

THE IMPORTANCE OF ALLUSIONS TO EDGAR ALLAN POE'S ANNABEL LEE IN VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S LOLITA

Bikkyová A.

Pavol Jozef Šafárik University, Kosice, Slovakia

Lolita, a classic novel of Vladimir Nabokov, is a confession of a complicated character, Humbert Humbert, an artist and a madman, whose double pseudonym already indicates his schizophrenic nature. The probable reason for his schizophrenia flows from a trauma caused by the loss of his childhood love, Annabel Leigh. Ever since Humbert loses Annabel, his world becomes divided into two parts. One part is represented by the reality which Humbert is unable to accept, and hence he escapes to his second, imaginary world, in which “nymphets” are the centre of his attention. Since Humbert's double nature seems to influence not only his sexual and social behaviour but also his thoughts and opinions, the source of his schizophrenia is worth examining. The aim of the paper is to focus on analyses of both the poem and the novel and outlining the importance of the allusions to Poe's *Annabel Lee* to the novel's content.

The most probable reason which made Humbert become twosome is the loss of his childhood love, Annabel Leigh, who is referred to as Lolita's “precursor”. In order to depict the importance of Annabel's presence in the novel, several facts about her will be analyzed. It is crucial to focus on the author's choice of her name first, as it functions as probably the strongest allusion in the novel. To exemplify, Humbert's love, Annabel Leigh, is a clear reference to Edgar Allan Poe's famous poem *Annabel Lee* (Appel, 1991, p. 329), as the phonetic sound of “leigh” and “lee” is identical in both cases. Since “Poe is referred to more than twenty times in *Lolita*” (Ibid., p. 330), the importance of these allusions is unavoidable.

If one analyzes the poem, manifold similarities between the two “Annabels” stand out immediately. To illustrate, the text asserts that both Humbert and Annabel are thirteen-year-old children sharing an amorous relationship set in France on the seaside. However, after a very short time, their relationship is terminated due to Annabel's death. This tragedy probably initiates Humbert's everlasting traumatic experience. To compare, in Poe's poem, the situation is considerably similar. Poe writes about his love for Annabel to be long time gone stating that they met “In a kingdom by the sea” (Poe, 1991, p. 40). While Poe calls Annabel Lee a “maiden” in the third line of his poem, likewise “a little maiden” (Nabokov, 2006, p. 293) is used to address a nymphet in *Lolita*. “I was a child and she was a child” (Ibid.) is as true for Humbert and his Annabel, as for Poe and his love. The fact that the relationship of both couples was strong is expressed by the line “But we loved with a love that was more than love” (Ibid.). “The angels [...] in Heaven” (Ibid., p. 41) in *Annabel Lee* might remind one of the closing paragraphs of *Lolita* where Humbert's “thinking of [...] angels” (352) is mentioned. In the case of Poe, Annabel Lee is taken away by “kinsmen” whom he accuses to “bore her away from [him]” (Ibid.), while Humbert's kinsman and alter ego, Quilty, plays the same role in his story. Even though Poe's Annabel was killed, the

poem says that “neither the angels in Heaven above/ Nor the demons down under the sea/ Can ever dissever [his] soul from the soul/ Of the beautiful Annabel Lee” (Ibid.). Similarly, the death of Humbert's Annabel not only eternalizes her, it also seems to leave its mark on him in a way that he cannot live a sane life ever after.

Therefore, it is reasonable to consider Annabel to be the initiatrix of Humbert's infatuation by nymphets, and later by Lolita herself. He regards Lolita to be his “release from the ‘subconscious’ obsession of an incomplete childhood romance with the initial little Miss Lee” (188) and as Alfred Appel points out, when Humbert addresses “Lo-lee-ta”, “the middle syllable alludes to *Annabel Lee*” (Appel, 1991, p. 328). In addition, Humbert transmits his love and memories of Annabel into his adulthood where his solution for this “seaside trauma” activates his obsession with nymphets. Since Humbert's description of a nymphet matches Annabel's characteristics to a large extent, it is very likely that he tries to cope with his unfulfilled love by searching for the once created ideal in her. In one of the nymphets' description, he says: “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” (15). Here, the elements of the island, rocks, beaches and sea remind the reader of the scenes about Annabel while connecting her to nymphets.

Besides the linkage of the poem to Humbert and Lolita's story, there is also an apparent connection between the personal life of Poe and the one of Humbert. According to Michael J. Cummings, it is assumed that Annabel in the poem *Annabel Lee* is based on Poe's wife Virginia Clemm whom he married when she was only thirteen years old. This corresponds with the ages of Annabel Leigh and Humbert at the time of their meeting. In fact, Poe was about twenty years older than Virginia at the time of their marriage which reflects the exact age of Humbert when meeting Lolita. Additionally, the wife of Poe and Humbert's Annabel are interconnected by their deaths at young age (Cummings, 2005).

However, it is not only these references that portray the importance of Annabel's character. It is also crucial to mention that for Humbert, Annabel represents the highest point of beauty possible while being in correspondence with the philosophical criteria of beauty drawn from history. Namely, important philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Aristotle considered perfection to stem from the connection of the material and spiritual world. When looking back at the relationship of Humbert and Annabel, Humbert claims that “The spiritual and the physical had been blended in us with perfection” (12), which means that their love was a perfect reconstruction of those philosophical beliefs.

Another instance of Annabel's appreciation of beauty appears when one concentrates on Nabokov's perception of art. In Nabokov's view, “Beauty plus pity- that is the closest we can get to a definition of art. Where there is beauty there is pity for the simple reason that beauty must die. Beauty always dies” (Nabokov, 1980). Hence, in order to stress her beauty, Annabel's presence is erased from *Lolita* right from the first pages of the novel. Despite this fact, Annabel's presence lingers in the text nevertheless, as the criteria for being nymphet match Annabel's characteristics to a large extent. In addition, as Appel suggests, thanks to *Lolita*, “Nabokov's 'nymphet' has entered the

language” (Appel, 1991, p. 338) and it can be found in various dictionaries nowadays. Appel gives an example of the word's dictionary definition which denotes a nymph as a “very young but sexually attractive girl” (Ibid.). To explain the origin of this term, “the mythological and zoological definitions are primary” (Ibid.). As Appel explains, “In Greek and Roman mythology, a nymph is ‘One of the [...] divinities [...] represented as beautiful maidens dwelling in the mountains, waters, forests, etc.’” (Ibid.). Actually, the term “maiden” used in this quotation is found not only in *Lolita* but also in *Annabel Lee*, forming another interconnection between the novel and the poem.

The use of the term “maiden” in these works is also thought to associate beauty with sex. To illustrate, since Annabel and Humbert were not able to perform their sexual desire for each other, the element of longing is notable with regard to Annabel. Referring to Crispin Sartwell, who defines beauty as “the object of longing” (Sartwell, 2006, p. 3), it could be assumed that Annabel's beauty was outstanding and embedded in Humbert's mind to such a great extent because of his unfulfilled longing. To illustrate, the analyzed text reveals that “the frenzy of mutual possession might have been assuaged only by our [Annabel and Humbert] actually imbibing and assimilating every particle of each other's soul and flesh; but there we were, unable even to mate” (10-11). Besides the illustration of longing, this citation underlines once more the presence of the spiritual and material side found in Annabel which proves her importance for the story.

To demonstrate the extent to which Annabel is the basis for Humbert's recognition of Lolita's beauty, the following idea is inevitable to propose. Having lost Annabel long ago, Humbert explains his state at the point of meeting Lolita by saying: “twenty-four years later, I broke her [Annabel] spell by incarnating her in another” (14). Obviously, “another” here refers to Lolita which presents a perfect example of Kant's theory of the human imagination. To illustrate, Kant claims that “the Imagination can not only recall on occasion [...] long past, but can also reproduce the image of the figure of the object” (Kant, 1892) which is the exact case in *Lolita*. As Humbert explains, “that mimosa grow- the haze of stars, the tingle, the flame, the honeydew, and the ache remained with me, and that little girl [...] haunted me ever since” (14).

In other words, one could state that Humbert incarnated the ideal of Annabel into Lolita and since he realized that Lolita and Annabel are not alike, he kept idealizing Lolita as the object of beauty in his imagination. Thus, Kant's premise that “if the mind is concerned with comparisons, the Imagination can, [...], unconsciously let one image glide into another” (Ibid.) is an apt one. Additionally, when Humbert encounters Lolita for the first time, he explains to the readers that “It was the same child” (41), while remarking once again that “The twentyfive years [he] had lived since then, tapered to a palpitating point, and vanished” (42). Another time, he finds Annabel's appearance in Lolita's presence by describing that “a blue seawave swelled under my [Humbert] heart and, from a mat in a pool of sun, [...], there was my Riviera love” (41). Moreover, here he even reconstructs the atmosphere by inserting the seawave, sun and riviera. By these ways he fits into Sartwell's conception of nostalgia which is described by him as “a longing that can turn almost anything into something beautiful because its object is an atmosphere of pastness” (Sartwell, 2006, p. 24).

When dealing with nostalgia, an interesting idea of Humbert about Annabel and Lolita suggests itself to be analyzed. As Humbert explains, for him

[t]here are two types of visual memory: one when you skipfully recreate an image in the laboratory of your mind, with your eyes open (and then I see Annabel in such general terms as: “honey-colored skin”, “thin arms”, “brown bobbed hair”, “long lashes”, “big bright mouth”); and the other when you instantly evoke, with shut eyes, on the dark innerside of your eyelids, the objective, absolutely optical replica of a beloved face, a little ghost in natural colors (and this is how I see Lolita) (10).

When concentrating on the first type of memory that Humbert recognizes, it seems to have realistic features because of the open eyes and the ability to recreate the image. On the other hand, the second type of memory concerning Lolita's image is of a contrary meaning, since it includes such expressions as a “ghost”, “a beloved face” and “evocation”, being of a highly imaginative nature. Thus, one could conclude that the former type could be characterized as realistic, while the latter as imaginative. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that Annabel's beauty could be deemed more realistic since it seems to pertain to a generally accepted symbol of beauty, while Lolita appears to be quite elusive. Lolita's features are emphasized, exaggerated and idealized. Even though Humbert describes the similarity between Lolita and Annabel by claiming that “Everything they shared made one of them” (42), he lets Lolita take the first place for good:

the vacuum of my soul managed to suck in every detail of her bright beauty, and these I checked against the features of my dead bride [...] this Lolita, my Lolita, was to eclipse completely her prototype [...] my discovery of her was a fatal consequence of that "princedom by the sea" in my tortured past (42).

Moreover, as far as hundreds of years ago, St. Thomas Aquinas set the prerequisites of beauty by saying that they must originate in senses, which seems to be applicable to Lolita's case to a great extent, too. This idea can be supported by Michal Sýkora's proposition that Lolita's presence means an aesthetic experience for all Humbert's senses: sight, smell, hearing, touch and taste (Sýkora, 2004, p. 73). In particular, Humbert portrays Lolita to smell “almost exactly like the other one, the Riviera one, but more intensely so” (45). Other time, when describing Lolita's looks, Humbert explains that “I simply love that tinge of Botticellian pink, that raw rose about the lips” (71). In other words, it seems that Lolita meets all the requirements perfection. Nevertheless, since Lolita is the incarnated version of Annabel, it is rather odd that only a few pages of the novel focus on Annabel, whilst Lolita is described in great detail. Annabel is a part of Humbert's childhood which is drawn only on a couple of the novel's initial pages and as early as at the end of *Lolita's* third chapter, Annabel's death is announced. On the other hand, Annabel is present throughout the whole novel in the version of the idealized Lolita. Since Lolita is a compensation for Annabel, it can be stated that whom Humbert loves is not the real Lolita but purely her idealized version.

In conclusion, the allusions of Edgar Allan Poe's Annabel Lee in *Lolita* figures as a symbol of childhood love and innocence, since Humbert and Annabel shared strong feelings for each other and their pure love was untouched by sexual encounter. Moreover, Nabokov did not let Annabel grow up and therefore she is remembered as an innocent child throughout the whole novel. Thanks to this fact, Annabel Leigh is forever embedded in Humbert's mind as the symbol of perfection, which makes the use of Poe's poem essential.

Literature

1. Appel, Alfred, Jr. 1991. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Annotated Lolita*. Penguin Books, 1991.
2. Cummings, Michael J. 2005. Annabel Lee/By Edgar Allan Poe/A Study Guide. In *Cummings Study Guides For the Great Works of World Literature*. [online] 2005. [cit. 2009-02-03]
<http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides7/Annabel.html#Top>
3. Kant, Immanuel. 1892. Of the Ideal of beauty. In *The Critique of Judgement*. [online] 1892. [cit. 2008-06-06]
http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=1217&chapter=97477&layout=html&Itemid=27>
4. Nabokov, Vladimir. 2006. *Lolita*. London: Penguin Books, 2006.
5. Nabokov, Vladimir. 1980. The Metamorphosis. In *Lectures on Literature*. [online] 1980. [cit. 2008-09-09] <http://imani.wordpress.com/2007/08/03/the-definition-of-art/>
6. Poe, Edgar Allan. 1991. Annabel Lee. In *The Raven and Other Favorite Poems*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1991.
7. Sartwell, Crispin. 2006. Beauty; *English*, The object of longing. In *Six Names of Beauty*. Routledge, 2006.
8. Sýkora, Michal. 2004. Hledání mezi románové řeči (Lolita). In *Vladimir Nabokov- „Americká témata“*. Brno: Host, 2004.

Summary

This article focuses on analysis of allusions to Edgar Allan Poe's poem *Annabel Lee* in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. It explores the source of the protagonist's obsession with girl-children, or "nymphets". As it is explained, his trauma flows from his childhood loss of a girl called Annabel Leigh. Lolita in his eyes is the incarnated ideal of beauty showing considerable similarities to Poe's Annabel. Thanks to the allusions to Poe's work, the symbol of innocent love, beauty and purity is articulated in the novel.