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BACHELOR THESIS

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**Reading Nabokov's Humbert Humbert through historical and  
socio-cultural prism**

Vnímání Nabokovovy postavy Humberta Humberta  
na historickém a sociálně kulturním pozadí

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## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this bachelor thesis, entitled "Reading Nabokov's Humbert Humbert through historical and socio-cultural prism" is a result of my own work and that all sources which were used are listed on the Works cited page.

Prague, April 9th 2015

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## **Abstract**

The scholarly appraisal of Nabokov's Humbert Humbert generally sees him as a very intriguing yet morally flawed character. It is therefore interesting to see his depraved views and sexual tendencies within the context of how people have historically thought about female nubility and maturity. The thesis does not seek to de-stigmatise paedophilia, yet it aims at providing some historical framework towards understanding (1) why the widely embraced cultural relativism does not exonerate paedophilia and (2) how some historically-grounded attitudes of humankind towards female maturity align with Humbert Humbert's tendencies.

**Key words:** child marriages; paedophilia; nubility; female maturity; Lolita; age of consent; child sexual abuse; childhood; sexual intercourse.

## **Abstrakt**

Vědecké posouzení postavy Humberta Humberta z románu Nabokova "Lolita" ho zpravidla popisuje jako postavu poutavou a přesto mravně vadnou. Proto by bylo zajímavé prozkoumat jeho neřestné názory a sexuální sklony v kontextu lidského pohledu na ženskou zralost a pohlavní dospělost v průběhu historie. Tato bakalářská práce si neklade za cíl ospravedlnit pedofilii, avšak zaměřuje se na poskytnutí historického rámce k tomu, abychom porozuměli, (1) proč široce rozsáhlý kulturní relativismus nepřipouští pedofilii a (2) jak některé historicky zakořeněné postoje lidstva vůči ženské zralosti odpovídají Humbertovým sklonům.

**Klíčová slova:** sňatek s nezletilou; pedofilie; pohlavní dospělost; ženská zralost; Lolita; legální věk způsobilosti k pohlavnímu styku; sexuální zneužívání dětí; dětství; pohlavní styk.

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# **Reading Nabokov's Humbert Humbert through historical and socio-cultural prism**

## **Introduction**

Nabokov's novel *Lolita* being first banished in America, later on became one of the most read and critically acclaimed books of the 20th century and still continues to be very intriguing and attracts the attention of many readers and critics. Its main theme of love between a man in his late thirties and a teenage girl, who has just started to explore her femininity and attractiveness, became so well-known all over the world that *Lolita* has become a term which is now summarily used to denote a young pretty girl who is perceived as sexually attractive. Possibly the most controversial and unsettling aspect of the book resides in the fact that Humbert Humbert (H.H.), the main character and the protagonist, repeatedly tries to persuade the reader that such an attraction, one that a man like him feels toward a girl who just has started to explore her sexuality, is a more or less common phenomenon (as he illustrates by means of some historical facts). Therefore it might be interesting to take a look at the history of different cultures and societies in order to find out what attitude to female nubility and maturity was predominant in those times and why. This thesis certainly does not attempt to apply postmodern relativism on the painful problem of juvenile sexual molestation. However, it does seek to survey the degree to which Humbert's position, which to the modern western mind verges on paedophilia, coincides with various views on the subject across different cultures, ancient, pre-modern and modern.

The theoretical part of the thesis will provide a historical and cultural overview of attitudes to female nubility and maturity in ancient times, in medieval times, in the Renaissance and in modern times going throughout the continents, different nations and religions looking for the differences and similarities which would underscore the relativist view upon female physical maturity and eligibility for partnership. It will also take a look at the attitude to female maturity in matriarchal societies comparing it with the patriarchal ones. This survey will then be juxtaposed against Nabokov's iconic character, namely the views which he espouses throughout the book.

One of the purposes of the theoretical part is to throw light upon the reasons for certain attitudes to women analysing social and cultural backgrounds of the society.

As has been said, the thesis does not seek to de-stigmatize paedophilia or to defend Humbert Humbert's view upon women but to show the relativity of such a topic as female maturity.

The practical part seeks to make a meaningful comparison between H.H.'s defence regarding his sexual orientation and the historical and socio-cultural facts examined in the theoretical part. The analysis will deal with Humbert's utterances in which he tries to persuade the reader in the normality of his desire as well as his deeds.

The thesis will also examine Lolita's character which, according to Humbert's belief, undermines his moral values, compelling him to commit the vilest of crimes.

Humbert's case can be seen from two points of view. First, his defence in which he aims to prove himself to be a "normal male" who "followed nature", putting emphasis on Lolita's physiological maturity (Nabokov 135). Furthermore H.H. can be scrutinized in the role of Lolita's guardian and Lolita's stepfather offering protection to his under-aged stepdaughter.

Finally, I conclude the thesis with the short analysis of Humbert's attitude towards sexual relations with children by examining his utterances throughout the novel and more specifically those of the last few chapters, and thus deriving from them the progressive change of his attitude towards himself and his actions.

# **I Theoretical part**

## **1.1 A synopsis of the novel, with a brief analytical preview**

Before exploring some historiography which may provide context for the attitudes of Nabokov's narrator, the theoretical part should provide a quick review of the novel and Humbert Humbert's leanings, actions and justifications. At the very beginning of the novel the main protagonist introduces the term "nymphet", indicating a girl from nine to fourteen years of age, whose nature is presumably not human but "demoniac" and who through her "fantastic power" makes certain men at least twice her age desire her madly in a sexual manner. He confesses to the reader his inclination towards little girls that he finds to be a common tendency among a particular group of "lone voyagers [...] with a bubble of hot poison in [their] loins" (Nabokov 17). Undisclosed by society, these "madmen" hide themselves among common people, dying of lust and shame.

Such is the main protagonist, Humbert, a well-educated European and a scholar who grew up in France and spent his early adulthood there. It is important to mention that Humbert's passion towards nymphets started with the unfulfilled teenage love to Annabel Leigh (an obvious intertextual reference to Poe's tragically perished young heroine Annabel Lee) whom he met when they were both children. After several attempts to adapt to common social norms of sexual life with adult women he moves to the United States where he meets the long-awaited embodiment of Annabel, Dolores Haze. Humbert moves in the house where Dolores lives with her mother and starts to refer to her as Lolita. He soon marries her mother, Charlotte, only in order to enjoy Lolita's presence and to be able to caress her under the pretence of being a loving and caring stepfather. After the accidental death of Charlotte Humbert takes Lolita from the summer camp she was at the time and intends to have sexual intercourse with her while she is unconscious, after secretly giving her sleeping pills. His plan does not work; she wakes up and ends up seducing him into a sexual intercourse. During this night H.H. finds out that Lolita lost her virginity a few days before with the only boy in the summer camp. The motives for this first sexual experience seem to have been mostly peer pressure. From that point of the story starts their long tour across the United States during which his desirable nymphet becomes his so called concubine.

In a desperate attempt to earn Lolita's love H.H. pampers her excessively with clothes, candies and a wide variety of entertainments but gets in return only her empty caresses and affectionless sexual services.

After two years of chaotic journey Humbert stops in Beardsley and enrolls Lolita in a school for girls, trying to restrict her from any contact with boys. Being obsessed with jealousy, Humbert

Humbert toughens the rules in the house, which later causes the rift in their relationship. She starts to wriggle from the severe restrictions imposed by her so called step-father and, after a big quarrel, she offers him to go on another trip. Gradually Lolita becomes aware of her power over his lust and attachment. It eventually enables her to take advantage of Humbert's emotional weakness by demanding more and more money for her "daily duties", the sexual services. Full of despair and disgust Humbert realizes what comes out of his adorable nymphet after these few years of constant sexual exploitation. At this stage Lolita seems to him more similar to another French teenage prostitute he met in the past than to the glorious vision of her he had before – he sees her as vulgar, manipulative, spoilt, and corrupt. Nonetheless Humbert is not yet capable of realizing his own contribution to Lolita's transformation.

During their travels Lolita becomes ill and is confined to a hospital for a few days. She is taken from the hospital by an acquaintance she met in Beardsley school, who also has impure sexual intentions towards her. This acquaintance has been following them from the beginning of their second trip. Overwhelmed by anger and desire for revenge, Humbert tries to pursue the fugitives, but to no avail. However, after two years of futile attempts he receives a letter from now seventeen-year-old Dolores Schiller, married and pregnant, asking her "step-father" for some money.

This way Humbert gets to know from Lolita the name of her accomplice, famous playwright Clare Quilty. Lolita confesses that Quilty was her only love. She tells Humbert that Quilty was a friend of her family. Humbert Humbert insistently intends to revenge the kidnapper even though he realizes that it will not help him to get closer to her again. He finds Quilty's house and murders him violently.

In the end of the novel Humbert is sent in prison waiting for the penal punishment for the murder. In the final scene Humbert is depicted in prison finally realizing the disastrous consequences of his behaviour upon Lolita's ruined childhood. The reader is given the feeling that a long period of contemplating his sins in solitude lays before him.

## **1.2 Definition of the terms "nubile" and "age of consent"**

It is obvious for a modern reader that novel *Lolita* is narrated by a paedophile or near paedophile (depending on our definition of the word) who tells us a story of his passionate and fatal love towards a twelve-year-old girl in all possible details and nuances and who is, however, not ashamed of his passion even though he fully realizes its abnormality and blameworthiness. However, the view upon this novel would probably had differed if it had been read in ancient times



or in medieval times or in another part of the world whose rules, laws and traditions are significantly different from the ones in modern European society. The reason for this lies in the attitude to female physical maturity and social as well as cultural customs of the particular society.

Whereas paedophilia is now considered to be an utterly unnatural and pathological aberration that cannot be reconciled with our social norms, paedophilia as a term did not appear as far back in time as it might seem. To understand the phenomenon of paedophilia and its origin, it is necessary to define the terms "*nubility*" and "*age of consent*".

#### Nubility

*Nubile* refers to a young woman who is 1.) "suitable for marriage, especially in regard to age or physical development; 2.) sexually developed and attractive". (Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary)

#### Etymology

The word *nubile* first was spread in France in 16th century in the sense of "marriageable" (as said of a woman). It can be traced to the Latin word *nubilis* that has the same meaning, i.e. "marriageable" derived from the stem *nubere* meaning "to take as husband". The word acquired the meaning "sexually attractive" (as said of a young girl) in 1973. (Online Etymology Dictionary)

*Age of consent* – (Law.) "the age at which a person is considered competent to consent to marriage or sexual intercourse". (Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary)

The terms nubility and age of consent therefore refer to female maturity, more specifically, her physiological maturity which allows her to enter into sexual contact with men. Nubility is now often mentioned while defining paedophilia. Sexual intercourse with a female child is not considered paedophilia if the girl is nubile, that is mature enough. Nevertheless, in concordance with historical moment and geographic location ambiguity appears with regard to the perception of the age in which a girl is believed to be mature enough for sexual relations. Whereas throughout the European history until the end of nineteenth century, as it will be shown further in the theoretical part, girls were considered to be nubile with the first appearance of menstruation, which may have been around the age of twelve, with the spreading of the new concept of childhood and especially girlhood the perception of nubility changed considerably. Since the end of nineteenth century Europeans started looking at pubescent females as underdeveloped and thus certainly unsuitable for sexual intercourse. However, the reason for considering pubescent children immature does not lay in their physiological but rather psychological immaturity, which is more important than corporeal

criteria. Since the end of nineteenth century, psychological maturity of a child is believed to be essential for the healthy commencing of their sexual life.

Due to the change in attitude towards female maturity, society's view upon paedophilia also changed. This attitude emerges from Nabokov's *Lolita* through the character of Humbert Humbert who is well-informed about the social shift of attitude towards nubility. Humbert bases his justification on historical evidence that sustains the "old" perception of nubility, according to which Humbert's actions would be accepted or at least not severely judged and considered as paedophilia.

The question arises as to whether nubility is a universally valid criterion for beginning sexual life or is it a relative measure that can vary with social beliefs, values and customs and thus cannot be looked upon as a clearly distinct biological concept.

The forthcoming research of different attitudes to female maturity throughout the continents and centuries will have the goal of throwing light on this complex topic in order to understand Nabokov's Humbert Humbert with his passion and sexual inclinations.

## **II Attitude to female nubility and maturity in patriarchal societies**

### **2.1 Ancient Greece**

"Everybody raises a son even if he is poor, But exposes a daughter even if  
he is rich"

(fragment 11, Kock)

Fourth-century BC comic poet Poseidippos

In order to understand the social traditions of marriage in ancient times it is necessary to clearly see the picture of patriarchal society with its attitude to women and their role within it. A patriarchy sees men as superior to women, thus giving a man the right to rule and to decide for himself as well as on behalf of a woman. Women of ancient Greece were considered to be inferior to men due to their "wild nature" which separated them from the rational and comprehensible world. This, as Halperin suggests, obliged men to "control the wild eros of women and so impose civilized order in the chaos of nature" (Halperin 143). B.F. Skinner adds that certain distinctive features of women's physiology, like menstruation, "began to be seen as insalubrious or disgusting" (Skinner 198). Beside that the presumed "woman's unrestrained appetite of sexual intercourse" made society believe that "woman's innate ability to act as a moral agent was inferior" (Skinner 198).

Men historically tended to possess all the advantages of the social life. The law listened to the man's voice and generally took it as the only right one, whereas women were deprived of most of the rights that men had. Women were disinherited and had no legal claim on property, thus making men only wish for male children. Sue Blundell in her book *Women in Ancient Greece* proclaims that in case "a man had only a daughter he could adopt a male child and made him marry his daughter and thus the adopted child could inherit the property" (Blundell 117).

The main role of a woman within society, which she was preparing for from her childhood, was to bear new citizens, at best males (Meyer). Sue Blundell explains, "The belief that women become wild and ungovernable at puberty [and] the stress on premarital virginity" were some of the reasons for early marriage to be widely regarded as desirable (Blundell 119). Moreover, an adult man marrying a little girl in her teens could bring her up as he wished so that his young wife behaved and ran the household in a way he would be pleased with (Blundell 119). Considering the fact that a woman was perceived as male's object and a tool for reproduction, such subordination and lack of respect regarding women could have been the reason of female infanticide that was common in ancient Greece as well as selling female new-born children to brothels.

The most common marriageable age for girls in Ancient Greece was around fourteen, whereas men were married in their thirties. The same situation prevailed in Roman Empire where, as Smith reports, "the girls were married from the age of twelve or thirteen" whereas the husband "could be [...] three times older than the bride" (Smith 210). As Sue Blundell points out, the age difference between spouses "would also strengthen male's superiority over women, intellectual inferiority of the female and would have reinforced the patriarchal attitudes towards women" (Blundell 119).

On top of that, in the book *Ancient Greek Love Magic* Faraone remarks that Greek folklore reinforced the idea of female savagery by depicting adolescent girls becoming mad and hysterical at puberty who acted like female animals in heat; not being able to restrain themselves from sexual desire and who thus behaved irrationally and foolishly (Faraone 170). Faraone then shows the mythological pattern "in which female adolescent hysteria (often eroticized) is to be "cured" by marriage and childbirth" (Faraone 170). The reason for this was probably lying in the fact that in marriage the girl would be under the control of her husband and society, thus taming her wildness. Faraone expounds on the idea of female adolescent hysteria by giving an example of the treatment of women in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, "in which the older women are portrayed in positive, rational and even patriotic roles, while the younger women appear as slaves to their desires for wine and sex who must to be locked up in the Acropolis by *Lysistrata*" (Faraone 170). Faraone explains "[the] notion of rabid female passion as a necessary transitional or developmental phase" (Faraone 170).

Enriching the wealth of the family and making new profitable connections between families was a common reason for a marriage to occur (Blundell 119-121). In such cases the future bride usually did not know or had not ever seen her husband or, having seen him, did not want to unite her life with him; yet she was still obliged to marry the respective man against her will (Blundell 119-121).

Beside those women whose main purpose in life was to bear legitimate children and to help in running husband's household there were concubines, women whose life duty was "men's daily bodily care" (Sex Education Links). The tradition of keeping one or two concubines at home was very common at least among upper classes in Ancient Greece (Blundell 124). Concubines could not marry male citizens due to their low origin (usually they were slaves or foreigners or came from a poor family that could not afford dowry) thus their relationship with a man was semi-formal (Blundell 124). Concubines' legal status was somewhere between a wife and hataera (prostitute). Much like wives, they were considered to be a man's property and were not allowed to have sexual intercourse with anyone else (Blundell 124).

## **2.2 Ancient China**

The situation with marriage in Ancient China looked different. In the period 122-221 B.C. during the Ch'in Dynasty, the age of marriage for the girl was fifteen; for the young man twenty. Baber remarks, "Emperor Cheng Kuan (A.D. 627) effectively disposed of the leftovers in the matrimonial market. He issued a decree that if a young man over twenty and a girl over fifteen were single, the local magistrate should marry them with due ceremony" (Baber 131). Relatives and neighbours were about to help them financially or in other ways in case the marrying couple was poor.

The betrothal usually took place a few years before the marriage, when the girl was at the age of 7-14 (Baber 134). The purpose of marriage itself was to prolong the family clan so that the family name would not die out. It was a duty rather than a matter of love or wealth. During the betrothal, there was a custom of exchanging presents between the two families, after which the future union of the young couple was certain and could not be dissolved (Baber 135).

As in Ancient Greece and Rome, Ancient China also had a custom of having a concubine whose duty was to satisfy man's desires. Amaro points out the position of concubines in society, stating that they were "literally sex toys to the Chinese male" (Amaro). There were, however, strict social rules regarding the role and status of a concubine. For instance, a concubine was not allowed to stay in the man's house after the sexual intercourse, she was obliged to leave. Sexual duties were

also regulated by rules and norms of the society and were supposed to be strictly obeyed. John Amaro gives the following report on Ancient Chinese regulations in the matter of sexual life of a concubine (Amaro):

In the Li-Chi one of the earliest texts of love it states that until a concubine reaches 50, the husband shall have intercourse with her once every five days. Bear in mind the usual ancient Chinese male may have had three or four wives and five or more concubines. This was an incredible obligation. The husband was allowed to retire from his sexual obligations when he reached the age of 60.

### **2.3 The Middle Ages and Renaissance**

If we adhere to the European development trajectory, the classical Greco-Roman Europe gradually dissolved into medieval times. The Middle Ages was the period of spreading Christianity that played an important role in shaping the moral principles of the European society. One of the Christian imprints that manifests itself even nowadays is the presumably sinful nature of sexuality, as well as the emblematic guilt which women presumably bear from the original sin. We cannot deny that a woman was not considered an equal human being to a man in ancient times. However, one can admit that relationships towards women even further worsened with the spreading of Christianity as it will be shown further on.

Partly sanctioned by biblical injunctions, Christian religion saw women as sinful beings, full of temptations which drew man aside from chastity and thus from God. According to Neumann, monks were advised to avoid women's presence. It was prohibited for a woman to enter the monastery (Neumann 600). Men were afraid of women and their wild nature that tempted them to fall into sin. It might not be a surprise that paranoia about witchery is thought to have appeared during that time. A convicted witch was chased and punished by being burned in a fire.

Marriage, however, was the most appropriate and respectful social status for all those who were not able of devoting one's life to God through celibacy.

Neumann reveals that marriage out of love was not advisable and even tended to be forbidden by the church (Neumann 606); what is more, love which was considered to be tightly connected with lust was believed to be sinful. The presence of love and passion between a man and a woman showed growing tendency of the couple to sink into the mud of temptations and sins. On the contrary, in order to keep the sanctity of marriage future spouses should not feel strong attraction towards each other, as Neumann declares (Neumann 606).

The purpose of marriage remained the same, namely the reproduction of new members of society. Sexual intercourse between the spouses had only a reproductive purpose as the church preached. Duby specifies that it was highly recommended for a couple to keep a tight rein on any sexual contact throughout the marriage because only in this way could they avoid committing a sin (Duby).

Premarital sex was common in the period of the Renaissance, even though there was general preference for bridal virginity, often checked publicly after the first night of marriage. For this reason there appeared a variety of decoctions and other artificial methods of attaining fake virginity (Neumann 68).

Throughout this period in history, the most frequent marriageable age for girls was twelve, with the onset on menarche; for the boys fourteen. The betrothal usually took place when the future spouses were at the age of seven to ten, the marriage, however, could be consummated after the girl reached maturity; that is with her first month period. "Throughout the Middle Ages marriage between a ten-year-old girl and a much older man was not exceptional, even though twelve years was by law the minimum age for marriage" (Schinaia 97). Such marriage was considered valid and could not be annulled from the moment the girl reached twelve or in case it was consummated namely after the sexual intercourse. "Even if the husband had technically raped his wife before she reached puberty, the marriage was regarded as consummated" (Encyclopaedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society).

## **2.4 Attitude to female nubility and maturity in modern times**

### **2.4.1 Child marriage in South Asia**

"Marriage is seen as an institution that protects women and girls and ensures  
their financial and physical security"  
("Child marriages in South Asia..." 17)

Statistically, half of all child marriages happening in the world occur in South Asia, where almost half of women are married during their puberty or even earlier. Legally marriageable age is fifteen in Afghanistan, sixteen in Pakistan and eighteen in Bangladesh and India. Nevertheless, practices of child marriages continue to prevail. The Center for Reproductive Rights struggles to protect women from marital violence, namely "forced initiation into sex" and "early, unplanned, and frequent pregnancies" ("Child marriages in South Asia..." 11).

Girls are put under a strong pressure of giving birth as soon as they are capable of reproducing in order to prove their fertility. Young brides are usually forced into sexual intercourse against their will and such non-consensual sex can last for their whole married life. The border between criminalized rape and sex as marital duty is very uncertain.

In 1890 Indian law "criminalized rape within marriage where the girl was under the age of 10" ("*Child marriages in South Asia...*" 24). In 1891, after the tragic death of the girl who had been raped by her 35-year-old husband while she was 11, the government increased the minimum age of sexual consent to 12. For some reasons it changed again in 2013. Since 2013 the Indian Penal Code criminalizes marital rape in cases where the wife is less than fifteen years old. The situation is similar in Afghanistan, where sex is legal within marriage where the girl has reached puberty. According to the law, the girl is considered to be raped if she had sex while being under 16 in such countries as Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka; however, the law of Sri Lanka "permits a man to legally have sex with his wife without her consent so long as she is above 12 years of age" ("*Child marriages in South Asia...*" 15).

#### **2.4.2 Africa. Northern Nigeria**

"An adult woman is considered one who has attained puberty and by the standards of pre-Islamic law, this is at the age of nine" (Khadir).

"One in four married girls in Nigeria has their first birth before the age of 15" notes Khabir in the article *The Role of Islam in Childhood Marriage* (Khabir). The husbands of such young brides are usually at least double their age and therefore have more life experience as well as sexual experience. Early initiation into sex might cause health problems to the young brides due to undeveloped sexual organs and physiological incompatibility between a young girl and an adult man. "Girls are usually pressured to bear children as soon as they are married, further increasing their risk and exposure to health problems related to early child birth" (Khadir).

Nigeria is the second biggest Muslim country in the world. Islam has been spreading in Nigeria since the 11th century and influences the rate of child marriages. Iyabode points out that "In 1999 Nigerian Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) showed that the median age of marriage in the South West and South East was 20.2 years whilst that of the North West was 14.6 years and slightly higher in the North East with 15.0 years" (Iyabode 86).

Sharia law, predominating in the Northern Nigeria, is believed by the Muslims not to be of human origin as all other laws but given by Allah through his Messenger, Prophet Mohammed. According to Sharia law, a girl is supposed to be ready for marriage at the beginning of the month that is with menarche (Iyabode 87-88). However, it is written in Quran that Mohammed got married to Aisha when she was nine. This fact is widely used by the Muslims in order to defend child marriages and to show Allah's approval of such a deed. The former Governor of the Zamfara State and a Senator, Ahmed Sani Yerima, recently married a 13-year-old Egyptian girl, who became his fourth wife (Iyabode 89-90). It turned out that Yerima's former wife was fifteen when they were married; two years later she was nursing a child when they divorced (Iyabode 90). The former Governor stated that he was acting according to law and his religious beliefs and thus did not do anything blameworthy. Nonetheless there continues to appear occasions of marital violence towards women as well as early marital deaths. Iyabode also mentions that "Recently in Yemen, Elham Madhin al-Assi, a 12-year-old girl died of internal bleeding three days after her March 29th wedding. The medical report by the hospital stated that she suffered from "sexual exhaust, cervix tears and severe bleeding" (Iyabode 91).

The Nigerian government, however, continues to deny accepting the Child's Rights Act, which prohibits child marriages, because of possible violent protest from the side of Muslims.

### **2.4.3 India**

"According to all the texts, it [marriage] is a samskaram or sacrament; [it is] one of the principal religious rites prescribed for purification of the soul"

Venkatacharyulu v. Rangacharyulu,  
1891 I.L.R. 14 (Mad.) 318.

(Francavilla 536)

India continues to be one of the few countries with high rate of child marriages, even though the minimum age of marriage prescribed in Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA) is eighteen for girls and twenty-one for boys. Official law does not seem to have big authoritative power on Indians. The reason for such wide spread practice of child marriages has its roots in Hindu culture and its set of values. It is difficult to change such values only by imposing legal restrictions without a deep change of the culture. An early marriage is perceived as duty for both men and women in the texts Dharmasutra and Dharmashastra - Hindu texts describing indications regarding personal life, marriage, household and other spheres of life (Francavilla 533). Francavilla illustrates that these



texts prescribe the suitable age for marriage for a girl as "a few months after puberty begins and even before" (Francavilla 533). Nevertheless, cases of early marriage can be found in which the bride is under the age of puberty. Indian Penal Code of 1860, section 375, clarifies when sexual intercourse is considered rape: "with or without [woman's] consent, when she is under ten years of age" (Francavilla 537). According to this law the minimum age of consent for a girl is ten. The age of consent was raised to twelve in 1891 (Francavilla 537). The restrictions do not seem to work, however. In 1921, as Francavilla remarks, "about 218,000 girls were married below the age of five, and about 8,500,000 were married before the age of fifteen" (Francavilla 541).

Early marriages can also be understood as an attempt to strengthen patriarchal order because a young bride, being married in early puberty, has no education, practical knowledge about life or life experience. Such inequality in age and experience between spouses makes young girls subordinates to the husband.

Another reason of proceeding child marriages in India is the custom of giving cash gifts or in other words dowry to the bridegroom's family. According to Hindu tradition, as Mercier suggests, "the longer the marriage arrangement is delayed, the more the dowry increases" (Mercier 382). That of course makes the bride's family hasten marrying their daughter; the fact whether a girl has reached puberty in such case does not play a decisive role.

An unusual fact considering perception of nubility in India is described by Stephen Robertson in the article *Age of Consent Laws*. He confirms that while India was under the influence of the British Empire, there were several attempts from the side of the British to rise the age of consent in India aiming to eliminate the custom of early marriages. As justification of early marriages the Indians claimed that "non-white races matured earlier, in part because of the environments in which they originated" (Robertson).

### **III Attitude to female nubility and maturity in matriarchal and matrilineal societies**

#### **3.1 Trobriand Society (Melanesia, Papua New Guinea)**

"The infantile sexual act, or its substitute, is [...] an innocent amusement"  
(Malinowski 55-59).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski conducted a research on a few islands in Melanesia, Papua New Guinea upon the Trobriand society, one of the few still existing matrilineal societies in the world. Beside the matrilineal system (passing

of the property to a female descendant, domination of women in regard to rights) the Trobrianders do not distinguish the role of the father. Basing his analysis on Malinowski's research, Carrier explains that, according to Trobrianders' beliefs, the embryo appears from the fusion of "maternal blood and *baloma*, matrilineal spirit. The father merely "opened the way," semen was thought to have no generative power, and physical resemblance between father and child was seen as the result of intimate nurture, not biology" (Carrier 43).

Apart from the unusual social order, the most surprising aspect of this tribal society is their sexual life. Malinowski discovered an attitude towards sexuality, and particularly towards pre-adolescent sexuality, which was, to his surprise, totally different from the European norm. Malinowski describes the way the young children of the tribe start discovering their sexuality openly and without any feeling of shame, playing games of mock marriage which besides other activities include sexual intercourse. According to the locals he interviewed, sexual games and amusements start at the very early age: girls start at the age of four or five. However, Malinowski assumes that Trobrianders have a strong tendency to exaggerate and thus suggests that the age at which girls begin to have full sexual intercourse is six to eight while the boys at ten to twelve years of age. Sexuality in this society is looked upon as a natural part of life; adults neither interfere nor limit their children's sexual pastimes. No violence or immoral behaviour with regard to the sexual activity was observed neither from the children nor from adults. The children's sexual upbringing has no systematic methodology; juveniles are left to themselves having complete freedom in their actions. Malinowski underlines that the infantile sexual act can appear only between peers. For an adult man or woman to desire sexual intercourse with a child is considered to be "improper and silly" (Malinowski 56-59). Malinowski also summarizes, "violation of children is unknown, and a person who played sexually with a child would be thought ridiculous and disgusting" (Malinowski 56-59).

Trobrianders' attitude to female physical maturity shakes our modern conception of children who from modern point of view need many years of moral education as well as time for proper physical and psychological development in order to be prepared emotionally, mentally and physically for sexual life. It seems that Trobriand society sees sexuality as something one does not need to prepare for, or otherwise said, to which one is preparing naturally from the first years of life and for which one does not need any moral explanation and teachings. It can be concluded that such open juvenile sexual activity can flourish in a society devoid of sexual violence and taboos.

### 3.2 Mosuo ethnic group (China)

"Men live, eat, and work with their maternal families by day, but after nightfall, they can seek entry into the flower chambers of any women they desire" (Stacey 243).

Another matrilineal society that has unusual social customs and attitude towards sexuality lives in Southwest China near the Lugu Lake. Judith Stacey, a professor of sociology at New York University, made a research after visiting Mosuo tribe in 2007, in which she examines Mosuo customs including the ones in regard to sexual life.

In the Mosuo ethnic group daughters inherit property and stay in their mother's home together with other siblings (both male and female) and their mother's relatives for their entire life. All the members of the extended family tend to household maintenance, upbringing of children born to all women of the family and care taking of aged relatives (Stacey 242).

Judith Stacey reports that members of the Mosuo society practice *tisese*, the so called walking marriages in which men visit their lovers in the night but have to return to their mother's home until dawn (Stacey 242). The sexual relationships are open and not obligatory with the only condition that they remain without discussion between the family members.

After a special ceremony a girl that has reached the age of thirteen gets a room of her own where she can invite the night visitors she wishes to have (Stacey 242). From this moment begins her sexual independence. The men in this society live their whole life in their mother's household and have liberty to meet their female lovers as they wish. However, these meetings can only take place in the woman's house (Stacey 242). Women may have as many lovers as they wish but are not compelled to bear children although a big family is considered to be advantageous in the running of the household.

### IV Synthesis

Some of these communal practices contribute fairly little towards the topic of female nubility and the definition of child molestation. However, the overview across different cultures gives at least some scope and context to the vigilance vis-a-vis underage sexual relations which has been the norm in the Western society for some time and which, in consequence, have made characters such a Humbert Humbert into violators of a social taboo. So, having described some global communities

which do not necessarily criminalize such behaviour, let us now focus on the legislative development in the West.

## **V Legislative norms of the age of consent in Europe and the U. S.**

Age of consent laws, otherwise known as statutory rape laws, seek to protect children from premature sexual contact with an adult or older teenager. However, the initial purpose of these laws is described to be first and foremost fathers' insurance in the safety of their daughters' virginity which was a valuable commodity since Antiquity (*Sex and Society* 54). Graham Parker claims that age of consent laws guaranteed female chastity before marriage thus the laws helped to regulate social order, ensure legitimate transfer of family property and "perpetuate male domination" (Parker 190).

Daryl J. Olszewski mentions the appearance of the first statutory rape laws in England in the thirteenth century, prohibiting sexual intercourse between an adult man and an unmarried girl under the age of twelve (Olszewski 695). The law changed in 1576 lowering the age of consent to ten (*Sex and Society* 55). In addition, Olszewski demonstrates the adopting of the English age of consent laws by the American colonies with further adaptations for the sake of women's safety, putting accent on protection of women from male sexual aggression. Colonial America statutory rape laws varied from state to state, allowing sexual intercourse with prepubescent females of ten or twelve years of age. Stephen Robertson points out that many European countries adopted the age of consent laws from the French Napoleonic code which sets the age of consent at eleven years of age, in 1791 raising it later to thirteen in the nineteenth century (Robertson).

The raising of the age of consent in the U.S. during the nineteenth and twentieth century is mainly attributed to the growing influence of the feminist movement (Olszewski 695). Feminist groups such as Women's Christian Temperance Union (Olszewski 695), The National Organization for Women (*Sex and Society* 55) among others, asserted female rights and protection from sexual violence. The newly updated age of consent in twentieth century United States varied from sixteen to eighteen years of age according to state. The laws developed "most rapidly in those states where women could vote" (*Sex and Society* 54). It is important to emphasize that in 1886 the age of consent laws in U.S allowed sexual intercourse with a young female of over seven years of age in Delaware until 1895; over ten or twelve in other states (Knudsen 106). Another reason for rising the age of consent in the U.S. during nineteenth and beginning of twentieth century is considered to be the opening of free public schools. Gordon B. Dahl mentions, this brought about an improvement in

child labour laws that stipulated minimum age or necessary school graduation for the young in order to be eligible for work (Dahl 690).

The reason for increasing the age of consent in nineteenth century England is considered to be the increased number of child prostitutes (Knudsen 106). As Stephen Robertson comments, "men [were] taking advantage of the innocence of girls just over the age of consent" (Robertson). The impulse for changing the age of consent is related to William Thomas Stead's article "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" describing the morbid situation of a young prostitute ("*Maiden Tribute – raising the age of consent*"). After a broad social protest against child prostitution the age of consent was increased to sixteen in 1885, being previously established at thirteen in 1875 (*Sex and Society* 54).

By the end of twentieth century U.S. statutory rape laws expanded to include both genders due to feminist reform campaigns regarding age of consent laws. In addition, as Robertson explains, "growing tolerance of homosexuality and desire to reach those at risk of AIDS" were another reason for protecting not only females from sexual exploitation but males as well (Robertson).

Age of consent in the U.S. nowadays varies between fourteen and eighteen, in the majority of states girls are allowed to have sexual intercourse at the age of sixteen ("*Age of Consent*" (1)).

### **5.1 Reinvention of childhood as a reason for increasing the age of consent**

Another important aspect for analysis is the modern concept of childhood that appeared in nineteenth century Europe and changed significantly the attitude towards children. Dean D. Knudsen uncovers the fact that children were often used throughout history for adults' sexual satisfaction even though the concept of sexual child abuse appeared only few decades ago (Knudsen 106). The appearance of the concept of child abuse can be considered the result of the new concept of childhood that first appeared during the Enlightenment period and extended in the nineteenth century, totally overlapping the old notion of childhood.

Medieval European society as well as society during the Renaissance period simply did not distinguish children from adults. Philippe Ariès, a French historian of family and childhood, discloses that childhood, perceived as a distinct period of human development, did not exist in that time (Ariès 125).

The church saw children as sinful beings prone to committing crimes. Thus children were supposed to be educated in a strict manner and scrupulously looked after. William Lecky observes the beginning of a shift in attitude towards children among the Victorians, who began to evaluate children's specific qualities and rights (Lecky 104-105). Later it developed into a concept of

children being pure and vulnerable creatures, in need of protection and care. Stephen Robertson specifies that the new notion perceives children "as particularly vulnerable to harm in the years around puberty" (Robertson). By 1920 Anglo-American legislators raised the age of consent to sixteen and in some states to eighteen (Robertson). Robertson explains this fact by stating, "While those ages were well beyond the normal age of menstruation, proponents justified them on scientific grounds that psychological maturity came later than physiological maturity" (Robertson). The notion of relatively late psychological maturity of children in comparison with their physiological maturity has appeared only in the last decade of the nineteenth century. It changed radically the vision upon human development, including the perception of marriage in relation to appropriate marriageable age. The period of childhood has now covered the later teenage years as well. Moreover the perception of the role of childhood in the natural development of a human being has changed too. Jeremy Rifkin points out that childhood has not become "an extended playful romp" but the period during which youngsters build their own identity (Rifkin).

An interesting view upon the purpose of age of consent laws is offered Stephen Robertson: "the law protected [teenagers] from themselves and from the immature understanding that led them to behaviours reformers considered immoral" (Robertson).

Parkhill underlines that childhood should be understood not as a distinct biological period of human existence which is characterized by some specific features, but rather as a social concept that can vary from culture to culture (Parkhill 103). Parkhill considers the perception of childhood to be comprised by social norms and beliefs that change over time. He also puts an emphasis on changeable point of view upon children's presupposed behaviour thus underlining that the innocence of a child (now widely believed to be an inherent feature of a child) is nothing else but innovative construction of Western societies (Parkhill 103).

## **5.2 The concept of child sexual abuse as a consequence of the extension of the period of childhood**

The new idea of prolonged childhood caused the change in perception of children as still vulnerable and immature in the age around puberty and thus incapable of making clear, conscious decisions. In the eyes of adults children became especially defenceless regarding sexuality. Juvenile's sexual maturity has become closely connected with psychological maturity. The onset of menstruation in case of girls no longer indicated sexual ripeness.

Due to new concept of delayed sexual maturity of children, adults felt responsible for protecting children from unwanted sexual contacts with other adults, who were believed to be more

determined and stronger. As an attempt for child protection the concern for child sexual abuse appeared. Knudsen explains that age plays a crucial role in a child's ability of consent to a sexual intercourse, more specifically in having enough knowledge "to decide whether to participate in sexual activities" (Knudsen 107). In the book *Child Maltreatment: Emerging Perspectives* Knudsen emphasizes Finkelhor's opinion about sexual consent in regards to children. Finkelhor presents two main conditions for consent which are: (1) knowledge about social norms regarding sexuality, moral understanding of its essence, consequences and probable risk of sexual contact and (2) right to consent or otherwise said ability to clearly say "yes" or "no" to sexual contact (Finkelhor 692-697). Finkelhor believes that these conditions, and particularly the right of consent, are not applicable to children as "by their nature [children] are incapable of truly consenting to sex with adults" (Finkelhor 692-697).

An important issue in relation to children's ability of consenting to sexual intercourse with an adult is influence of authority upon a child. This concern has been widely discussed in context of child sexual abuse.

It is well-known that sexual relationships between an adult authority (usually a teacher) and a child or a young person were common and even encouraged in Ancient Greece (Gentry 6). Even though such relationships were predominantly homosexual, the influence of the authority in this case is perceptible. Through sexual relations a teacher was believed to pass knowledge to students more effectively. However, nowadays the use of authority by an adult for the purpose of sexual contact is considered a misuse of this authority. Sexual relationships between a teacher and undergraduates are prohibited in some American universities, such as Harvard University, the University of California and Yale (Southall, Lewin). The American Association of University Professors suggests that "intimate relationships between students and professors make consent hard to determine because of the unequal power dynamic" (Southall, Lewin). Henceforth, the distinction between consent to a desirable or undesirable sexual contact with an authority cannot be clearly distinguished because of the dominating influence of the authority.

The same problem appears in case of incestuous relationship where children are under the influence of an adult authority. Sandra Butler declares that due to their "powerlessness in the family and early stage of psychological development" children are incapable of clear understanding adults' sexual behaviour and thus of proper and sincere consent (Haskell 24).

### 5.3 Paedophilia as a sexual perversion

There are many types of perversion that are described by psychiatrists and psychologists and which, however, are still being widely debated about, bringing many uncertainties and difficulties in creating a distinctive definition. The problem of defining perversion in a clear concrete way arises from the inability to define what might be called natural behaviour and what can be already considered as perversion. Nevertheless, all of the specialists in this topic as well as ordinary people would agree that paedophilia qualifies as a perversion, i.e. a violent deviation from the norm.

As was mentioned before, sexual perversion is summarily defined as unnatural sexual behaviour which does not serve its main natural function; which is reproduction. The demarcation line, so to speak, is understandably defined in cultural rather than biological terms, as "a twelve-year-old girl may be capable of reproducing, yet sex with her by an adult male counts as paedophilia, regardless of that biological fact" (Levi 194).

The reason for considering paedophilia as a perversion lies in the fact that an adult man can easily traumatize a girl physically (due to the undeveloped sexual organs of the girl) as well as psychically, as "paedophilia belongs to the psychoses" (Balint 192). Thus a paedophile's sexual behaviour can influence the teenager's personality in a harmful and unbeneficial way. Beside that, as Levi asserts, "the mere intensity of the seducer's sexual feeling can be traumatic to a child, even if the seducer is not strange or threatening". (Levi 201)

Fowler in his book *A Practitioners' Tool for the Assessment of Adults Who Sexually Abuse Children* published in London 2008 quotes Beckett's notion regarding men who abuse children. Having analysed men abusers in treatment, Beckett gives a description of the average paedophile:

typically emotionally isolated individuals, lacking in self-confidence, under assertive, poor at appreciating the perspective of others and ill-equipped to deal with emotional distress. They characteristically denied or minimized the full extent of their sexual offending and problems. A significant proportion was found to have little empathy for their victim; strong emotional attachment to children and a range of distorted attitudes and beliefs, where they portrayed children as able to consent to and not be harmed by sexual contact with adults. The men with the most problems in the above areas tended to be the most serious offenders. (Fowler 30)



## VI Practical part

### 6.1 Humbert Humbert's attempt of self justification

"You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style"

(Nabokov 9)

From the very beginning of Humbert Humbert's description of his aberrant passion towards little girls, the reader might notice a dramatic split in Humbert's character. On one hand he feels deeply "ashamed and frightened" of his sexual desires; on the other hand he seeks to justify his lust and deeds to himself as well as to modern society (Nabokov 18). Being a civilized citizen, well-educated and well behaved, Humbert Humbert generally tries to obey current age of consent law which forbade sexual intercourse with a female child under sixteen. Humbert acknowledges the moral norms dictated by Western society, though he strives for approval of his sexual inclinations through cultural relativism. He tries to find and present evidence that adult-child sexual interaction has been seen as normal and accepted by society throughout cultures and epochs in an attempt to defend his passion for pubescent girls. His desperate search for evidential material that would exonerate his sexual desires in terms of the society's approval is nothing else but his wish to feel comfortable with his sexual orientation within society, as well as a wish to find self-acceptance within, to look upon his sexual needs as something normal and morally acceptable or even right. However, the more approval he finds in history the more problematic it becomes for him to perceive himself as a normal and respectable citizen. The evidences he discovers only make his mind and soul waver between shame of his immoral inclinations, as it is perceived by western eyes, and the stubborn conviction that such sexual behaviour was a common phenomenon in other cultures and times and thus can be considered normal.

Throughout the book H.H. presents some historical facts in defence of his sexual tendencies. He remarks that according to Roman law a girl was considered to be mature for marriage and thus for sexual intercourse at twelve (Nabokov 135). His claim seems to be corroborated by scholarly consensus. According to Bonnie G. Smith, Roman law indeed allowed a girl to marry at "the age of twelve or thirteen" whereas the husband was usually "three times older than the bride" (Smith 210). Age of consent set in the Roman Empire, as Humbert Humbert announces, "is still preserved, rather tacitly, in some of the United States" (Nabokov 135). In reality, in mid twentieth century, which is when the story takes place, American law prohibited sexual contact with female children under

sixteen even though early sexual life became gradually accepted by American society due to new concept of adolescence and particularly girlhood (Robertson). Robertson comments that during the 1930's "sexual games" including full sexual intercourse were normalized and even considered to be necessary for the purpose of harmonious transition of a girl-child into adult sexual life (Robertson). However, such games were accepted only between peers (Robertson).

In addition to Roman law, Humbert also seeks to establish biblical sanction of his sexual preference. He gives an example of a young Canaanite harlot Rahab (Nabokov 19), who became a prostitute at the age of ten and whose sexual services, according to Jerome, were irresistible to any prince or ruler because of her beauty (Jerome 26). Humbert also discloses the fact of Virgil's homosexuality (Nabokov 19). William Harris in his work dedicated to Virgil "*Publius Vergilius Maro*" states that the ancient Roman poet "apparently was a committed homosexual"; he adds that there is no precise data regarding his sexual orientation and thus very little can be said with certainty about his sexual life (Harris). The age of Virgil's lovers is unknown and so we cannot say for certain whether Virgil was mainly fond of children, as Humbert Humbert was trying to claim (Nabokov 19).

Dante's romance with nine-year-old Beatrice is also considered by Humbert Humbert to be a proof of Dante's affection towards nymphets (Nabokov 19). Nevertheless, his misinterpreting vision of Dante's inclinations can be easily disapproved by the simple reality of Dante's date of birth. Dante was born in 1265, his first meeting with Beatrice took place in 1274 when they both were prepubescent children (Beck). Humbert Humbert explains that "when [he] was a child and she was a child, [his] little Annabel was no nymphet to [him]; [he] was her equal" (Nabokov 13). Thus, following Humbert's rationale, Beatrice cannot be considered a nymphet in relation to Dante (Nabokov 17). The same probably intentional miscalculation is made by Humbert while he mentions Petrarch's lover Laureen. Humbert states that "when Petrarch fell madly in love with his Laureen, she was a fair-haired nymphet of twelve" (Nabokov 19). However, De la Durantaye disapproves H.H.'s statement by underlying that in reality Laureen was only "six years younger than the poet". (De la Durantaye 86). Nevertheless, Humbert does not find it necessary to reveal the whole truth, presuming that the reader would not know such small details (Kornis). In an attempt to justify his sexual interest in juveniles, Humbert intentionally distorts some of the historical facts or does not expose all the details which could have compromised the idea he wanted to present to the reader.

We cannot ignore the fact that there are references on Humbert's list which describe sexual contacts between an adult and a child in other cultures that indeed can be found in human history.

The notion about Lepcha old men having sexual intercourse with prepubescent girls, as Humbert Humbert claims (Nabokov 19), truly can be found in the work of Martinson *The Sexual Life of Children* and in the work of Bolin and Whelehan *Perspectives on Human Sexuality*. They describe the Lepcha, a Buddhist society living in India, where sexual contact between adults and children is not seen as criminal offence but on the contrary, it is regarded as an important phase of juveniles' development that helps in "stimulating [children's] maturation" (Bolin, Whelehan 202). Humbert, surprisingly, does not seek to extend his investigation about other such societies, even though there are plenty such cases in other communities. Bolin and Whelehan give examples of other permissive societies where adult-child sexual interaction is a widely accepted phenomenon. Such communities can be found in some Indonesian societies (Alorese), Native Americans in northeastern Arizona (Hopi), Hindu Indian groups, Australian aborigines, in Mexico (Tontonac), Eastern Bolivia (Siriono), southern Africa (Chewa), New Zealand (Moari), Melanesia (Trobrianders), and the Kazak communities (Bolin, Whelehan 202-203). The above mentioned cultures, as Bolin and Whelehan explain, indulge in some sexual practises that would be looked upon as absolutely pervert and immoral from the modern western point of view. Such practices as "finger defloration of female infants" by adult men or "stretching the vagina [of the eight year old girl] until three fingers could be inserted" are the part of the children's maturation (Bolin, Whelehan 202-203). These anthropologists further add that child-adult sexual intercourse is "institutionalized as part of initiation rituals in at least twenty countries" (Bolin, Whelehan 203).

Humbert Humbert also comes up with example of "two of King Akhnaten's and Queen Nefertiti's pre-nubile Nile daughters (that royal couple had a litter of six) wearing nothing but many necklaces of bright beads", making an allusion to Akhnaten's aberrant sexual tendencies of incestuous nature which in Humbert's eyes sustain his desires (Nabokov 19). Here are two pictures



depicting Akhnaten's daughters (1) and Akhnaten's family (2).

In a summary of the above-mentioned Humbert's comment, Shankie concludes that "[Humbert] finds a way to twist the happy scene depicting the joys of family and blessings of divinity into a sexually perverse and very disturbed allusion to paedophilic pornography" (Shankie).



To expand (and partly validate) Humbert's historical reference, we may mention that yet another notion about Akhnaten's sexuality is offered by British Egyptologist Dominic Montserrat in his book *Akhenaten: History, Fantasy and Ancient Egypt*. This renowned Egyptologist believes that our image of the Pharaoh Akhenaten would have differed considerably if the evidence about him had been discovered not at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as it happened, but at the end of the twentieth century (Montserrat 183-184). He suggests that Akhnaten's sexual inclinations would be probably regarded as pervert or at least abnormal. Montserrat points out that "those images of the happy family life, and the naked children being petted, would be interpreted rather differently, [...] as Vladimir Nabokov suggested in *Lolita*" (Montserrat 183-184).

After introducing the idea of legitimacy of early marriages in Ancient Rome Humbert Humbert obviously exaggerates the fact of recognition of child marriages while saying that it is totally acceptable all around the world for "a brute of forty" to lust after a little girl under fourteen and to have her as a bride (Nabokov 135). In addition he mentions the common occurrence of early marriages in some Indian provinces which indeed, as it was discussed in the theoretical part, are still practised in small towns in India (Nabokov 19).

Kornis considers Humbert's omission of some particular details of the historical facts to be a tricky literary device which has as its purpose to persuade the reader in the normality of Humbert's

libido so that the reader looks at the story from Humbert's perspective. Kornis believes that "Humbert is capitalizing on the reader's supposed lack of knowledge in terms of literary history" and thus deludes the reader so that all facts are seen as approving Humbert's lust towards nymphets (Kornis). Despite the questionable origin of some of Humbert's statements, he continues to make numerous attempts to persuade the reader and apparently himself "that there was really nothing wrong in being moved to distraction by girl-children" (Nabokov 19). What is more, Humbert openly declares that "[he] ha[s] but followed nature" (Nabokov 135). He justifies himself by quoting an article from an old magazine he found in prison, where it is said that in warm countries "girls mature about the end of their twelfth year", referring in this way to Lolita's physiological maturity and thus capability of sexual intercourse (Nabokov 135). Furthermore Humbert despairingly (as he still experiences "horror that [he] cannot shake off") defends his first sexual contact with Lolita by emphasizing the fact that he was not even the one who deflowered her (Nabokov 135).

Summarizing all the facts Humbert uses to justify himself, it might be appropriate to offer a description of "nympholepts" as depicted by Humbert Humbert:

The majority of sex offenders that hanker for some throbbing, sweet-moaning, physical but not necessarily coital, relation with a girl-child, are innocuous, inadequate, passive, timid strangers who merely ask the community to allow them to pursue their practically harmless, so-called aberrant behaviour, their little hot wet private acts of sexual deviation without the police and society cracking down upon them. We are not sex fiends! We do not rape as good soldiers do. We are unhappy, mild, dog-eyed gentlemen, sufficiently well integrated to control our urge in the presence of adults, but ready to give years and years of life for one chance to touch a nymphet. (Nabokov 87-88)

Humbert's portrayal of child abusers indeed coincided with a real analysis of this phenomenon carried out by Beckett as it was shown in the theoretical part (chapter *Paedophilia as sexual perversion*). Humbert evidently tries to induce in the reader the feeling of compassion and understanding towards his pitiful situation, being unable not even to touch a desirable child. Humbert points out that he is neither a rapist nor a murderer ("Emphatically, no killers are we. Poets never kill" (Nabokov 88), purposefully emphasizing on the fact that he does not go against the child's will. However, as Beckett highlights, due to their "distorted attitudes and beliefs" sex abusers do not realize children's inability to consent clearly and with full understanding of the essence, as

well as consequences of sexual behaviour (Fowler 30, Finkelhor 692-697). In addition Humbert remarks that his "aberrant behaviour" is "practically harmless" because Humbert's goal and desire does not consist in sexual intercourse with a child but in "fix[ing] once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets" (Nabokov 88, 134).

## **6.2 Humbert's misuse of social roles for the fulfilling of his sexual desires**

Humbert assumes different roles in relation to Lolita, which he uses in his attempt to persuade himself and the reader of the righteousness of his sexual perversion. Much like he manipulated historical facts to advocate his behaviour, he also manipulates the interpretation of these roles that he assumes. Instead of assuming the responsibility and the authority intrinsic to these roles for the sake of protecting Lolita, he uses them to both manipulate her as well as justify to himself through twisted logic his abnormal behaviour.

### **6.2.1 Humbert in the role of the father**

To encourage Lolita to have sexual contact with her new stepfather, Humbert first of all tries to inculcate in Lolita's mind the idea of his fatherhood and his true feelings of fatherly love and care. Humbert continues to repeat, "I am your father. I have a feeling of great tenderness for you [and] I am responsible for your welfare" (Nabokov 119). He assures her of the normality of sexual interaction with him, stating that "Among Sicilians sexual relations between a father and his daughter are accepted" (Nabokov 150). This line of thought can be seen as analogical to the concept of an early marriage vouchsafing a smooth transition from nubility to adulthood, as practised by various communities referenced in the theoretical part.

Despite Humbert's interminable search for justification of his sexual orientation by means of historical facts, Humbert still feels distressed by his actions. It seems that his struggle for defence has developed from intrinsic understanding of his immoral, deviant libido. Even though he strongly feels the wrongness of his behaviour, Humbert's lust overpowers his moral sense and compels him to submit to it.

In another fruitless attempt to convince Lolita in the normality of their sexual relations Humbert recites a passage from a book for girls that affirms, "the normal girl is usually extremely anxious to please her father" (Nabokov 150). Undoubtedly Humbert means that such pleasing might

include sexual contact. Emphasizing on the word "normal", Humbert indicates that Lolita is a normal girl and their relationship is also normal, even though he himself does not believe in its normalcy, being trapped in feelings of "agonizing guilt" and despair (Nabokov 140). The more Lolita realizes the abnormality of their bond, the more Humbert's confidence diminishes, transforming him into a beggar for Lolita's attention, both sexual and nonsexual.

### 6.2.2 Humbert as a guardian and protector

"I am just your old man, a dream dad protecting his dream daughter".

(Nabokov 149)

Nabokov's character can be also analysed from the perspective of Lolita's guardian who after the tragic death of her mother considered himself obliged "to protect [her] from all the horrors that happen to little girls" (Nabokov 149). Humbert's approach resembles the ideology of Ancient Greece and Rome in which women were in need of a male guardian from their early childhood. As it was shown in the theoretical part (chapter *Ancient Greece*) the guardian's role was to control women, taming in this way their wildness.

Humbert subsequently concludes that the person he is going to protect Lolita from is in reality Lolita herself, more specifically from her spoilt character. Oberman supports this idea by emphasizing that beside protecting children from those who "prey upon their vulnerability", age of consent laws are trying to protect youngsters from themselves, from probable unconscious and yet irrecoverable actions that might be committed due to absence of adequate understanding of sexual behaviour (Oberman 713). H.H. puts an emphasis on the fact that Lolita needed to be protected from herself, more specifically from her unconscious and presumably harmful behaviour. He discloses that due to the "constant amorous exercise" Lolita radiated with "some special languorous glow" which attracted all the males around her (Nabokov 159). Humbert complains on Lolita's tendency to get in contact with any male who would be nearby, stating:

For little Lo was aware of that glow of hers, and I would often catch her *coulant un regard* in the direction of some amiable male, some grease monkey, with a sinewy golden-brown forearm and watch-braceleted wrist, and hardly had I turned my back to go and buy this very Lo a lollipop, than I would hear her and the fair mechanic burst into a perfect love song of wisecracks. (Nabokov 159)

Humbert feels the need to protect Lolita from the strangers she easily gets in contact with and who (strangers) might take advantage of her due to her immaturity and lack of understanding of possible risk that such contact may carry. Humbert is aware of promiscuous inclinations in Lolita's character and wants to protect her from herself, even though his motives derive partly from his jealousy.

The reason for which Humbert considers that Lolita needs protection corresponds with the notion of unrestrained sexual desire of adolescent females, which predominated in Ancient Greece, as it was described in the theoretical part. In the chapter *Ancient Greece* it was explained that the only prescribed cure for female bordering on insane savage behaviour was marriage and childbirth. Such cure was thoroughly advised simply because (1) only in marriage a pubescent girl could have had sexual intercourse that she unconsciously desired and the absence of which was considered to be the reason of her hysteria; and (2) in marriage a young girl was under the permanent surveillance of her older husband, her new guardian. Humbert Humbert, seen from this point of view, was in fact Lolita's protector. In addition, Humbert himself advocates such an idea persuading Lolita, "I will still stay your guardian [...] I am not a criminal sexual psychopath taking indecent liberties with a child. [...] I am your father [...] and I love you" (Nabokov 150).

He was indeed responsible for Lolita's welfare; she was left alone without any close relatives. Beyond sexual attachment appears in Humbert's heart an emotional bond towards Lolita, even though he was often unconscious of it being dazzled by his impossible fatal lust.

Though Humbert is aware of the responsibility he has for the young stepdaughter, though he tries to play the role of a father honestly, he fails utterly over again due to ceaseless sexual desire he is unable to control. Humbert admits, as a father to Lolita he was "a ridiculous failure" (Nabokov 174). With the tone of sadness he discloses that Lolita has understood how impossibly wretched was their parody of family life. She realizes that "even the most miserable of family lives was better than the parody of incest, which, in the long run, was the best I could offer the waif." (Nabokov 287).

In addition to being a stepdaughter, Lolita played a role of his "pubescent concubine", as Humbert Humbert calls her few times (Nabokov 148). Humbert evidently makes an allusion to Ancient Greek, Roman and Athenian custom of keeping a concubine, with whom men had sexual relations and spent free time. Concubines, as was mentioned in the theoretical part (chapter *Ancient Greece* and *Ancient China*) were not supposed to bear children but to satisfy men and to be their female companion in public. Men in their turn acted as the concubines' guardians who provided them with money, clothes and everything necessary for living. Humbert calls Lolita a concubine



because their relationship indeed resembles this ancient tradition. In addition in the beginning of their journey across the U.S. Humbert discloses to the reader that Lolita would later take advantage of her position as a concubine and establish "the system of monetary bribes" as a price for Humbert's pleasure and which "was to work such havoc with [...] her morals" (Nabokov 148). If in the beginning of their relations the price for Lolita's sexual "duties" was presents, sweets and clothes, to the end of their cohabitation she demanded a continuously increasing amount of money, thus converting herself into a prostitute.

### **6.3 Psychological analysis of Humbert Humbert's sexual behaviour**

"Despite our tiffs, despite her nastiness, despite all the fuss and faces she made, and the vulgarity, and the danger, and the horrible hopelessness of it all, I still dwelled deep in my elected paradise, a paradise whose skies were the color of hell-flames but still a paradise"

(Nabokov 166)

Humbert beguiles the reader with his "fancy prose style" making the reader feel some grudging respect towards the erudite protagonist and even pity for Humbert's tragic child romance with Annabel and unhappy early adulthood (Nabokov 9). Humbert's strange sexual deviation can be, at least to some degree, understood, after the long and restless justification that Humbert supplied with numerous historical facts.

The reader's view of Humbert Humbert starts to alternate while we observe his shameful actions. Humbert asserts that sex is not what allures him most about the relationship with Lolita, in fact sex is by no means what he is interested in, thrusting it aside as "elements of animality" (Nabokov 134). What bewitches him the most is "the perilous magic of nymphets" that he endeavours to disclose (Nabokov 134). It sounds as a poetic and utterly innocent motive for being close to Lolita. However, as the reader finds out with the development of the story, Humbert's main purpose and fulfilment have been hidden predominantly in sexual contact with the nymphet, which besides all was not even voluntary and desired from Lolita's part. Humbert's actions undermine his initial intention of deciphering the nymphets' enigma, his character transforming into a sexual pervert exploiting his stepdaughter. "[The] battle between his mind and body, morality and bestiality", as Covello believes, follows him throughout the story from the very first thought of

sexual pleasure he would derive from the sexual intimacy with Lolita because such a thought was immediately followed by the awareness of guilt (Covello). After having given Lolita a sleeping pill in order to take all the possible advantages of her young body, Humbert hopelessly testifies, "I insist upon proving that I am not, and never was, and never could have been, a brutal scoundrel (Nabokov 131). However, this daring confession is followed by Humbert's long-lasting dependence upon Lolita's sexual "duties".

After few years of sexual relation "in [his] present boundless misery" Humbert came to the realization of psychological, as well as physical, harm he had done to the child, depriving her thus from full-fledged childhood, natural maturing and eventually from decent family life (Nabokov 135).

Lolita's unhappiness was evident, even though the protagonist does not refer to it openly. Humbert discloses that during their first trip across the United States Lolita "sob[ed] in the night, every night, every night the moment [he] feigned sleep" (Nabokov 176).

## Conclusion

The novel *Lolita* is written as a retrospective confession by Humbert Humbert while being in jail. Humbert probably feels that the judgment of the trial will not be fair in his eyes and for this he explains his story, trying to get from the reader a different judgement or at least to share with the reader the process through which Humbert went.

As it was examined in the practical part, Humbert tries to base his "defence" on cultural relativism. Throughout his confession he refers to different societies, different geographical places in different periods of human history illustrating different perspectives upon nubility for the purpose of self justification.

As shown in the theoretical part, indeed throughout the history the opinion about age of nubility, about the role of women in society as well as definition of childhood differed considerably. There certainly can be found numerous examples regarding different perspectives upon nubility. However, one might admit that this issue is impossible to cover within a bachelor thesis. This thesis illustrated several views upon the topics mentioned above, which existed or still exist in different cultures. From this point of view it is visible that such an issue is not always so clear and thus cannot be judged from a single perspective.

There are two problems regarding Humbert's defence. One of them is the fact that some of the evidences he brings to justify himself are not accurate. It is not clear whether Humbert manipulates the information intentionally or not. However, considering the fact that he is a very educated person (the reader gets to know that Humbert is well-informed in matter of European literature as he wrote few volumes about it), we can presume that he makes it purposefully in order to justify himself (as shown in the case of Dante and Beatrice, Akhnaten's daughters and other evidences provided by Humbert). That is the problem from the factual point of view.

From the other point of view there is problem inherent to cultural relativism. It is true that attitude towards female maturity differed in time in various cultures; this, however, it is not relevant in the case of an individual. One should accept the norms and rules of the particular society he or she lives in. Humbert thoroughly explains the relativity of such topic as nubility from the perspective of cultural relativism; however, ones an individual breaks the law, he or she gets punished according to the current law predominating in that particular society, not according to some historical and cultural concept. The law does not implicate the historical development of the view upon female maturity; it adjudicates according to present values and norms.

Humbert writes his confession in order to convince the reader because he knows that he cannot convince the judge. The judge will weigh the facts, not Humbert's explanation of cultural relativity of this issue. But he wants to be heard as a human, he wants to have the chance to justify himself at least in front of the reader, even though it will not change the objective outcome of his situation. It is true that to some extent cultural relativism can be applied to Humbert's issue but on the bottom line that is exactly its problem, that such a topic remains relative, whereas in the eyes of law there is no relativity, but concrete cases.

Moreover, Humbert uses cultural relativism as a double-edged sword. Sometimes he uses it for his protection when he tries to justify his deeds in front of the reader; in other cases he uses the same strategy to manipulate Lolita for the purpose of having sexual contact with her, while underling his social roles of the father and guardian, as it was shown in the practical part.

However, even though he does his best to convince Lolita, the reader and probably also the judge through cultural relativism and his personal point of view, his attempts fail. He is in jail waiting for punishment; he cannot convince the judge because their decision will be based on the legislative norms of that period of time. Neither can he convince the reader who at that point of narration sees Humbert as a criminal and as a pervert. On the top of that perhaps most of all he fails to convince himself in normalcy of his actions. After retelling the whole story he himself admits that he ruined Lolita's life. He acknowledges that it all was a mistake, that it should have been avoided. Even though in the beginning he thought that morally it might be excusable, the practical side of his experience shows that his actions were vicious.

As a result of investigation I have done in this thesis about the issue of cultural relativism in relation to female maturity I can conclude that Humbert's story depicted in the novel shows that even though it might be philosophically and ethically debatable, in the end when seen from the point of view of modern law and even more so from the personal experience of those involved in adult-child sexual relations (Lolita, H.H.), the relativism cannot cover the damage done for all implicated.

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