of Humbert. It recasts Humbert’s adult crimes as the innocuous and desperate attempt of a child to reunite with his lost love. Indeed, immediately following his recounting of the tragedy, Humbert addresses the “Ladies and

¹ All subsequent references to *Lolita* will be indicated in the abbreviated form “*L*”

gentleman of the jury,” offering as “exhibit one” the trauma of his childhood loss (*L* 9). This loss, he claims, became a “permanent obstacle to any further romance. . . .” Having made the case that he was, in effect, frozen by/in the grief of a lost childhood love, he goes on to explain that Lolita was merely an incarnation of Annabel (15). Thus begins Humbert’s murder confession. Strategically, however, the crime to which he initially confesses is not the kidnap and rape of Dolores Haze; rather, it is of an unspecified murder. Purposefully leaving out the crucial details of his murder confession, he prompts the reader to begin a quest to uncover exactly who has been murdered and why. He hopes to effectively distract the reader/juror from the greater crime and to distance himself from it long enough to qualify what he believes is a true love for Lolita. Quilty, he will argue, has no such love; he is “subhuman,” a pedophile and child pornographer (295).

The second trauma Humbert recalls is the death of his mother: “My . . . mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three, and, save for a pocket of warmth in the darkest past, nothing of her subsists within the hollows and dells of memory.” Given that memories from toddlerhood do not persist as such in adulthood, Humbert’s mother is undoubtedly an idealized figure created to provide the very “pocket of warmth” in the nebulous of the “darkest past.” In the simplest Freudian terms, we may understand Humbert as having never successfully negotiated passage through the Oedipal phase - first because of the death of his mother and later because his father takes sexual advantage of his deceased wife’s sister, yet never prohibits Humbert from doing so. Humbert verifies as much when he recalls his aunt Sybil (his mother’s older sister)

assumed full-time care of him after mother's death; she becomes a surrogate mother to Humbert. Tragically, thirteen years later, just after his sixteenth birthday, he tells the reader that his aunt Sybil died and that "somebody told [him] later that she had been in love with my father, and that he had lightheartedly taken advantage of it one rainy day and forgotten it by the time the weather cleared. I was extremely fond of her . . ." (10). Inasmuch as it is not until late adolescence and after her death that he realized any romantic link between his father and Sybil, Humbert's affection for his mother figure, has gone unobstructed by his father.

Humbert's childhood story lends itself a little too easily to a vulgar psychoanalytic reading. In fact, he goes out of his way to both construct the perfect Oedipal allusion and to disavow the validity of Freudian theory. He says that an implied psychoanalytic reader "is no doubt anxious to have me take my Lolita to the seaside and have me find there, at last, the 'gratification' of a lifetime urge, and release from the 'subconscious' obsession of an incomplete childhood romance with the initial Miss Lee." Before he can recreate his childhood of sexual exploration, he confesses, "So many delights had already been granted me by my traveling companion that the search for a Kingdom by the Sea, a Sublimated Riviera, or whatnot, far from being the impulse of the subconscious had become the rational pursuit of a purely theoretical thrill" (167). Of course, his sexual abuse of Lolita hardly qualifies as sublimation. Nevertheless, he is preempting any psychoanalytic reading of his narrative by admission of his desires. He equally demonstrates a seeming command of Freudian symbolism, saying "We must remember that a pistol

is the Freudian symbol of the Ur-father's central forelimb" (216). For his part, Nabokov confesses to "detest[ing] symbols and allegories," and blames his aversion, in part, to an "old feud with Freudian voodooism" ("On a Book Titled *Lolita*" 314). What good, then, is a psychoanalytic reading of narrative?

In Lacanian terms, Humbert has not gained access to the "symbolic order" and thus has never been issued the mandate of "normal" adult sexuality. Having never been denied the mother's body, even if for lack of opportunity upon her death, and later to Sybil's body, Humbert has not acceded to castration. To do so, of course, would be to yield to the Law, or the social order in the name-of-the-father. Unlike a child who has accepted the Law-of-the-father, Humbert does not have an ego ideal with which to identify. In other words, nothing directs him to the sexual normativity that will one day provide a permissible sexual relationship that will serve as a substitute for his first object of desire (mother). Accession to castration (relinquishment of the body of the mother), on Lacan's telling, is ideally accompanied by another act of social integration: participation in language. Language, because it works precisely by difference and absence, serves as a guarantor, if not reminder that one is severed from the real. Humbert's mastery of language, then, must be understood as operating in the same unbridled fashion as his sexuality.

For Humbert, language poses no constraints. In fact, it actually provides the means for a naïve attachment to the real rather than indicating a fundamental lack constitutive of self. So, in his economy signification equals representation equals the full presence of the object. As such, the loss of Annabel need not be permanent for Humbert;

he can effectively recreate her in another – not only in the flesh of *Lolita*, but also in the transcendence of language, in his narrative. The benefit, then, of a psychoanalytic read of Humbert, indeed of *Lolita*, lies in its ability to register desire as mediated by language. As Rachel Bowlby points out, “*Lolita* demonstrates . . . that far from being incompatible, advertising language and literary language share an assumption that objects of all kinds acquire their desirability through the words and the implied stories in which they are represented” (177).

The American Girl: A Fast Little Article

The desirability of *Lolita* on the part of Humbert, American culture, and even Nabokov is linked to her sexual ambivalence (virgin and temptress) as a metaphor for America – the implied story in which she is represented. Humbert casts *Lolita* as temptress, namely to garner sympathy from the reader. Thus he feigns, “I . . . had taken for granted, when I first met her, that she was as unravished as the stereotypical notion of a ‘normal child’ had been since the lamented end of the Ancient World” (124). Of course, he finds out that *Lolita* has a sexual experience at summer camp. He even goes as far as to blame her experience and precociousness for his imminent demise:

Somewhere behind the raging bliss, bewildered shadows conferred . . . that *Lolita* had already proved to be something quite different from innocent Annabel, and that the nymphaen evil breathing through every pore of the fey child that I had prepared for my secret delectation, would make secrecy impossible, and the delectation lethal. I should have known . . . that nothing but pain and horror would result. . . . (124-5)

There is reason to doubt that Lolita's prior sexual experience occurs outside of the influence of Humbert. To be sure, he admits that before leaving for summer camp, Lolita had developed a crush on him, believing that he resembles her favorite "crooner or actor" (43). Thus when she coquettishly says, "Oh, I've been such a disgusting girl" and removed "with slow fingers a velvet hair ribbon," it becomes clear that she could be making-up the story of her sexual encounter in order to impress Humbert, or she could have sought a sexual encounter in naïve anticipation of a romantic relationship with him. Moreover, the reader will recall that before leaving for summer camp, Humbert managed via "magic friction" to reach orgasm as Lolita sat partially in his lap (59). As unreliable a narrator as he proves to be, there is no doubt Humbert believes that Lolita is his love object. That she is a temptress, however, should remain more than a little dubious.

In keeping with Humbert's construction of Lolita as a pubescent seductress, American popular culture has created an archetypal image of the precocious, vampish "jail bait" known simply as a Lolita. Leslie Fiedler observes a "public eager to participate in the defilement of their [Americans'] own sacred images." According to Fiedler, "That defilement is carried even further in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1958), whose subject is the seduction of a middle aged man by a twelve-year-old girl" (335). Fiedler views Humbert's encounter with "Lolita and her mummy, the bitch-girl and the semi-preserved suburban predator" as leading to his demise. In the end, Humbert's fascination leaves him "raped, driven to murder, and left to die of a heart attack in jail." For Fiedler, then, "The novel represents the final blasphemy against the mythical innocence of the woman and the child, more than sufficient unto a day haunted by the

fear that there may, after all, have been such an innocence – that somewhere underground it may still persist” (336).

Adrian Lyne’s 1997 cinematic remake of *Lolita* epitomizes the blasphemy to which Fiedler alludes. Nearly a year after premiering in Europe, the film finally made to the U.S. In the absence of a willing movie distributor, however, the rights to the film were purchased by Showtime. In August of 1998 the film premiered in the U.S.. Rather than playing in cinemas, it was televised by a cable network company – Showtime – into individual homes and later released in select theaters to a limited market. It was as the viewing of the film should necessarily be voyeuristic, suitable not for public viewing; rather, like pay-per-view pornography it is best enjoyed in the home.

What is striking about the film is its unabashed portrayal of Lolita as a temptress and ultimately victimizer. Casting Humbert as the victim, then, the film endows him with a sense of the tragic and conveniently ignores the duplicity that is clear Nabokov’s text. Michael Wood points out, “Lyne has chosen to costume Swain [the actress playing Lolita] as a very young child,” but the net effect is, “curiously, to make her look like an older girl” – Dominique Swain was fifteen years old during the filming of the movie, while Lolita was twelve years old when she taken by Humbert (186). Screenwriter Stephen Shiff says Swain was chosen because “She wasn’t quite beautiful, and she certainly wasn’t polished, but . . . she was enormously gifted – at once a seductress and a child” (Introduction xviii). One particular scene in the film bears mention. In a scene similar to the infamous parlor room sofa scene in the novel, Lolita is actually the

aggressor: “She is wearing nothing but his pajama top, unbuttoned” and “her hips are moving, and we gradually realize they are making love.” She dispassionately reads a comic book at first, but then becomes increasingly attentive to the sex. In fact, “She moans” and “the hip movement increases.” Eventually, “She is breathing hard, and her eyes are very bright. She moans again. There seems to be no dividing line between her sexual pleasure and the pleasure she takes in the comics” (120-1). Is this the Lolita of Nabokov’s novel?

Nabokov once referred to Lolita as “my poor little girl” (*Strong Opinions* 94). It would be misguided, then, to think that the author had a temptress, a vamp in mind when he created Delores Haze or her story. In his essay “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” Nabokov recalls that “the first little throb of *Lolita* went through [him]” in 1939 while reading “a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardine des Plantes, who... produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal. . . .” This “initial shiver of inspiration” yielded a short story written in Russian and titled *Volshebnik*, or “The Enchanter” as it was later translated into English. While Nabokov viewed the narrative as a “prototype” of *Lolita*, he admits to never having been satisfied with it (“On a Book Titled *Lolita*” 311). One year later, Nabokov immigrated to the US where he lived for nearly decade before the “throb” returned. He began to rewrite the story in 1949, making some major changes to the story, including writing it in the language and vernacular of his new American home. As he began work on story, he recalls that it began to grow the “claws and wings of a novel.” The symbolism of the U.S. found in his metaphor – the eagle – was quite intentional, for as Nabokov saw it, the task of writing *Lolita* was

“inventing America” (312). As much as the novel invents America, however, it is also invented by America. Considering *Lolita* a work of émigré fiction, John Haegert concludes:

Humbert’s evolving attitude toward *Lolita* reflects...his creator’s changing and generally much-improved estimate of American life. Viewed from this perspective...Humbert’s ambivalent search for ‘his’ lost *Lolita* in the last third of the book enacts an émigré’s quest for a truer vision of his host environment – an America no longer seen as a nubile nymph in need of European refinement, but as an estimable independent spirit requiring (and deserving) a national identity of her own. (779-780)

Haegert sees “encoded in [Humbert’s] attempt to portray [*Lolita*’s] fatal attractiveness and daemonic charm... an émigré perspective that laments the insubstantiality of American society” (783.) What, then, does the novel reflect of this identity? I suggest that it registers the culture of late capitalism, particularly as advertising increasingly targeted an ever younger demographic. Ellen Pifer describes *Lolita* in terms of one seduced by consumer culture:

Lolita’s brand of naiveté – which leaves her more vulnerable, in some ways, than a child who lacks her pretense of knowing sophistication – poignantly attests to the intrusive power of the media. Forming her notions of reality from images projected on the silver screen, she has no idea that adult experiences transcend the Hollywood gestures and ritualistic movie kisses she has learned to imitate. By the time Humbert arrives on the doorstep of the Haze household, the forces of consumer culture have clearly made inroads on the child’s limited experience. Spreading false cheer and empty promises, the philistine art of advertising and the mass media exert a hypnotic influence on her (94)

Lolita’s is a bifurcated precocity. On the one hand, as demonstrated, her seductive powers and sexual experience are the product of Humbert’s rhetorical efforts, if not his

sexual advances; that is, in his effort to exonerate himself he creates a sexually promiscuous Lolita independent of his doing. On the other hand, Lolita's sexuality is the manifestation of her culture, independent of Humbert's foreign influence. Here begins problems for Humbert the immigrant. Dana Brand observes:

When Humbert becomes Lolita's lover, he alienates this original power to gratify himself. Humbert can only have the illusion of possessing Lolita by spending a great deal of money to buy things for her. When Lolita becomes, in this process, a commodity, Humbert becomes a consumer. He has left the patrimonies of poets and the marketplace, as the thrall of a little girl as vulgar, energetic, flirtatious, seemingly innocent and yet manipulative as the American commercial environment itself. When his commodity, as commodities will, takes on a life and independence of her own, he loses the imaginative happiness he enjoyed when he approached her as if she was a piece of art. (19)

America is first mentioned in the context of Humbert's uncle who had immigrated to the U.S. and found a measure of business and financial success (27). America, then, is imbued with a sense of promise. Humbert is given over to a fanciful notion of America, imagined as it through a print depicting a "locomotive with a gigantic smokestack . . . hauling its mauve coaches through the stormy prairie night" (26-7). The train proves to be a romantic illusion. As Humbert finds, the car dominates American travel. As surely as the train system signified production in the form of shipping goods, the car is a symbol of consumption, taking the vacationer across country. Humbert, musing on his cross-country travel with Lolita, says, "We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing" (175.) Susan Mizruchi says the travel narrative of *Lolita* reflects "a view of the world as commodified and collectible." She continues, "Souvenirs, as Susan Stewart has helped us to understand, register the condition of an increasingly lost set of referents; they stand

inevitably at a loss in relation to the experience they are supposed to represent. Incapable of capturing the power of the real object, they expose the increasing inauthenticity of modern life” (645).

The cross-country travels of Humbert and Lolita not only foregrounds the theme of advertising and consumption but also points to the ethical consequence that is the commodity fetish: The sacrifice that is made of the Other wherein s/he either becomes the means to whose end is profitability or consumption, or irrelevant if profitability or consumption are not feasible. Ironically, it is Lolita who most clearly demonstrates as much when happening upon a car accident, She and Humbert “silently stared, with the other motorists and their children, at some smashed, blood-bespattered car with a young women’s shoe in the ditch” all Lolita manages to say is, “That was the exact type of moccasin I was trying to describe to that jerk in the store” (174). Lolita has become the ideal consumer:

She believed, with a kind of celestial trust, any advertisement or advice that appeared in *Movie Love* or *Screen Land* – Starasil starves Pimples, or “You better watch out if you’re wearing your shirrtails outside you jeans, gals, because Jill says you shouldn’t.” If a roadside sign said: VISIT OUR GIST SHOP – we *had* to visit it, *had* to buy its Indian curios, dolls, copper jewelry, cactus candy. The words ‘novelties and souvenirs’ simply entranced her by their trochaic lilt. If some café sign proclaimed Icecold Drinks, she was automatically stirred, although all drinks everywhere were ice-cold. She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster. (148)

Hit Me Baby One More Time: The Resurrection of Lolita

Since her first appearance in the novel’s 1958 American publication, Lolita has been reincarnated in numerous fast little articles, perhaps none so famous as Britney

Spears. The pop culture construction of Britney Spears as a self-conscious nymphet, like HH's construction of Lolita, is at once a ruse, a feigning of innocence and an attempt to assuage a guilty conscience. Britney Spears' debut album, "...Baby One More Time," was released January 12, 1999 – mere weeks after her eighteenth birthday. The timing of the release was undoubtedly off by a few months if the record company wanted to capitalize on holiday shopping. While her rise to the top of the pop charts was meteoric, it was not without controversy. Beth Ritchie, in a *Good Housekeeping* article titled "Surviving Britney Spears: What to do when your preteen worships this latter-day Lolita", encourages parents "to offer a reality check about the consequences of thigh-high skirts and flirtations behavior." She continues, "Ten-year-olds may not understand that the Britney look is a kind of come-on, and that they may be setting themselves up for catcalls – or worse" (103).

Rolling Stone's 1999 article and cover "Britney Spears: Inside The Heart And Mind (And Bedroom) Of America's New Teen Queen" begins with an evocation of a familiar scene that could have easily been lifted from the pages of *Lolita*: "Britney Spears extends a honeyed thigh across the length of the sofa, keeping one foot on the floor as she does so. . . . Spears' pink T-shirt is distended by her ample chest, and her silky white shorts – with dark blue piping – cling snugly to her hips. She cocks her head and smiles receptively." While author Steven Daly begins his next paragraph saying, "But hold on. It's not like that. You're falling into the same trap as the lovelorn youths, . . ." the article's title and magazine's cover suggest otherwise. Spears is marketed by the magazine as a precocious teen who oozes sexuality. To be sure, the cover photo features

Spears in bra and panties, lying on hot pink satin sheets while talking on a cordless phone and clutching a child's stuffed toy. That Britney Spears has become a pop cultural icon as an archetypal Lolita attests to Patnoe's claim that "Lolita has become the product of our culture beyond the book's pages" (83). While the reincarnation of Lolita is commodity as such, we may also understand to be a symptom of the repressed.

Slavoj Žižek contrasts a "fetishist mode of ideology, which predominates in our allegedly 'post-ideological' era" to a "symptomal mode [of ideology], in which the ideological lie which structures our perception of reality is threatened by symptoms, qua 'returns of the repressed,' cracks in the fabric of the ideological lie." He says, "Fetish is effectively a kind of *envers* of the symptom. That is to say, symptom is the exception which disturbs the surface of false appearance, the point at which the repressed Other Scene erupts, while fetish is the embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth" (*Enjoy Your Symptom!*, preface x). The fetish, then, keeps one busy; it preoccupies the conscious mind so that the superego will not run the risk of encountering the symptom as a trace of the original trauma. The problem, of course, is that fetishism in-effect prompts the individual to merely stay busy at being busy; it is the layering of fabric upon fabric in order to hide the cracks of the ideological lie.

Moral condemnation of Britney is a fetish that serves to block our enjoyment of her as a thing. For if we enjoy her in any sense, we run the risk of seeing Britney anamorphotically, as a subject constituted by the social world she inhabits. In other words, she becomes our creation – the other who is sacrificed in the name of profitability.

In summary, we create her per libidinal drive, and then disavow her per super ego. What trauma, then, does our fetish attempt to disavow? What could possibly be worse than the sexualization of a child, than a child being made into an object of potential sexual gratification? The answer: Commodification of the sexualization of a child. So, we make a sexual object out of her and then blame her for the sexual precociousness in order to order to avoid complicity in the commodification of sexuality, children, or some combination of the two. What I am calling a morality fetish works only by first acceding to commodity fetishism. After this inversion in which relations to people become relations to things we see a certain reversal – an inversion of the inverted. Thus the moral condemnation is leveled against Britney Spears as a person, not as a thing, or commodity. Speaking on what he calls the “fundamental systemic violence of capitalism,” Žižek notes that “this violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their ‘evil’ intentions; it is purely ‘objective’, systemic, anonymous” (*The Fragile Absolute* ,15). Thus there is no Humbert to arrest, send to trial, and convict. A symptomal reading is necessary.

At the conclusion of the narrative, Nabokov effectively teaches us that, in the words of Žižek, the fetish represents “an object that fills the constitutive lack in the Other, the empty place of ‘primary repression’, the place where the signifier must of necessity be lacking in order for the signifying network to articulate itself” (*Interrogating the Real*, 48). So, in Lacanian parlance “the Other does not exist as the Guarantor of Truth” (49). Thus Humbert says:

There was in the fiery phantasm a perfection which made my wild delight also perfect, just because the vision was out of reach, with no possibility of attainment to spoil it by awareness of an appended taboo; indeed, it may well be that the very attraction immaturity has for me lies not so much in the limpidity of pure young forbidden fairy child beauty as in the security of a situation where infinite perfections fill the gap between the little given and the great promised – the great rosegray never-to-be-had. (264)

In his read of the feature film, “The Matrix,” Žižek comments on “two aspects of perversion:” “On the one hand, reduction of reality to a virtual domain regulated by arbitrary rules that can be suspended, and on the other the concealed truth of this freedom, the reduction of the subject to an utter instrumentalized passivity.” Žižek argues that we should reverse the terms in order to best understand our reality. Thus he says, “Our reality *is* that of the free agents in the social world we know, but in order to sustain this situation, we have to supplement it with the disavowed, terrible, impending fantasy of being passive prisoners in the prenatal fluid exploited by the matrix” (*Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 264). If we substitute a perceived moral depravity for the matrix, then we breach the problem that we have apropos Britney and Lolita: We cannot bear thought we are the one defiling innocence. Thus we posit our “matrix,” a corrupt world in which young girls become “fast little articles” and “not that innocent” at the hands of nefarious perverts. We effect a desublimation that, by its very definition, is an act of repression.

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