

## *Lolita* and Butterfly Aesthetics

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### Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov, best known as the author of *Lolita*, was also recognized as a scientist excelling in the field of lepidoptera. As a literary figure, Nabokov has long been acclaimed as a metaphysical seeker, a composer of esoteric riddles, and a virtuoso of postmodern literary techniques. However, his reputation as a lauded entomologist has only drawn underestimated literary attention in the interpretation of *Lolita*, the novel in concern. This paper contends that a consideration of the interplay between Nabokov's scientific spirit and artistic aesthetics will contribute to the understanding of this long-debatable novel. The paper attempts to provide a unique perspective by addressing the influence of his butterfly aesthetics on the fiction, which exhibits itself through three identifiable and distinct aspects of mimicry, respectively mimicry of butterflies, deceptive camouflage, and metamorphosis. This effort intends to add to the current literature of Nabokov study regarding a balanced view of the author's scientific spirit and literary aesthetics in the interpretation of his established literary classics.

**Key words:** Butterfly Aesthetics; *Lolita*; Mimicry

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### INTRODUCTION

Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977), a Russian-born American writer, was a famed artist as well as a distinguished

scientist (a naturalist or entomologist, to be more exact). As a literary figure, Nabokov has long been acclaimed as a metaphysical seeker, a composer of esoteric riddles, and a virtuoso of postmodern literary techniques. His reputation as a scientist has been on the rise for his unprecedented contribution in lepidopteral taxonomy. The interplay of science and art has long been a focal point of Nabokov study. Nabokov scholars might have reached a consensus that his genius in one area ignited that in the other. According to Blackwell (2009), "Nabokov's thought as an artist was heavily informed by his scientific passions: his lepidopteral research was guided by his aesthetic sense of the world around him" (p. xi). Nabokov (1990) once said in an interview "there is no science without fancy, no art without facts" (p.79), from which one can safely conclude that Nabokov's worlds of science and art are inseparable and overlap in certain areas. Attentive readers with a willing mind can find the tendencies of the scientization in his literary creation and the aestheticization in his scientific work. Accordingly, a good reader in Nabokov's mind should have a combination of two different temperaments, the artistic as well as the scientific.

His literary creation process bore the traces of his scientific spirit, overtly or covertly, which are described as butterfly aesthetics in this paper. *Lolita*, Nabokov's 1955 seminal novel, also his third novel in English, is one of the most brilliantly written yet long-debatable literary works in the 20<sup>th</sup> century American literature. Ever since the inception of its publication, Nabokov scholars have invested considerable efforts in exploring some of the most important themes and devices: road narrative, American consumer culture, morality motif, a first-person unreliable narrator, parodies of literary genres, etc. This paper attempts to provide a unique perspective by addressing the influence of his butterfly aesthetics on this novel. This paper first presents an overview of Nabokov's butterfly complex, i.e., his lifelong passion for butterfly hunting, collecting, and studying spanning from his

childhood years until his last days. Based on a discussion of Nabokov and his butterfly complex, this paper further elaborates on three aspects of mimicry permeated in the whole fiction, respectively mimicry of butterflies, deceptive camouflage, and metamorphosis. As evidenced by the precise details (descriptive verisimilitude), intentional characterization, and the symbolic evolution of the major figure in the novel, this critical effort to interpret *Lolita* from Nabokov's skillful manipulation of mimicry is intended to add to the current literature of Nabokov study by striking a balanced view between his scientific spirit and literary aesthetics.

## 2. NABOKOV AND BUTTERFLY COMPLEX

Butterflies have been accepted as a personal sign of Nabokov in his life, scientific work, and his literary creation. Illustrations of butterflies both real and imagined decorated most of his publications. One image of Nabokov as a butterfly hunter frequently appears on the front covers of many of his literary works: an amiable old man in shorts, bare-chested, with butterfly net at the ready, on a Swiss mountainside, underneath an azure sky. Nabokov presented to his readers different images of himself as a butterfly hunter: "as a pretty boy in knickerbockers and sailor cap; as a lanky cosmopolitan expatriate in flannel bags and beret; as a fat hatless old man in shorts" (Nabokov, 1999a, p.125). His passion for butterflies was so great that he told *the Paris Review* in a 1967 interview: "It is not improbable that had there been no revolution in Russia, I would have devoted myself entirely to lepidopterology and never written any novels at all" (Nabokov, 1990, p.100). A loss of the lepidopteral world turns out to be a gain in literature.

Nabokov's passion for butterflies dates back to the age of seven probably due to the family legacy. His parents were both fervent butterfly lovers, who had a large collection of butterfly specimens in the family estate in Vyra. Therefore, it seems natural enough for Nabokov to develop his boyhood fascination with butterflies and moths and a scientific interest in lepidoptera. As Nabokov recalled in his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, the morning of his childhood years was set aside for his passion of chasing, collecting, and studying butterflies, and his tutors and governesses cautiously did not intrude. From 1906 to 1910, Nabokov read extensively and intensely the books by those greatest lepidopterists, including Maria Sibylla Merian, Esper, Boisduval, Seitz's, and Hofmann that he found in the attic of his family's country house. At the age of nine, he boldly wrote to one of the then greatest lepidopterists and told him about one specimen that he found and named. In 1910, he sought to buy a collection of rarities and read extensively entomological periodicals in both Russian and English.

Almost all Nabokov readers know of his lifelong passion for butterflies, though many might think of him merely as a passionate dilettante. This has been proved to be one misunderstanding that can easily be taken for granted. His first publication was not fiction but a scientific paper, *A Few Notes on Crimean Lepidoptera*, written in 1919 and published the next year in the London magazine, *The Entomologist*. After the 1919 Russian revolution, Nabokov lived as an émigré writer in Berlin where he continued his butterfly hunting excursions, frequently visited butterfly experts, and spent hours working on butterfly collections in museums.

Nabokov resumed his passion for butterflies only one year after his arrival in the United States, where he was invited to work on the butterfly collections at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ). There he was known to be a diligent and productive scientist. During the six years (1942-1948) while acting as a part-time curator of lepidoptera at MCZ, he spent an average of six hours per weekday settling at his workbench and poring over butterfly genitalia under the microscope. His professional scientific work won him the respect of his colleagues who might not even have known him as a writer. His major work in the lab included lepidopteral dissection, microscopic examination, figuring of the forms, and comparing the variations of the structural parts. Before he left Harvard for Cornell, he dissected at least 1,570 butterfly genitalia, most of which were drawn and annotated with extreme detail and precision. In honor of his outstanding contributions in this field, many species of butterflies known as "blues" were named after him, like "nabokovi". Nabokov's most famous blue was Karner blue, which was discovered, named, and described by him. Seven full-blown scientific articles were also published during this period which established his status as "the most famous lepidopterist in the world" (Boyd, 1991, p.16). However, his eyesight was severely impaired forever out of the constant long-time observation at the dissecting microscope. Besides this laborious work, he was also undertaking many other jobs (going on lecture tours, teaching Russian language and literature) because the family was in constant financial needs. This might explain in part how came the least productive decade in his literary creation with only one novel, *Bend Sinister*, produced. However, those tremendously hard years were remembered as "the most delightful and thrilling in all my adult life" (Nabokov, 1990, p.190). He stated similar views in *Speak, Memory* that "incredibly happy memories, quite comparable, in fact, to those of my Russian boyhood, are associated with my research work at the MCZ, Cambridge, Mass." (Nabokov, 1999a, p.108). It was after he left Harvard and the time-consuming job in the lab that he began the writing of *Lolita*, which benefited considerably from his scientific work under the microscope.

Besides his exceptional work in MCZ, Nabokov also made several trips across mainland America almost every summer in the 1940s and 1950s, chasing and collecting butterflies. Since Nabokov had never learned how to drive, his wife, Véra, drove him to the collecting sites. Their butterfly-hunting trips between 1949 and 1959 covered more than 150,000 miles through most of the states in America. The most frequented collecting sites were in the Rocky Mountains. His butterfly collections of this period are kept in some museums in New York, Boston, and Ithaca. The financial success of *Lolita* enabled Nabokov to quit his teaching position and return to Europe so that he could devote more time to writing. However, his passion for butterfly hunting was still an important part of his life. He went frequently to the Alps, Corsica, and Sicily to chase and collect butterflies. During the European years, Nabokov visited many museums for research purposes.

The 1980s witnessed a rise of Nabokov's reputation as a scientist for his work in butterfly taxonomy that he did in the 1940s. A team of scientists vindicated his seminal taxonomic framework for North and South American butterflies, typically for Andean blues. His classification work was proved to be "ahead of time" using gene-sequencing technology (Nabokov, 1999b, p.290). In a book review Boyd indicated a collaborative effort since the 1990s between literary and lepidopterological Nabokov scholars to expose to the public Nabokov's work in entomology, especially in butterflies and moths, mostly Nabokov's unpublished as well as his uncollected lepidopterological work. These scholars include Brian Boyd, Dieter E. Zimmer, Kurt Johnson, Steve Coates, Victoria N. Alexander, and Zoran Kuzmanovich, to name just a few (Boyd, 2000). Their efforts have successfully justified Nabokov's stature in the scientific arena, which was previously drawn from his literary status. Brian Boyd himself treated Nabokov the scientist in great details in two of his pioneering biographies, *Vladimir Nabokov: the Russian Years*, and *Vladimir Nabokov: the American Years*.

### 3. LOLITA: MIMICRY OF BUTTERFLIES

As an intellect excelling in both science and art, Nabokov demonstrates a combination of artistic passion and scientific precision in his novel *Lolita*. Mimicry is perceived as a frequently used writing technique in his novels best reflective of the inescapable influence of his scientific spirit embodied in his butterfly complex. As a biological term, mimicry can be understood in the sense that a creature mimics something to resemble it or be mistaken for it to protect itself from its predators. In an interview with Robert H. Boyle, Nabokov stated that "Mimicry and evolution are for me more and more fascinating... I cannot separate the aesthetic pleasure of

seeing a butterfly and the scientific pleasure of knowing what it is" (Nabokov, 1999b, p.529). Nabokov held that mimicry is beyond the explanation of Darwin's theory of natural selection. He identified two types of mimicry: classical mimicry between two species, and "object resemblance" also known as "crypsis, i.e., protective coloration" (Blackwell, 2009). Mimicry, a phenomenon found in nature, was frequently adopted by Nabokov as a utilitarian mechanism to achieve his literary aesthetics.

While addressing the impact of Nabokov's lepidopteral pursuit on his literary works, Johnson (1997) has a fair observation "nothing in Nabokov's art is by chance. Precision and design are all". Johnson's pithy assessment sheds some significant light on the understanding of mimicry as a scientific term as well as a literary term. This paper traces the influence of butterfly aesthetics in *Lolita* in terms of these two features: precision and design. Precision finds its manifestation in the precise mimicry of the reality (nature), typically Nabokov's descriptive verisimilitude in the text. Design is evidenced by Nabokov's intentional characterization, mimicry of deceptive camouflage, and the character development of *Lolita*, mimicry of metamorphosis.

#### 3.1 Mimicry of Butterflies

One basic form of mimicry has the visible nature, or reality, as its object of imitation. Nabokov, as an artist-scientist, had a passionate affection for nature or reality. As an expert in lepidoptera, he had developed keen observational skills and a conscious awareness of observing the nature for detail and pattern, which has always been a constant source of inspiration for his artistic creation. In *Lolita*, Nabokov devoted to a commitment to descriptive verisimilitude by describing locales, literary characters, specific phenomena, etc. in the accurate way that he observed and described the butterfly genitalia under the dissecting microscope. This section explores Nabokov's use of mimicry by analyzing details and butterfly references in the text.

To Nabokov, details are valued above everything else. As a writer, he believes in "stressing the special detail". He emphasizes the importance of details by declaring "In high art and pure science detail is everything" (Nabokov, 1990, p.168). As a literature professor, he endeavored to "provide students of literature with exact information about details" (Nabokov, 1983, p. Viii). Therefore, a good reader must be prepared for these details in his literary works.

Butterfly images are prevalent throughout *Lolita* either directly or indirectly. A blatant reference is made in Chapter 20 of Part Two, where Humbert comments on his love for Lolita: "An inquisitive butterfly passed, dipping, between us" (Nabokov, 1997, p.234). Butterfly references are used when Humbert (or Nabokov) describes the tender and delicate young girls. Nabokov depicts Lolita and other nymphets like her through the eyes of Humbert



in such subtle and minute details that readers might get confused whether the author is describing fancy child girls or elusive enchanting butterflies. The frequently used adjective words to describe the nymphets include “frail”, “fragile”, “supple”, “silky”, and “fairy-like”, which could be as readily applied for delicate butterflies. A best illustration could be the impressive description of Lolita when Humbert caught the first glimpse of her in the backyard — “Without the least warning, a blue sea-wave swelled under my heart and, from a mat in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses” (Nabokov, 1997, p.39). Two obvious analogies might be made between Humbert’s Lolita and Nabokov’s butterfly. First, Humbert watches over Lolita in pretty much the way Nabokov watches over a butterfly from afar. Second, Lolita on a mat in the sun is like a butterfly on the meadow. The follow-up details of Lolita’s appearance give Humbert’s nymphet more butterfly-like qualities: “It was the same child—the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair. A polka-dotted black kerchief tied around her chest... the tiny dark-brown mole on her side” (Nabokov, 1997, p.39). The choice of words, such as “frail”, “silky” and “dotted” and words of colors, indicate that Humbert is describing a fragile subtle butterfly rather than a teenage girl. The physical likeness is easy to detect between Humbert’s Lolita and a butterfly. Similar details of portraying girls in the way of describing butterflies can be found throughout the text. It is interesting to note that the depicting of adult women reminds readers how Nabokov describes moths. As opposed to butterflies, moths usually have fatter stout furry bodies. The major moth-like female characters include Valeria, Humbert’s divorced wife, Charlotte, Humbert’s second wife, and Rita, Humbert’s mistress, against whom Humbert’s cruel bias is evident. Take Charlotte as an example. The words associated with Charlotte are “thick thighs”, “plump wet back”, “clumsy seal”, “poor, slippery, bigbodied creature”, “heavy hips, round knees, ripe bust, the coarse pink skin of her neck”, etc. The moth-like qualities conjure up in readers’ mind an affected middle-class American woman.

Besides Lolita’s appearance, the scenes of her walking, dancing, playing tennis, and even riding a bike are all meticulously crafted in sophisticated details and endow Humbert’s nymphet girl with butterfly qualities. In the Enchanted Hunter Hotel, the way Lolita walks up to the suitcase vividly resembles how a delicate butterfly glides across the air: “She walked up to the open suitcase as if stalking it from afar, at a kind of slow-motion walk, ... She stepped up to it, lifting her rather high-heeled feet rather high, and bending her beautiful boy-knees while she walked through dilating space with the lenth of one walking under water or in a flight dream. Then she raised by the armllets a copper-colored, charming, and quite expensive vest, very slowly stretching it between

her silent hands ... Then she crept into my waiting arms, radiant, relaxed ...” (Nabokov, 1997, p.120). The image of Lolita “walking under water or in a flight dream” “at a kind of slow-motion walk” presents the ethereal beauty of a shiny butterfly gliding through the air over the meadow. Lolita “raising the vest” is an image of a butterfly gracefully unfolding its wings. Lolita creeping “into my waiting arms” is like a bewitched butterfly flying into a hunter’s net. The dancing scene visualizes a butterfly fluttering among the flowers: “and-one, and-two, and-one, and-two, weight transferred on a straight right leg, leg up and out to the side, and-one, and-two, and only when she started jumping, opening her legs at the height of the jump, and flexing one leg, and extending the other, and flying, and landing on her toes...” (Nabokov, 1997, p.182). Also, the depiction of Lolita playing tennis presents a perfect imitation of the form of a butterfly, light, elastic, and elegant. The portraying of these scenes of Lolita as a nymphet vividly mimics a graceful elusive butterfly with enamoring charm.

A correlation between Nabokov’s butterfly aesthetics and literary creation is fully revealed through these minute, subtle, delicate, and live details, as scattered throughout *Lolita*. Mimicry of butterflies, as exemplified in *Lolita*, raises the level of detail and precision to an unprecedented higher degree, which engages readers in the aesthetic bliss (a timeless ecstasy) that Nabokov consistently strove to convey via his literary creation.

### 3.2 Mimicry of Deceptive Camouflage

Besides precision as manifested in the descriptive verisimilitude, the other object of mimicry examined is the deliberate design: camouflage and metamorphosis. In the animal kingdom, some preys resort to the technique of camouflage to protect themselves from their predators. Nabokov is particularly fascinated by this type of mimicry known as camouflage, or chrysalis. He once claimed that a moth or butterfly can mimic natural objects so precisely that it deceives the predators’ visual acuity. He referred to this type of mimicry as “an incredibly diverse range of imitative survival strategies in nature – butterflies that look like leaves, butterflies with large spots on their wings that suggest the eyes of a large predator, and butterflies with deceptive ‘false heads’” (Johnson & Coates, 1999). Nabokov explained in his autobiography the “special attraction” of camouflage mimicry and how he associates this mimicry with his literary aesthetics: “Its phenomena showed an artistic perfection ... When a butterfly had to look like a leaf, not only were all the details of a leaf beautifully rendered but markings mimicking grub-bored holes were generously thrown in. ... nor could one appeal to the theory of ‘the struggle for life’ when a protective device was carried to a point of mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury far in excess of a predator’s power of appreciation. I discovered in nature the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic,

both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception” (Nabokov, 1999a, p.107). The essence of the camouflage mimicry captured from this statement is “magic”, “enchantment”, and “deception”, which is beyond the explanation of Darwin’s theory of evolution. Nabokov is adept at using this device to achieve his literary purpose. With the help of deceptive camouflage, he sets traps to mislead and deceive the reader, thus toying with the reader’s intelligence. He wants his readers to identify the camouflage scattered throughout *Lolita*. In Nabokov’s (1983) judgement, “... one cannot *read* a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader” (p.3). In this section, the mimics of deceptive camouflage in *Lolita* are explored in terms of two respects: the “nerves of the novel” and deceptive qualities of characters.

Nabokov has deliberately constructed many secret points as deceptive traps to challenge his readers and expected his readers to identify them in the way butterfly hunters recognize butterfly camouflage. In the epilogue *On a Book Entitled Lolita*, Nabokov reminds readers of these secret points: “And when I thus think of *Lolita*, I seem always to pick out for special delectation such images as Mr. Taxovich, or that class list of Ramsdale School, or Charlotte saying ‘waterproof,’ ... , or the pictures decorating the stylized garret of Gaston Godin, or the Kasbeam barber (who cost me a month of work), ... These are the nerves of the novel. These are the secret points, the subliminal co-ordinates by means of which the book is plotted...” (Nabokov, 1997, p.316). From this statement, one can see the overriding significance of these secret points in the novel. An appropriate understanding of *Lolita* would be impossible without carefully deciphering these codes. It might be worthwhile to capture and analyze some other “nerves of the novel”. Nabokov intentionally crafted those names of Lolita, all associating the child girl with butterflies. “Dolly” is derived from a Greek word meaning “chrysalides”. “Dolores” is the name given by Nabokov to a female butterfly he discovered on the slope covered with lupines and green gentians. The number of butterflies, 22, is used as Lolita’s number at school. In the name list of Lolita’s class, Lolita is intentionally placed between names of roses (Mary Rose and Rosaline) and a butterfly (Falter, a German word). The Enchanted Hunter Hotel is placed in the town named Lepingvill, a word coined apparently alluding to “lepidoptery”. Vivian Darkbloom, a female playwright and Quilty’s writing partner, is an anagram of Vladimir Nabokov, implying in a certain sense a cooperative or conspiring relationship between Nabokov, Humbert, and Quilty. Besides word games, Nabokov sophisticatedly manipulates numbers for the same deceptive purpose. 324 is a number motif throughout the novel: it is Charlotte’s house number, the room number of the Enchanted Hunter Hotel where Humbert and Lolita stays, and the total sum of hotels they

visit on their two cross-country journeys. Careful readers might notice that 324 is a rearrangement of Nabokov’s own birth date, April 23. Two pairs of license plates are noteworthy: “WS1564 and SH1616” apparently alluding to William Shakespeare, one of the greatest playwrights who was born in 1564 and died in 1616 and has the same birth date as Nabokov. The other pair, “Q32888” and “CQ88322”, evidently hints at Clair Quilty. The total sum of the numbers in these two plates comes to 52, a deliberate coincidence that Humbert and Lolita spent 52 weeks on the road. It also coincides with the number of weeks in a year and the number of cards in a pack. A careful reader might remember a 52-line poem written to Lolita by Humbert while staying in the sanitarium. The major characters, Lolita, Humbert, and Quilty, all died in 1952, as revealed previously in the foreword. These seeming coincidences make a perfect harmony of the inner structure underlying the text.

The leading characters are endowed with the mimicry of deceptive camouflage. Their inherent desire to mimic and deceive each other can be interpreted as an expression of the butterfly aesthetics in the novel. Humbert’s passion for Lolita is an evident imitation of his innocent childhood love for Annabel. In his love affair with Charlotte, Humbert mimics a responsible husband and stepfather but is actually a pedophile. He mimics a respectable professor teaching Latin, French, and literature but never finishes his work. Lolita, a tragic and sorrowful figure, is held captive by Humbert for many years and cultivates deceptions to be used against Humbert. According to Humbert, she mimics a sexually innocent child, reverses the roles of prey and predator, and seduces Humbert in the Enchanted Hunter Hotel the first time they stayed there. Her mimetic actions involve imitation, deception, and escape from Humbert. Humbert and Quilty, like double characters in a doppelganger tale, mimic the roles of prey and predator and oftentimes reverse the order. Valeria, Humbert’s first wife, mimics a faithful wife while having affairs with a taxi driver. Charlotte, Humbert’s second wife, mimics a cultured, refined, and elegant lady in affected manners, but is actually vulgar and unattractive to Humbert. Though all equipped with deceptive strategies of mimicry, these characters died an early death like lepidopteral insects: Lolita, like Valeria, dies in childbirth; Charlotte dies in a car accident; Quilty is murdered by Humbert; and Humbert dies of coronary thrombosis in prison.

Nabokov, as a scientist, is fascinated by the mimicry of deceptive camouflage in butterflies, which he devoted lifelong passion to recognizing. He sophisticatedly applies this mimicry as a literary mechanism to construct word games and characterization so that the text is endowed with a quality of magic and enchantment.

### 3.3 Mimicry of Metamorphosis

Apart from deceptive camouflage, mimicry in *Lolita* shows up also in a dynamic process of metamorphosis,

originally a biological process in nature, especially in lepidoptera, like moths and butterflies. Lolita undergoes the process of metamorphosis, “child – nymphet – woman”, similar to the corresponding metamorphosis of butterflies, “larva – chrysalis/pupa– imago”. As an entomological term, a nymph refers to a hemimetabolic insect, i.e., a larva of an insect, that does not undergo complete metamorphosis, or an insect that resembles adult insects, except in size.

The term “nymphet” is a singular contribution Nabokov made via the novel *Lolita* to the English language. Nabokov coined this word to categorize the type of child-girls with paranormal powers of enchantment that drives Humbert, an old pervert, mad with desire. Humbert, the solipsistic hero, identifies himself as a “nympholept”, an old male with demoniac enthusiasm for this ideal status of “nymphet”. Humbert provides a criterion for his “nymphet”: “In fact, I would have the reader see ‘nine’ and ‘fourteen’ as the boundaries – the mirrory beaches and rosy rocks – of an enchanted island haunted by those nymphets of mine and surrounded by a vast, misty sea. ...Neither are good looks any criterion; and vulgarity, or at least what a given community terms so, does not necessarily impair certain mysterious characteristics, the fey grace, the elusive, shifty, soul-shattering, insidious charm that separates the nymphet from such coevals of hers as are incomparably more dependent on the spatial world of synchronous phenomena than on that intangible island of entranced time where Lolita plays with her likes” (Nabokov, 1997, p.17). Not only do these child-like immature girls reveal “true”, “demoniac” nature to “bewitched travelers”, but they are confined on an “enchanted” “intangible island of entranced time”, an age limit between nine and fourteen. Humbert hopelessly wills that his nymphets “never grow up” and enslaves Lolita on the time island so that he could have a timeless and changeless nymphet to satisfy his carnal passion, which bears a resemblance to Nabokov’s hunting and killing the beautiful butterflies to preserve their beauty. Therefore, metamorphosis is the change that Humbert wants least to happen in *Lolita*. However, his will against this change of metamorphosis is thwarted by time and fate.

In the novel, the metamorphosis of Lolita can also be understood as a process through “present – present – future”, or “Annabel – Lolita – Charlotte” as manifested in Humbert’s solipsistic imagination. Lolita, born on January 1, 1935, was 12 years old when Humbert (aged 37) first saw her. Between the age of nine and fourteen, Lolita is no longer a child and not yet an adult woman. Somewhere between, Lolita is a combination of past (ideal love) and future (harsh reality), or a combination of Annabel and Charlotte. Humbert had longed for the ideal Annabel but never had her in carnal reality. Therefore, Humbert identifies Lolita with Annabel by saying that he “broke her spell by incarnating her in another” 24 years

after Annabel died. Humbert longs for Lolita, sexually enjoys her, and wants to retain the situation as possible as he can. In the first part of the novel, Humbert’s will is satisfied by attaining Lolita with fate on his side (Charlotte was killed in a car accident). However, the Lolita attained is not the real child-girl but only a creation of Humbert’s imagination, or a projection of his Annabel from the past. In this sense, the ideal Annabel is metamorphosized into Lolita via his willed incarnation. In the second part, Humbert tries to retain Lolita while fate stands against him (Quilty acts as the agent of fate and steals Lolita away from him). However, Lolita is subject to time and the chronological progress of Lolita from the stage of puberty into adult womanhood is irreversible when Lolita reaches the age of fifteen, the upper temporal boundary of the enchanted island of time. Humbert refers to Lolita as “little Haze” and in this way associates her with Charlotte, the real, repugnant flesh that Humbert repeatedly and involuntarily possessed. Humbert attempts to transcend the mutability of time by making two transcontinental trips with her and binding her to him. However, his efforts are spoiled, and the nymphet is inevitably metamorphosized into a woman, which might bring forth into the reader’s mind the adult female characters like Valeria, Rita, and Charlotte with moth-like qualities that Humbert holds cruel bias against. Humbert laments over the loss of his nymphet: “Oh, she had changed! Her complexion was now that of any untidy high school girl. ... A coarse flesh had now replaced that innocent fluorescence” (Nabokov, 1997, p.200). Lolita is metamorphosized into Charlotte (or Valeria to a certain extent), the flesh that can no longer mirror Humbert’s ideal Annabel. The metamorphosis is evidently visible when Humbert met Lolita for the last time when she was seventeen. Lolita, the then Mrs. Richard F. Schiller, was pregnant, had “ruined looks”, and, “hopelessly worn”, was “only the faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo of the nymphet [Humbert] had rolled [himself] upon with such cries in the past” (Nabokov, 1997, p.277). Unlike the metamorphosis from an unattractive larva into a charming winged butterfly, Lolita gets more vulgar and loses her nymphet powers: “...her pale freckled cheeks were hollowed, and her bare shins and arms had lost their tan, so that the little hairs showed. She wore a brown, sleeveless cotton dress and sloppy felt slippers” (Nabokov, 1997, p.269). Lolita is metamorphosized from a nymphet into an exhausted wife and a mother-to-be against Humbert’s will, which reveals the cruelty in Humbert’s evil passion for his imagined nymphets.

The mimicry of metamorphosis plays a key role in the characterization of Lolita, a real child girl as well as the creation of Humbert’s imagination. Humbert’s will to stop the process of metamorphosis is doomed to failure and cannot preserve beauty, which differs from Nabokov’s butterfly aesthetics in the moral significance.

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## CONCLUSION

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The butterfly complex inherited in his early childhood contributed to the making of Nabokov the scientist and artist. His butterfly aesthetics bridge the seemingly very different areas of science and art. Mimicry, the core component of his butterfly aesthetics, has drawn considerable attention from readers and critics alike. This paper borrows from Johnson's idea of "precision and design" and further divides mimicry into three subcategories: mimicry of butterflies (descriptive verisimilitude), deceptive camouflage, and metamorphosis. A critical analysis is conducted to explore this phenomenon as a literary mechanism in constructing the amazing text of *Lolita*.

Hopefully, this effort to decipher the Nabokov Code in literary creation can contribute to the current literature of Nabokov study. Future research might also consider studying how his scientific work influenced the infrastructure of this novel. It is also hoped that such efforts might be duplicated into the interpretation of Nabokov's other literary works. Though the novel itself shines on its own merits and can be appreciated aside from its entomological context, butterfly aesthetics concerning Nabokov's butterfly passion and how it informs his literary creation would offer a fascinating insight into

the interpretation of *Lolita* in terms of scientific spirits, literary aesthetics, and moral significance.

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