

The Dead Poet's Society

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by Madeline Stahl

[1] In 1849 Edgar Allan Poe wrote "Annabel Lee," a poem about his deceased young wife, whom he married when she was only thirteen years old. This poem of forbidden love, envy, jealousy, and tragedy inspired Russian author Vladimir Nabokov to write *Lolita*, which was published in 1955. Nearly half a century later, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* aired, introducing Spike, a hybrid of the molds Poe and Nabokov created. Spike, like Poe and Humbert Humbert, the protagonist of *Lolita*, is a creature living on the borders of humanity in an immortal world where love, poetry, obsession, madness, and death are inextricably intertwined.

[2] Poe's poem speaks of a "kingdom by the sea" where he and his love, his Annabel Lee, met doom at the hands of jealous angels. In reality, Poe's Annabel is his wife (and cousin) Virginia Clemm (Wilson). They married in 1836 when Poe was twenty-seven, and she was thirteen. In Poe's time, it was not uncommon to marry one's cousin, but taking such a young wife *was* quite uncommon (Wilson). Virginia died of tuberculosis eleven years after their marriage (Wilson), but in the poem that her death inspired, Poe wrote that they were, in fact, the same age and blamed her death on green-eyed onlookers:

"*She was a child and I was a child,
In this kingdom by the sea,
But we loved with a love that was more than love-
I and my Annabel Lee-
With a love that the wingd seraphs of Heaven
Coveted her and me.*"

Eventually, these covetous seraphs sent a wind "chilling and killing" Annabel Lee, and Poe became heartbroken yet defiant in his anger. He told the angels that no being of Heaven or hell could ever "dissever my soul from the soul/ of the beautiful Annabel Lee" (Poe).

Through Annabel's story the reader catches a glimpse of that place where love and death- mortality and immortality- meet. Poe and Annabel share a love so intense, their souls merge, and it is this ardor which dooms Annabel and tortures Poe.

[3] Nabokov recreates Poe's "kingdom by the sea" but tells a story more attune to Poe's actual life than his poem. Humbert, the first person narrator of *Lolita*, is three-times older than his darling nymphet, who completely consumes his existence and is the subject of his novel which he writes from prison. Humbert begins his novel, writing, "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul" (Nabokov 9). He alludes to the judgmental angels of "Annabel Lee," saying, "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns" (9). And, yet again, the reader is taken to a place, that strange place, where dichotomies unite, which Humbert calls "the portion of hell and the portion of heaven in that strange, awful, maddening world- nymphet love. The beastly and the beautiful merged at one point" (143). Like Poe, Humbert is tortured in his happiness and his darling child seems fated to die.

[4] Humbert's lover, his Lolita, is no ordinary girl, however, and he is quick to identify and define her inimitable characteristic. According to him, "Between the ages of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature, which is not human, but nymphic (that is demonic)" (Nabokov 17). And these "bewitched travelers" cannot be just anybody; "You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy" (18). Spike certainly fits this category, and for him *slayer* is synonymous with *nymphet*. Just as a nymphet's power is demonic, a Slayer's power is rooted in "the energy of the demon" (Get it Done 7015). Humbert and Spike are doomed to seek out these beautiful demons, not out of perversion, but because it is their curse that their souls be incomplete without them.

[5] Spike and Humbert both try to fulfill this void in alternative ways, projecting the identities of their lovers on other women- girlfriends, wives, prostitutes, or, in Spike's case, a Buffybot- but these ventures never satisfy them. Their precious demons have utterly penetrated every inch of their being. Humbert woefully writes, "Don't think I can go on. Heart, head- everything. Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita" (Nabokov 116), and Spike declares himself Buffy's "willing slave" (Once More With Feeling 6007). Soon this feeling of incompleteness is projected onto Buffy and Lolita, as if, outside of the context of their relationships with Spike and Humbert, the girls become less real. Spike repeatedly tells Buffy that no one understands her like he does, and in "Wrecked," as Buffy watches the rest of the Scooby gang dance from the balcony in the Bronze, Spike tells her, "You belong in the shadows... with me." Love is twisted by obsession driven mad with craving, and soon these carnal desires demand fulfillment.

[6] "I am now faced with the distasteful task of recording a definite drop in Lolita's morals," writes Humbert almost mockingly (the following paragraph actually details Lolita's monetary greed not the sexual adventures that are implied) (Nabokov 194). Sex is an ever-present issue which lurks in the background of every sentence and every scene, yet the details remain vague. What we do know is that these nymphets, these slayers, are erotic animals who seem to be made for copulation. After Lolita and Humbert first have sex, Humbert states that he will not bore his readers with details "suffice it to say that not a trace of modesty did I perceive in the beautiful hardly formed young girl" (142). And Spike scoffs at Buffy for downplaying her 'enthusiasm' when she calls their sexual encounter "perverse" and "degrading" (Wrecked 6010). She concedes, "That might be how you get off, but it's not my style," to which Spike responds, "No, it's your calling. Gave me a run for my money, Slayer" (Wrecked 6010). A calling indeed, the lure of a nymphet and a slayer is distinctly sexual, but when conflated with the conscience of a human girl problems arise.

[7] Buffy and Lolita express disgust with the state of their lives. Disgust in their

impropriety. Buffy runs away from Spike in a repugnant huff after sex so regularly that after one sexual episode Spike jokes, "Isn't this usually the part where you kick me in the head and run out, virtue fluttering?" (Dead Things 6013). Likewise, the morning after Lolita and Humbert first have intercourse, she chastises him, saying, "You chump...You revolting creature. I was a daisy-fresh girl, and look what you've done to me. I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me. Oh you dirty, dirty old man"(Nabokov 149). These happy little idiosyncrasies of nauseated self-hatred do not escape the prying eyes of the lecherous men, who feel hurt and confused by it. Humbert sadly recalls, "She had entered my world, umber and black Humberland, with rash curiosity; she surveyed it with a shrug of amused distaste; and it seemed to me now that she was ready to turn away from it with something akin to repulsion" (175). Spike often appears to be hurt that he must remain Buffy's dirty little secret throughout the sixth season, and in his frustration he sings, " If my heart could beat, it would break my chest/ But I can see you're unimpressed/ So leave me be" (Once More With Feeling 6007). The men cannot seem to understand the disappointment that Buffy and Lolita find in themselves for not being the kind of women that they think they should be.

[8] Spike and Humbert seem to have a much easier time accepting their shunned sexual encounters. They both explain it as a natural bodily function. Spike, famously declared, "Love isn't brains, children, it's blood... blood screaming inside you to work its will. I may be love's bitch, but at least I'm man enough to admit it" (Lover's Walk 3008). Similarly, Humbert claims, "I have but followed nature. I am nature's hound" (Nabokov 143). These men, however, are not *solely* concerned with sex. Their top priority is something akin to human intimacy. Humbert, rather poetically, writes, "I recall certain moments, let us call them icebergs in paradise, when after having my fill of her- after fabulous, insane exertions that left me limp and azure-barred- I would gather her in my arms with, at last, a mute moan of human tenderness," (302) and Spike calls an evening spent simply holding Buffy, "The best night of my life" (End of Days 7021). It seems that in these brief moments of

intimacy the thunder of battle, which is perpetual in the mind of these "enchanted hunters," is quieted and for a mere second their mind, body, and soul are in harmony (Nabokov 124).

[9] Lolita and Buffy, however, are a different story, and, furthermore, we must be careful not to converge the two identities. Lolita is a thirteen year old schoolgirl and Buffy is not. Lolita epitomizes all that is nymphic while Buffy breaks the mold of "slayer," defying traditional, patriarchal structures (namely the Watcher's Council) and sharing the strength that was once reserved for her alone with girls across the globe. Still, Lolita and Buffy may be more similar than one tends to think. Lolita is not the ignorant, victimized child many would have her be. As Dr. Zymph says in Stanley Kubrick's film version of *Lolita*, "She either has exceptional control or no control at all. We cannot decide which." And when it comes to Spike, Buffy may not be the disciplined, controlled woman that she wishes she could be. Both nymphet and slayer willingly enter into sexual relationships with their respective suitors (though how capable a thirteen year old is of making that decision is certainly debatable), and, in fact, Lolita and Buffy both initiated the first seduction. Both are disgusted at the state of their lives, yet, despite their best efforts at chastity and modesty, Buffy and Lolita return to their enchanted hunters. The true distinction between the two in respect to their sexual relationships is simply that Buffy truly cares for Spike.

[10] Likewise, Spike and Humbert have their differences. As mentioned previously, Spike is a hybrid of Poe and Nabokov's protagonist, because, as a vampire, Spike is able to live in both contexts where he loves *as a child* and as a man *twice or many times older* than Buffy. He is around 200 years old, yet, he is eternally young. Spike's vampiric nature is also one contributing factor which qualifies him as a "bewitched traveler" (Nabokov 18). William alone could not achieve the level of madness necessary to love a slayer and, therefore, needs Spike. William, however, is a poet, providing the artistic element required to love a slayer. It is an unavoidable merging of dichotomies; Vampire and poet must

coincide to love the Slayer.

[11] This curious symbiotic relationship is a source of great torture, because the opposing natures are always trying to extinguish the other. Yet their common goal, the love of a nymphet or slayer, binds them. In defending this goal, this obsession, Humbert, the poet, says, "We are not sex fiends! We do not rape as good soldiers do. We are unhappy, mild, dog-eyed gentlemen... ready to give years and years of life for one chance to touch a nymphet. Emphatically, no killers are we. Poets never kill" (Nabokov 93). Likewise, William, whose most vagrant display of aggression is quietly calling a man, who has just embarrassed and insulted him in front of his peers and the woman he loves, a "vulgarian," seems quite incapable of murder, preferring to chase unrequited love ("Fool for Love").

[12] Nonetheless, Humbert and Spike *are* murderers. Humbert purposefully and proudly extinguishes Clare Quilty and shows no remorse for killing him. Spike is a vampire. Enough said. But even when Spike retrieves his soul, he does not spend years repenting as Angel did. Principal Wood confronts Spike about killing his mother just weeks after his soul is returned, and Spike says, "I don't give a piss about your mum. She was a slayer. I was a vampire. That's the way the game is played" (Lies My Parents Told Me 7017).

[13] Humbert and Spike, however, are not so callous in all matters of morality. They deeply, deeply regret and repent raping Lolita and Buffy. In discussing his trial for the murder of Clare Quilty, Humbert says, "Had I come before myself, I would have given Humbert at least thirty five years for rape, and dismissed the rest of the charges" (Nabokov 327). Similarly, Spike returns to Sunnydale a mentally tortured mess, and in "Help" he tells Buffy, "I hurt you, Buffy, and I will pay. I am paying because I hurt the girl." For the first time, they are capable of looking at these girls and actually *seeing* them. Nymphet and slayer, no longer shrouded in their demonic guise, become two women, two human beings. And they have been hurt. Fueled with sorrow and repentance, Humbert and Spike begin

the long journey toward redemption.

[14] Humbert began righting his wrongs by killing Clare "Cue" Quilty, a fellow bewitched traveler who took Lolita away from him. Quilty is a darker shadow of the kind of man Humbert could have been. Cue's interest in Lolita was purely sexual, not rooted in love as Humbert's was. In killing Quilty, Humbert hoped to put to rest that perverted part of his physicality which hurt his dear Lolita, but he can never really extinguish it entirely. It is the manifestation of a battle Humbert has been fighting all his life: poet vs. murderer. In an intriguing gesture, Humbert gives Quilty a piece of paper and demands him to read it, telling him that it is his death sentence. It was a poem:

"Because you took advantage of a sinner
Because you took advantage
Because you took
Because you took advantage of my disadvantage...
Because you cheated me of my redemption...
Because of all you did
Because of all I did not
You have to die" (318).

He kills Cue. Later, Humbert offers Lolita words of atonement; "I loved you. I was a pentapod monster, but I loved you. I was despicable and brutal, and turpid, and everything... And there were times when I knew how you felt, and it was hell to know it, my little one. Lolita girl, brave Dolly Schiller" (302). Tragic Humbert is denied redemption during his lifetime, because he can never quite reach Lolita on a human level. He suffers the rest of his life being tortured in that soul crushing world of nymphet love.

[15] Spike's path to redemption is much more successful. After attempting to rape Buffy, he goes to retrieve his soul, realizing that, though his vampiric nature must be present to love a slayer, to love Buffy Summers the poet must prevail. Surprisingly, however, the restoration of one's soul is not quite the warm fuzzy feeling you might think. Seeing the pain and anguish it causes him, Buffy asks, "Why? Why would you do that?" and Spike

replies, "Buffy, shame on you. Why does a man do what he mustn't? For her. To be hers. To be the kind of man who would nev-- To be a kind of man" (Beneath You 7002). He slowly approaches a large cross, pauses, and then drapes himself over it, sizzling his flesh, and he asks, "Can we rest now? Buffy, can we rest?" Eventually, Spike's humanity saves him, which he is able to find through loving Buffy. In Buffy, Spike finds a place to rest.

[16] Humbert is not able to find this during his lifetime. The poet, however, lives on through his novel, and though in the beginning Humbert claimed that his purpose for writing it was to sort out the tangled world of nymphet love, he reveals his true purpose in the final paragraph of *Lolita*. Addressed directly to Lolita, Humbert expounds fatherly advice and wishes his dear child all the best, all the wonderful things that she deserves. Finally, recognizing his impending death, he tells her, "I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita" (327). Through literature, through art, Humbert creates a universe where he can rest with the love of his life.

[17] Spike and Humbert, are powerful characters, but do not forget their tragedy is based on a real life man- Edgar Allan Poe. Poe *really was* robbed of his wife. She was a *real* person, and he really loved her beyond comprehension. And she died. Poe's life began to fall apart, and he turned to alcohol to numb the pain of loneliness (Wilson). It is rumored that his last words were, "Lord, help my poor soul" (Wilson). Long before he died, however, he wrote a poem. Poe also took refuge in art, securing and creating a place of his own where he could rest for eternity with his beloved wife:

"And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride,
In her sepulcher there by the sea-
In her tomb by the side of the sea."

[18] Poe crawls into his resting place, caressing and nuzzling a memory. Humbert follows

his lead and spills his soggy, beaten heart onto blank pages, and Spike, instead of documenting his devotion, lives a life of poetry, fighting at the side of his lover. These three men, these enchanted hunters, claw their way out of that singular place where the past meets the present and beauty collides with nothingness. They take sanctuary in literature and art and in doing so create a place for other weary travelers to rest, if only for a moment. Their stories may be stories of death, but they are timeless. Poets never die.

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