

Милена М. Чомић
Универзитет у Крагујевцу
Филолошко-уметнички факултет
Крагујевац

УДК: 821.111(73):659 ; 316.778(73)
ИД БРОЈ: 192071180

Оригинални научни рад
Примљен: 12. новембар 2011.
Прихваћен: 14. јануар 2012

ADVERTISING (IN) *LOLITA*

Abstract: The paper analyses the influence of advertising, as a crucial segment of popular consumer society of modern world, on Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*. Being one of the greatest representations of modern American society, commercialized on all levels, *Lolita* represents a novel of constant conflict of popular and high culture. Final identification of Lolita, the heroine, with commodity, consumed by Humbert, leading to the separation into her own existence and depriving him of all the aestheticism, represents the triumph of popular-consumer culture. The same fate of popularizing and commercializing of Lolita's character and name exceeds the boundaries of the novel and from a literary character makes "Lolita myth" or popularly speaking "Lolita brand". The paper further deals with the development of "Lolita myth" from Hollywood screening, via posters, magazines, fashion styles to the pornographic industry and the world of the Internet.

Key words: Lolita, advertising, popular culture, consumer society, Nabokov.

The opening line of the chapter on advertising in *Mass Culture – The Popular Arts in America*, a book published in 1965, seven years after American publication of *Lolita*, is - "In the kingdom of mass culture, advertising is the prime minister" (Rosenberg 1965: 434). This "kingdom of mass culture" represents a metaphor for America, the adopted country of Nabokov and the homeland of *Lolita*. Similarly, Tony Tanner describes America as a culture dominated by the advertisement on all its levels. Accordingly, this "prime minister", this pervading power, also dominates Nabokov's masterpiece both inside and outside its structure. Identification of the advertising with the prime minister only suggests the power and the authority it has over the individual everyday life of the ordinary, in this case American, people. This is what Dana Brand, who considers *Lolita* Nabokov's most comprehensive representation of modern American life, recognizes and analyses in his essay "The Interaction of Aestheticism and American Consumer Culture in Nabokov's *Lolita*". Dana points out - "Nabokov suggests in *Lolita* that the society which claims to have freed itself from traditional

forms of coercive authority has evolved new and more covert forms to replace the old (Brand...14)". Now an individual builds his/her identity according to the images provided by advertisements, mass culture, psychoanalytic clichés. Lolita, the heroine, represents the individuality shaped in this way:

She it was to whom the ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster... She believed, with a kind of celestial trust, any advertisement or advice that appeared in *Movie Love* or *Screen Land* [...] If some café sign proclaimed *Icecold Drinks*, she was automatically stirred, although all drinks everywhere were iccold. (Nabokov ...)

Lolita seems to have inherited her mother's behavior and view of the world which were determined exclusively by Hollywood movies, movie magazines, advertisements, homemaking guides and book clubs. Charlotte Haze represents the clearest example of the standardizing pressures of American life. Thus the constant appeal of consumer goods is already a powerful force in Lolita's young life. She wanted and tried to identify herself with the idealized existence represented in ads, to experience the felicity represented in them, which makes her a perfect consumer. For the most part of Lolita's childhood and especially during the year on the road her only friends come in the form of magazine story heroines and disembodied radio voices. The lack of friends, and not to mention family, leads to her addiction to clothes, magazines, fast food, movie idols, and popular music –the "experiences to share with the friends she never quite makes in the parody of childhood that Humbert has engineered for her" (Vickers 2008: 146). By spending money on Lolita's whims, Humbert feeds his illusion of possessing her. One of the delights of *Lolita* is the constant interplay between the artistic tastes of Humbert and the popular tastes of Lolita. Simply put, Humbert loves art for art's sake while Lolita eagerly embraces the promises of commerce. Humbert's cultural world always takes into account Lolita's more limited one, but hers can never accommodate his. But in her own, popularly shaped way, Lolita is almost as poetic as Humbert, as Rachel Bowlby explains in her essay "Lolita and the Poetry of Advertising": "It is Lolita who is the poetic reader, indifferent to things in themselves and entranced by the words that shape them into the image of a desire that consumption then perfectly satisfies" (Vickers 2008: 148). However, Humbert does try to fathom how Lolita's mind works, which includes paying attention to the mass cultural background of her interests. In *Muse in the machine: American fiction and mass publicity*, Mark Conroy explains fascinations of both Humbert and Lolita:

"Humbert not only wants to unravel Lolita's culture but also finds himself fascinated by it. At least part of what intrigues him in Lolita is what he calls the eerie mixture of vulgarity and grace, and the mass-cultural background of both is part of what attracts him to Lolita." (Conroy 2004, 53)

On the other hand, from the moment of their becoming lovers, when their “love” is actually consumed, *Lolita* becomes commodity herself and Humbert a consumer. According to Brand “consumerism is the false double of aestheticism in that it involves a dependence upon the actual rather than the merely imaginative possession of objects” (Brand .. 20). However, advertisements deliberately camouflage their deceptive nature so the possession is never real. At this point Humbert enjoys what he seems to possess, he declines from “aestheticism to consumerism” and no longer finds the source of his satisfaction in his artistic imagination, as it was the case before they became lovers, but focuses it in external commoditized object. Now *Lolita*, as a commodity, threatens to take away from him all satisfaction, since commodity often takes on a life and independence of its own, betraying in this way the expectations of consumers promised them by the ads. This betrayal of expectations could be transmitted to the level of the novel itself, and in a way it formed the false public opinion, that is to say, it formed the *Lolita* myth. Nabokov himself recognized and pointed out to this phenomenon in the afterword to *Lolita*:

Certain techniques in the beginning of *Lolita* (Humbert’s Journal, for example) misled some of my first readers into assuming that this is going to be a lewd book. They expected the rising succession of erotic scenes; when these stopped, the readers stopped, too, and felt bored and let down. This, I suspect, is one of the reasons why not all the four firms read the typescript to the end. (Nabokov 1984: 312)

Even though the novel got the recognition it deserves, the advertising potential of its topic never ceased to haunt it. The culture of mass media continued to exploit the novel, its topic and the characters until they became the commodity as well. In his article “American advertising”, Marshall McLuhan deals with the ways the movies are advertised, and concludes that the two most widely used elements are sex and violence. He points out that “even films that contain little emphasis on either sex or violence are often advertised in such a misleading way as to allow the public to infer that sex and violence are main themes in the films” (McLuhan 1965: 434). However this way of advertising is highly ambiguous, since usually it is very hard, almost impossible, to tell or even guess the true quality of the film from its advertisement. This is also the fate of Nabokov’s novel, especially after in 1962 Stanley Kubrick released a movie after it. Only then *Lolita* became a sex symbol, and, as a commodity, started a life of her own, snatched from the world of the novel. Previously mentioned “foul poster” was published as an advert for the movie and launched *Lolita* into a new life. According to Graham Vickers, who dedicated a detailed study, *Chasing Lolita*, to life and fate of *Lolita* myth, this was the birth of the myth, of the new commodity:

It was not until a publicity poster appeared for Stanley Kubrick's 1962 film of *Lolita* that we first encounter a color photograph of an entirely bogus Lolita wearing red heart-shaped sunglasses while licking a red lollipop (love and fellatio, get it?). Lolita's sunglasses in Kubrick's (black-and-white) film sport regular frames and at no point does she suck that kind of lollipop, so the poster makes false promises on every level. (Vickers 2008: 8)

It marks the visual travesty of Nabokov's dark-haired twelve-year-old and does not even resemble the way Sue Lyon (the actress who played the role of Lolita) looks in the movie. The sexual allusions used in the poster served the purpose explained by McLuhan - they provoked, intrigued, made expectations. But not only was it used as an ad for the movie but continued to be used for book covers of new editions of the novel. Soon it established a visual symbol that stayed in the collective mind. "Lolita was to become the patron saint of fast little articles the world over, not because Nabokov's mid-1950s novel depicted her as such but because, slowly and surely, the media, following Humbert's unreliable lead, cast her in that role" (Vickers...). The newborn "popular" Lolita had little in common with the literary original, who was not equipped, in any sense, to be an iconic temptress. She was produced in the process, explained by John Fisk, when the consumer not only uses the certain commodity but process it as well, seeing it as a cultural material which could be used for other purposes. By becoming the product of mass media she became everyone's commodity. Bearing all of this in mind the Vickers's subtitle - "How popular culture corrupted Nabokov's little girl all over again" - becomes fully understandable. Heart-shaped glasses and other items were to become a trademark vaguely suggestive of very young, sexually available girls. In this way a counterfeit Lolita fashion was founded upon an accessory that had nothing to do with the Lolita that Nabokov had realized in such precise detail. She eventually became a continuing object of interest to the commercial world for reasons that were rarely literary. Her disrepute would eventually be found in every segment of commerce and fashion, ranging from sex toys and movie promotions to paintings and photographic art. Here is how Vickers saw this process of commercializing Lolita:

Half a century or so later, in Lolita's name the world has now been given erotic lithographs and weird fashion movements, artful spin-off novels and miscellaneous movies, awkward theater dramatizations and ill-judged musical entertainments, and vile Internet subcultures and lurid newspaper clichés. (Vickers 2008: 3)

In above quoted afterword to the novel, Nabokov argues the way pornography is comprehended in modern American society, which in the following century and the era of globalization can be transmitted to worldwide popular culture and consumer society. Nabokov writes:

While it is true that in ancient Europe, and well into the eighteenth century (obvious examples come from France), deliberate lewdness was not inconsistent with flashes of comedy, or vigorous satire, or even the verve of a fine poet in a wanton mood, it is also true that in modern times the term ‘pornography’ connotes mediocrity, commercialism and certain strict rules of narration. Obscenity must be mated with banality because every kind of aesthetic enjoyment has to be entirely replaced by simple sexual stimulation which demands traditional word for direct action upon the patient. (Nabokov 1984: 311)

By explaining this, his intention was to set the boundaries between the artistic world of his masterpiece and the banal presentation of it. Unfortunately, banality itself was to become Lolita’s fate. Having been commercialized, her name has been used to sell all kinds of objects, as well as justify a number of doubtful artistic projects that seem to operate on the line between art and pornography. It has also lent itself to fashion styles and trends. Her name has even been adopted by a Japanese youth fashion called Lolita Fashion (its most famous line is called Loligoth). What seems clear is that for Japan, as for America and many other countries, the basic schoolgirl “look” is a particularly powerful access in the canon of male-oriented erotica or pornography. This Loligoth phenomenon intensifies the misunderstandings that have accumulated around Lolita’s name. It has perhaps vaguely reinforced the idea of Lolita as an accomplice in her own exploitation. As Vickers explains, the sight of young girls publicly affecting costumes that merge the childlike with the tempting—and doing it, however unconsciously, in Lolita’s name— only strengthens the general suspicion that somehow Dolores Haze was asking for it. It is an unworthy but widespread suspicion and one that finds its logical conclusion in the ultimate commercialization of Lolita’s name. Furthermore, lifesize Lolita sex dolls became available, fully equipped with the appropriate apertures, and finally the earliest child pornography movies were marketed under the name “Lolita” and were made by a Copenhagen based company called Color Climax. This last wave of exploiting Lolita’s name for pornographic purposes is even more absurd if we bear in mind the fact that in the novel Quilty throws out Lolita because she flatly refuses to participate in his pornographic movies. “I said no, I’m just not going to [...] your beastly boys, because I want only you,” (Nabokov 1984:275) Lolita tells Humbert at their last meeting, explaining why Quilty dumped her. She, at least, had a choice in the matter, and she refused. With that in mind, it seems doubly ironic that her name has since been bestowed upon generations of abused girl children who never had the option to turn down the participation in pornographic projects. The final link in this, as it seems, endless chain of (ab)uses of Lolita’s name for commercial purposes is the Internet. The world of Internet Lolitas is in fact a rather more complex one than it may seem at first glance. The various meanings given to her exceed by far all previously mentioned. A well

known sentence that Vladimir Nabokov said in one of his many interviews “Lolita is famous, not I”, gets its full meaning many years after his death, in the Internet era, when result of Google search on Lolita shows 136000000 entries while on Nabokov only 6520000.

As a conclusion, another Nabokov’s thought from the afterword can be used. In the last paragraph he described *Lolita* as the record of his love affair with English language. Having been born as a word in this adopted language of his, in the textual world of the novel, “Lolita” flew away from it into its own existence until finally it was transformed into a new English word, a noun *lolita* which found its place in Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary meaning “a young girl who has a very sexual appearance or behaves in a very sexual way”.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brand (1987): Dana Brand, “The Interaction of Aestheticism and American Consumer Culture in Nabokov’s *Lolita*”, *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Spring

Conroy(2004): Mark Conroy, *Muse in the machine: American fiction and mass publicity*, The Ohio State University

Fiske (1991): John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, London: Routledge

McLuhan (1965): Marshal McLuhan, “American Advertising”, *Mass Culture – The popular arts in America*, New York: The Free Press, London: Collier-Macmillan limited

Nabokov(1984): Vladimir Nabokov: *Lolita*, Harmondsworth [etc.]: Penguin books

Rosenberg, Manning White (1965): Bernard Rosenberg, David Manning White, *Mass Culture – The popular arts in America*, New York: The Free Press, London: Collier-Macmillan limited

Tanner (1982): Tony Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon*, Methuen, London and New York

Vickers (2008): Graham Vickers, *Chasing Lolita*, Chicago: Chicago Review Press

Милена Чомић

ADVERTISING (IN) *LOLITA*

Резиме: У раду се анализира утицај „адвертајзинга“, круцијалног сегмента популарне-потрошачке културе модерног света, на роман *Лолита*, Владимира Набокова. Будући једна од најбољих представа модерног америчког друштва, комерцијализованог на свим нивоима, *Лолита* представља роман константног сукоба популарне и високе културе. Коначно поистовећивање Лолите са робом коју Хамберт конзумира, да би се на крају одвојила у сопствену егзистенцију лишавајући га тиме естетизма, представља тријумф популарне-потрошачке културе. Иста судбина популаризовања и комерцијализовања лика и имена Лолите превазилази границе романа и од књижевног лика чини „Лолита мит“ или популарно говорећи „Лолита бренд“. Рад даље даје преглед развоја „Лолита мита“ од холивудске екранизације преко постера, магазина, модних стилова до порнографске индустрије и света Интернета.

Кључне речи: Лолита, адвертајзинг, популарна култура, потрошачко друштво, Набоков