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Lolita in the Contemporary American Classroom: Pedagogical and Learning Approaches

A Thesis Presented

By

JASMINE REVELS

MAY 2021

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Lolita in the Contemporary American Classroom: Pedagogical and Learning Approaches

A Thesis Presented

By

JASMINE REVELS

Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies
Bridgewater State University
Bridgewater, Massachusetts

In partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree of

Master of Arts in English

MAY 2021

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to discover effective collegiate-level teaching and learning strategies for Vladimir Nabokov's 1958 novel *Lolita* in the midst of the current American political and social climate. Some of the factors of the current political and social climate in the United States thought to have an effect on the teaching of *Lolita*, and were thus considered for further inquiry, were cancel culture, the Me Too Movement, and trigger warnings. Primary research was collected from college students and English college professors. To obtain this research and the opinions of respondents regarding this topic, a combination of both surveys and interviews were distributed and conducted; surveys were distributed to both students and professors and interviews were limited to professors only. The results found in this study were that both students and professors favor the inclusion of trigger warnings, the Me Too Movement has impacted professors' decisions to currently teach *Lolita*, and cancel culture does not have a significant effect on teaching and learning *Lolita*. The ten strategies included in this study are based on current trends in higher education and collegiate pedagogy and the responses from students and professors; they are recommended for effective teaching and learning of *Lolita* at the collegiate level.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Vladimir Nabokov, who published a body of work in 1958 that was so profound that it has been constantly on my mind ever since I first opened my personal copy, taking up residency in my psyche for well over a decade. For without my having read my dearest *Lolita* for the first time many years ago, this thesis would not exist.

I anticipate many more decades of continuous enchantment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to acknowledge and thank my parents, Jacqueline and Johnny, my sister Jourdin, and my brothers Joshua and Johnny for supporting me during the process of writing this thesis, and especially for doing so during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time that has been difficult for all of us. Without your endless love and support, I would not be in the position that I am in today, an author of a graduate thesis. In addition, I would like to acknowledge and thank the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Joyce Rain Anderson, Dr. Kimberly Chabot Davis, and Dr. Benjamin Carson for providing a never-ending amount of support, advice, and guidance for this process. It is your belief in my research that has landed me here. Thank you to my friends who cheered me on and encouraged me to keep writing. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge and thank the dozens of college students and English professors who graciously offered their time to assist me in collecting research. Your contributions are the soul of this thesis.

Thank you all.

PREFACE

This thesis was inspired by an incident in one of my English graduate classes where we were discussing Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1958) and a fellow student claimed that they would never read it due to its uncomfortable content. I was taken aback by the student's comments because they were an English student just like I was, and I had assumed that English students and scholars were usually open to reading almost anything, especially anything with academic merit. I wanted to talk to them and understand why they would judge an entire book without having read it first, but I never did. As time passed, I could not help but wonder about potential other students who would dismiss an opportunity to read *Lolita* simply based on the plot summary alone. As an aspiring professor who, prior to this project, had every intention on teaching *Lolita* to future classes upon my hiring at an institution, I pondered on what I would do in a hypothetical situation where I had one or multiple students who did not want to engage with the disturbing and controversial novel. With the exception of tutoring, I have had no experience teaching college students about novels, writing, rhetoric, and other English-related topics. As someone without experience but who also quite curious, I figured I would simply do what I wanted to do with the student in my class; I would ask college students and professors about their thoughts and experiences about *Lolita* for answers and clarity and have a discussion. The idea for this thesis was conceived shortly after.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: <i>Lolita</i> in Context: The 1950s	11
Chapter 2: An Evolving Twenty-First Century American Society	27
Chapter 3: Collegiate Pedagogy and Higher Education Trends	36
Chapter 4: Research	49
Chapter 5: Strategies and Approaches	75
Epilogue	82
Works Cited	86
Appendix	94

Introduction

Origins of *Lolita*

In a 1958 CBC interview with Pierre Berton, author Vladimir Nabokov was asked how he had come up with the idea for his most famous novel, *Lolita* (1958). Nabokov referred to a story he read in a newspaper about an ape who was given a piece of charcoal and was to draw the bars of his personal cage; *Lolita*'s protagonist, Humbert Humbert (his first and surname are identical), was Nabokov's "baboon," a character he imagined doing as the ape was doing, drawing the bars of his personal cage and being forced to confront his demons (4:40-5:40). Regardless of where Nabokov had gotten his inspiration for his controversial novel from, *Lolita* has been raising eyebrows and shocking readers since even prior to its American publication in 1958. The novel tells the story of a nearly middle-aged man by the name of Humbert Humbert who is a self-proclaimed lover of "nymphets" ("nymphets" being young girl children) and his tumultuous and sexual relationship with his twelve-year-old stepdaughter, Dolores Haze, or "Lolita," his personal nickname for her. Despite its lewd plot, the novel was surprisingly met with praise when it was published and has managed to sustain for over sixty years. Despite its praise, both *Lolita* and Nabokov were forced to face staunch criticism and backlash from critics and readers for its pedophilic and sexual content, the former continuing to face such criticism.

The Problem with *Lolita*

Lolita is a bit cursed. Although a novel of beautiful prose, it suffers from both incoming readers and those with no plans of ever touching it having negative

preconceived notions before they open the book to its first page. This was true during the 1950s when it was published and is true today. No matter the decade, *Lolita* will always be unsurprisingly controversial. *Lolita*'s first film adaptation was released in 1962, with an accompanying tagline that read, "How did they ever make a movie of *Lolita*?" This was a valid question, especially given that the film was released in the early 1960s, a time when the United States was still considerably more conservative than contemporary America. During the late 1990s, when America was considerably more liberal, a second adaptation by director Adrian Lyne was produced. However, the film could not find a distributor and was forced to air on HBO. It had been nearly forty years since the release of the novel and over thirty years since the release of the first film, and yet the film industry was not quite ready to share Lyne's updated re-telling on a large scale. The films are not the book, but the 1997 film suffered from the same predicament the novel continues to suffer from, nearly sixty-three years since its publication: distrust and disgust from the public.

The novel's protagonist and unreliable narrator is a man named Humbert Humbert who is a self-proclaimed lover of "nymphets," or attractive girl-children; Humbert is frankly a pedophile. Humbert's pedophilia stems from childhood trauma. As a young boy, he was madly in love with a girl named Annabel during a 1923 summer in France. Despite a few moments of sensual touching, Humbert and Annabel never consummate their relationship, as Annabel dies of typhus just four months after their summer together. This seems to be the beginning of Humbert's downfall, at thirteen-years-old, and the root to his pedophilia: "The poison was in the wound, and the wound remained ever open, and soon I found myself maturing amid a civilization which allows a man of twenty-five to

court a girl of sixteen but not a girl of twelve” (Nabokov 18; part one, ch. 5). Years later, as a nearly middle-aged man, Humbert becomes a college professor and moves to the United States. There, he meets and moves in with Charlotte Haze, a widow with a twelve-year-old daughter named Dolores Haze. Immediately attracted to Dolores, he creates a personal nickname for her, “Lolita,” and begins to obsess over her and fantasize about a life with her. Humbert and Lolita eventually begin a sexual relationship that eventually leads to a tragic ending for both.

Humbert Humbert is a complex character. He is a pedophile and this undeniably makes him a monster. He is a rapist and essentially turns young Lolita into a sex worker by giving her money in exchange for sexual favors, all while keeping her trapped and leaving her without options and resources. Yes, Humbert is despicable, yet somehow, readers sympathize with him. How does Nabokov do this? He makes Humbert and unreliable reader, for one. *Lolita* is never told through the perspective of other characters, only from that of Humbert. In addition, Humbert is very charming and expressive in an attractive way. The opening lines of the novel are poetic expressions of Humbert’s feelings toward his child lover: “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul” (Nabokov 9; part one, ch. 1). Later when Humbert gazes upon Lolita for the first time, he again uses language that is both beautiful and convincing: “Without the least warning, a blue sea-wave swelled under my heart...there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses” (Nabokov 39; part 1, ch. 10). If he had not been referring to a twelve-year-old child, Humbert would be a romantically appealing and attractive man. Nabokov does an excellent job of using language and diction to occasionally mask the monster that is Humbert. James Tweedie argues this in his 2000 article, stating that

Humbert “convinces” his readers with his declarations of love for Lolita, using “enchanted language” (159). Indeed, Humbert is quite convincing when describing his intense desire for his Lolita, adding to the sorrow readers might feel for him as she slowly slips from his grasps in the second half of the novel.

The final component that contributes to readers feeling sorry for Humbert is Lolita herself. Again, the story is told completely from Humbert’s perspective. According to Humbert, Lolita is spoiled and manipulative. She is also quite flirtatious with Humbert, is sexually active with both boys and girls by the time she and Humbert are intimate for the first time, and is accused of initiating their first time together: “By six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers. I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me” (Nabokov 132; part 1, ch. 29). Assuming this is all true, readers might not necessarily look at Lolita as an innocent child, despite her age making her undeniably innocent and a pawn in Humbert’s predatory game. In addition, she has an affair and plots her escape with another older man named Clare Quilty, who, in his own way, is more monstrous and dangerous than Humbert. Nabokov cleverly weaves the story in a way that encourages readers to be both disgusted and sympathetic with Humbert Humbert. On the other hand, while readers naturally feel sorry for twelve-year-old Delores Haze, who is being taken advantage of, they also may blame her for her predicament. Of course, readers never know if Humbert’s version of the story is accurate or not by the culmination of the novel.

How does *Lolita* offend the reader? Why will this novel always be controversial? There may be multiple answers to these questions. Considering contemporary American society, perhaps the biggest offense is the pedophilia and Humbert’s sexual relationship

with twelve-year-old Lolita that keeps readers away. The limited research conducted for this thesis may or may not confirm this theory. Considering the negative reviews from the 1950s, the commonality was the tagging of the novel as “pornography,” suggesting that mid-twentieth century readers may have been more disturbed by the sexual intercourse in the novel rather than the pedophilic protagonist. Chapter one of this thesis will explore this topic more, particularly American society and politics during the 1950s. Regardless of whether it is the sexual intercourse, the pedophilia, or any other possible factors, time has proven that *Lolita* will always be controversial, no matter the decade, due to its plot and general content.

Lolita Misunderstood

I first read *Lolita* in 2008 at the age of sixteen after first watching Adrian Lyne’s 1997 film adaptation. I enjoyed the film immensely and was inspired to read the original source material, figuring it would have more substance than the film; my assumptions were correct. Since having read *Lolita*, it has become not only my favorite novel, but somewhat of an obsession. My obsession stems from the feelings I have towards the plot of the novel. The story itself is undoubtedly taboo, which in itself is intriguing. Furthermore, it is not only the story that is intriguing, but the way the story is told, as well as my response to it. I do not condone, nor will I ever condone pedophilia. However, I am one of the readers affected by Nabokov’s trickery and therefore cannot help but have sympathy for Humbert. I am a reader who has compassion for both Humbert and Lolita. I am fascinated by Nabokov’s stunning prose (English was not his first language) and how he beautifully tells this haunting, humorous, complex, and tragic story. These

are some of the reasons I continue returning to *Lolita* and continue wanting to have discussion surrounding the novel.

Lolita is oftentimes misunderstood. It is normal for people to have preconceived notions about anything prior to experiencing whatever that something is and *Lolita* is no exception. I can recall a day years ago when my grandmother caught me reading the novel and was disgusted with my choice of reading. “Why are you reading that filth? Put that away,” she asked and commanded me. I then asked her if she had ever read the novel, to which she admitted that she had not, but knew the general story. Some who have not read the novel may assume that the book and its fans support pedophilia. On the contrary, it does not, and neither did Nabokov. In the novel’s Foreword, using a fictional character by the name of “Dr. John Ray Jr.,” he states that “I have no intention to glorify “H.H. (Humbert Humbert). No doubt, he is horrible, he is abject, he is a shining example of moral leprosy” (5). *Lolita* does not make a case for pedophilia and excuse it. What *Lolita* does is it explores how one’s personal hell and demons can take control, remove logical reasoning, and harm not only that person, but those around them. If anything, *Lolita* is a psychological case study.

Regarding the sexual activities in the novel, Nabokov is talented at tastefully describing the acts without being explicit and too descriptive. Nowhere in the book is sexual penetration, or any sexual activities for that matter, specifically and distinctly described in detail. In the very beginning of *Lolita*, we have our first sexual encounter in the novel with Humbert and Annabel. It is written as such: “When my hand located what it sought, a dreamy and eerie expression, half-pleasure, half-pain, came over those childish features” (Nabokov 14; part 1, ch. 4). A mature reader should understand what is

happening in this passage, despite the lack of descriptive and specific details. Jumping to an encounter with Humbert and Lolita, there is an even less descriptive passage at the very end of part one, after Humbert informs Lolita that her mother is dead: “At the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently” (Nabokov 142; part 1, ch. 33). Again, a mature reader should understand that sexual intercourse is being described here without explicit details. And this is exactly what Nabokov does throughout the entirety of the novel; he writes of sexual intercourse without explicitly describing it.

To refer to *Lolita* as “pornography” is far-fetched. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “pornography” is “the depiction of erotic behavior (as in pictures or writing) intended to cause sexual excitement” (“pornography,” def. 1). *Lolita* is not written for the purposes of sexual arousal and therefore it is not pornography. The critics from the 1950s who referred to the novel as “pornographic” could just be examples of being products of their time. In other words, maybe for that time, it was normal to consider something like *Lolita* pornographic. Cody Roy makes an interesting argument regarding 1950s critics and scholars’ response to *Lolita* in his 2001 article. He theorizes that those who took extreme offense to the sexual situations in *Lolita*, as well as Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*, were actually disturbed by the shame they may have felt for relating to and personally experiencing these sexual situations:

Perhaps the critical fuss has to do with a certain sense of guilt evoked by both novels. In addition to being somewhat taken aback by the discovery of an “incitement to [sexual] discourse” that was indicative of the 1950s...these reviewers and, arguably, many readers were guilt-stricken...they could all too

well “imagine those elements of animality” Humbert spoke of and recognize that they were also capable of them.

The 1950s was a more conservative time in American history where it was generally unheard of to openly talk about sex. This thesis will explore more of this topic, politics, and sexuality in the 1950s and some of Roy’s theory in chapter one.

Purpose of This Research

I have analyzed Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* many times, both in educational settings and in my own thoughts. I aim to move past this and move the discussion to pedagogy and learning. As an aspiring college English professor, I would love nothing more than to introduce *Lolita* to future scholars and to have discussions surrounding the complex Humbert Humbert and how Nabokov tricks his readers into feeling sympathy for a pedophile, among other topics. *Lolita* has had a place in the American college classroom for decades and American society has significantly changed since 1958. With that being said, American society has undoubtedly found itself in a place of sensitivity. Things like “cancel culture” have at times made the idea of second chances a non-option for those who have been accused of offending others, professors included. It is the feeling of walking on eggshells that has caused people to be overly careful and cautious about what they say and do. We currently live in a technologically advanced and social media-heavy era; almost anything and everything can be filmed on a cellular device, making a way for people to easily be exposed for their actions, whether they are positive or negative. In addition to cancel culture, the recent Me Too Movement in the United States has brought more attention to the issues of sexual assault and sexual abuse. This social

movement has inspired and encouraged people to come forward with their own stories of sexual harassment, some even calling out their perpetrators and demanding justice.

Looking at contemporary American society, introducing *Lolita* to a college classroom could pose a unique set of issues separate from those of the 1950s for both professors and students. The novel has controversial themes, the biggest being pedophilia and statutory rape, that could potentially create a hostile or uncomfortable classroom environment for professors and students. It is not inconceivable to believe that cancel culture, the Me Too Movement, and other factors could stir up negative reactions from students having to read *Lolita* for a college course. Despite other potential problems that may come with teaching this novel at the collegiate level, it has been done before and is therefore not impossible. There are many avenues professors and educators can take when teaching *Lolita*. As stated previously, it easily serves as a psychological case study and can be analyzed through such a lens. It is a great candidate for a feminist reading, a look at sexuality during the 1950s, an observation on the effects of an unreliable narrator, and even a study on 1950s American pop culture and travel, among many other discussion topics.

There is a lot of potential for both teaching and learning *Lolita* and I believe the research conducted for this thesis, albeit limited, will help with doing so as effectively as possible; this is the purpose of this research. I aim to discover what professors who want to teach *Lolita* can possibly do to best prepare both themselves and their students for this task. The purpose of the strategies will not be to make students feel comfortable reading *Lolita*, as that is counterproductive, but to find the best options that encourage learning. By gaining the perspectives of both professors and college students regarding teaching

and learning *Lolita*, I hope to discover effective, constructive, and successful tools that will assist with continuing to welcome *Lolita* into the American college classroom within the continuous evolving twenty-first century American society.

Chapter One: *Lolita* in Context: The 1950s

Lucille Ball's *I Love Lucy*; Elvis Presley rocking out with his guitar and sinfully thrusting his pelvis to his popular hits; we cannot forget hot rods, dapper men and women, doo-wop, the rise of television, depictions of the perfect family, poodle skirts, and more. These topics and images are often what come to mind when pondering the decade of the 1950s. American pop culture was on the rise, as television and music boomed, producing a list of famous celebrities left and right. Walt Disney made history in 1955 when he opened the first American Disney theme park in Anaheim, California, attracting thousands of guests on opening day. Technology also began developing, as a host of inventions started making their debuts during the decade as well. The 1950s are almost always remembered as a fond and classy decade, one that is often referred to as "the good 'ole days," and in many ways, it is deserving to be remembered in this fashion. However, with the exception of poor race relations and the Civil Rights Movement that bled into the 1960s and beyond, other politics and social structures that were set up during the 1950s seem to be rarely discussed. The 1950s, while charming, was an era of sexual suppression and censorship, where one could be, and was, fined and/or imprisoned for encouraging provocative behavior, resulting in a confusing time where First Amendment rights and harsh obscenity laws were questioned.

Leading Up to the 50s: Anthony Comstock and Obscenity Laws

Anthony Comstock, born in 1844, was an American reformer and founder of the now extinct New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. He served in the Union Army and held extremely pious and religious views of society (Strub 14). He despised anything

that he personally deemed immoral and made it a goal to reform America by helping establish laws that would crack down on “immoral” citizens. After obtaining sponsorship from the YMCA, Comstock famously went after a woman named Victoria Woodhull, who would later run for president in 1872, a feminist who, along with her sister, exposed Reverend Henry Ward Beecher for his adultery through the publication of a weekly newspaper called *Woodhull & Claflin’s Weekly* (Strub 15). Comstock initially attempted to get Woodhull convicted at the state level but failed. After this failure, he then asked for a copy of the issue to be sent to him through the mail under the pseudonym of another identity, to which his request was granted (Horowitz 403). Once caught, Woodhull was arrested and charged for sending obscene materials through the post and tried at the federal level, but once again was acquitted.

Although the case failed to get Woodhull convicted, it catapulted Comstock to a respected position in politics, which led to the passing of an 1873 federal act called “Suppression for Trade in and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use,” or simply the “Comstock Act.” Some of the things that fell under the Comstock Act were “obscene, lewd, lascivious, or filthy book, pamphlet, picture, paper, letter, writing, print, or other publication of an indecent character” (qtd. in Strub 16). It also included “any article or thing designed or intended for the prevention of conception or procuring of abortion” and “any article or thing intended or adapted for any indecent or immoral use” (qtd. in Strub 16). The “Hicklin Test,” a custom originating in England, was adopted by the United States and added into the Comstock Act. The Hicklin Test made it so that any piece of literature that encouraged lustful thoughts would be considered obscene. Anyone who risked being caught breaking these strict obscenity laws

faced spending years in prison and/or fines of astronomical amounts, upwards of thousands of dollars. Some members of society saw these laws as unfair, suppressive, and anti-free speech; some convictions resulted in the guilty parties committing suicide. What exactly was considered “obscene” was oftentimes unclear. An attempt by the federal court to clarify what “obscene,” “lewd,” and “lascivious” meant in 1895 proved useless (Strub 24) and confusion about the definition of “obscene,” as well as accusations of obscenity laws being anti-free speech would continue for decades into the future.

The Cold War

The Cold War was a nearly fifty-year-long period of time when the world was on the brink of a third global war as tension between the United States (capitalist), the Soviet Union (communist), and their allies nearly resulted in destruction. The Cold War began almost immediately after World War II in 1947. The Soviet Union, who was originally an ally of the United States during World War II, was steeped in its own form of communism and had subjected people to harsh and oppressive conditions, even prior to the beginning of the Cold War. Joseph Stalin, leader of the Soviet Union at the time, although not the first leader to establish communism in the Soviet Union, had continued a merciless, militaristic regime that immediately struck any attempt of producing consumer goods down (Walker 3). Despite being allies during World War II, the United States naturally became suspicious of the Soviet Union and vice versa, and it was this suspicion and distrust between the two that initiated the “war.” Some of the most iconic events from the Cold War were the missile attack threats, proxy wars, the “space race” competition, and the removal of the oppressive Berlin Wall in the late 1980s, among other things, all occurring over the course of nearly fifty years. However, it was the

period of intense fear of the kind of communism in the Soviet Union taking residence on American soil during the 1940s and 1950's that would send the United States into a frantic, paranoid frenzy.

McCarthyism and the Red Scare

While (white) Americans were enjoying the freedoms and liberties of living in the United States, communism in Europe, particularly in Soviet republics (now independent countries), was brutally oppressing people. Some of the atrocities and crimes against humanity that occurred under communist Soviet Union were the establishment of the GULAG system, which were labor camps where people accused of committing crimes, usually anti-Stalinists and anti-communists, were sent, abused, and often died, the Great Famine of the 1930s, which killed millions of people, and the killing of prisoners of war, and other atrocities. Communism, particularly Soviet communism, was quite unpleasant (though Soviet Union communists ironically thought of themselves as progressive); the Soviet communist outlook was very much anti-human progression, an ideal stemming from the Enlightenment era, and Stalin intended to spread his communist values across the world (Whitfield 3). Many Americans were initially ignorant of the atrocities of Soviet communism in Europe, but as American society became more aware over time, they in turn became horrified of not only Soviet communism, but also of the possibility of Soviet communism infiltrating the United States. A 1949 Gallup poll had revealed that a whopping 70% of Americans *disapproved* of the United States' pledge of no first use of atomic bombs and similar bombs, and in the same year, President Harry Truman revealed that the Soviets had detonated an atomic bomb, thus putting more fear into Americans of

the spread of communism (Whitfield 5). This fear fueled the mistrust and paranoia that was soon to come.

Although Soviet communism was undeniably horrific, the fears and panic Americans had about it reaching the United States were completely overblown. The leading figure of anti-communism, who would advance a modern-day witch hunt in the United States, baselessly accusing many people of being communists (a period known as the “Red Scare”), was Joseph McCarthy. Joseph McCarthy was a republican senator who was hellbent on finding as many so-called communists in the United States as possible. This in turn caused the nation to be unnecessarily and unhealthily obsessed with anti-communism. McCarthy was ruthless in his actions, instilling fear not only in the American public, but in those who dared take him on or give him any suspicions (Donahue 11). Anti-communism propaganda and imagery began appearing in pop culture. Literature had responded, too, as well as film. In 1953, Arthur Miller published his famous play, *The Crucible*, a work that criticizes McCarthy’s witch-hunt tactics. The film industry was a notable player in the Red Scare, as it saw famous figures such as Walt Disney and Ronald Regan speak out against communism, and also saw some of its most loved and well-known actors being blacklisted for accusations of being communists or communists sympathizers, such as Charlie Chaplin, who was eventually banned from the United States.

McCarthy provided a new definition to “anti-communism;” before his rise, anti-communism was “an effort dedicated to preserving national security,” with hints of patriotism associated with it (Donahue 11). After McCarthy began his crusade of accusations, the definition then included “the abuse of civil liberties,” and coupled

patriotism with partisanship (Donahue 12). McCarthy went after people of all backgrounds, including politicians, but it was his decision to accuse the United States Army of being too lax with communism that led to his political demise. The hearings into the investigations were televised, allowing Americans to see McCarthy in action. On June 9, 1954, Joseph N. Welch, Chief Counsel for the United States Army at the time, famously told and asked McCarthy, “You’ve done enough. Have you no decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency” (0:03:40-0:03:50). Joseph McCarthy’s political career eventually saw its end, but the mass hysteria in the United States that he helped develop and spread had taken its toll and changed American society in the 1950s.

A Behaviorally and Sexually Suppressed American Society

Obscenity laws originating from the late nineteenth century coupled with McCarthyism and the fear of the infiltration of communism created the conservative, “prim and proper” behavior within American society the 1950s is well known for. The 1950s decade is famous for promoting the idea of the “perfect American family,” where dad went to work, mom stayed home to cook and clean for the family, little Jane and little Joe were perfectly well-mannered children, and the family was generally happy and successful. The idea of the “perfect American family” was a commonly used story archetype in film and television, such as in the popular sitcom *Leave It to Beaver*. It existed outside of fictional film and television as well. Religious worship in the country became more popular and church attendance saw a large increase (Donahue 10). It was not just famous celebrities, senators, and other members of the government that were accused of communism, but regular American citizens, too; no one was safe from communist accusations. Americans both read about the lives of the accused being

destroyed and watched the lives of the accused being destroyed by McCarthyism. It was clear that it was best to avoid suspicion at all costs, mind one's own business, and do one's best to be a law-abiding, respectful, and modest citizen. In particular, both McCarthyism and obscenity laws encouraged society to suppress sexual expression and sexuality, both in one's personal life and in literature, or else risk fines, jail time, and shame.

The expression of sexuality was heavily guarded in the decade. Gender norms were expected to be complied with, as heterosexuality was the only sexual orientation that was acceptable at the time; men were to be men, women were to be women, and only heterosexual couples were accepted in society. In addition to heterosexual expectations, gender norms were also expected by society due to yearnings of wanting to be anti-Soviet communist and to be disassociated with Soviet communist ideals. Whitney Strub gives the example of Soviet women being "stripped of their gender traits" (107) and American women, in turn, embracing and exuding their feminine traits. Although heterosexuality was the societal norm, openly discussing one's sex life and other topics related to sexual intercourse was not, even for heterosexuals. It was obviously known that people enjoyed sex and heterosexual couples participated in sexual intercourse with each other, but to be open about such information went against the conservative values of the 1950s.

Heterosexuality was leashed and tamed; too much knowledge of sex, too much premarital sex, too much sex for pleasure, etc. were seen as threats to the pristine, traditional American family (Strub 108). Gender norms were the same. Men were to be just the right of masculine, as too little of it would make one soft and too much of it could lead to dangerous situations. Women were not to be too feminine, as too much femininity led to

promiscuity; since women were expected to be virgins until marriage, promiscuity was sinful because it threatened to disrupt this tradition.

If heterosexuality was American tradition, then homosexuality was the enemy of American tradition, thus making said tradition ragingly homophobic. Homosexuality was heavily demonized and gay men and lesbian women were constantly shut out of the many opportunities that were afforded to straight men and women, including the freedom to show affection towards their lovers and partners in public. Thousands of homosexual men served as soldiers in World War II, and yet they were denied G.I. Bill benefits, unless they were able to successfully mask their homosexuality (Canaday, “Social Citizenship” 938). In addition to being kept from certain governmental benefits, gay men and lesbian women “faced increased FBI and Post Office surveillance and explicit immigration and naturalization exclusions, as well as...political subversion” (Canaday, “Straight State” 2). Homosexuality was deemed perverted and abnormal, which meant the homosexual community faced both sexual and psychological stigma. Homosexuality was yet another factor that was threatening and disruptive to the delicate balance of proper American living, arguably making homosexuals anti-American and almost as much of a security threat as Soviet communism.

Naturally, pornography was included on the list of unacceptable things for a suitable American society. The definition of “pornography” and what was considered pornography was vague, however. Pornography stems from its original Greek etymology *porni* or *porne*, which means “prostitutes,” and *graphein*, meaning “to write,” thus making the original definition to mean “any work of art and literature depicting the life of prostitutes” (Jenkins). The original nineteenth century obscenity laws in fact kept the

term “pornography” omitted because at the time, the original Greek definition was abided by (Strub 16). Despite the lack of a clear and precise definition of “pornography” during the 1950s, this did not tame the societal fears of the presence of porn. Because of its vague definition, anything considered smutty or overly sexual was usually labeled as “porn.” For an artist’s work to be labeled “porn” at the time could have been detrimental to the success of said work and the artist themselves.

The Anti-Obscene Crusade and Printed Works

The desire for a pure American society affected printed works that perpetuated sex, murder, crime, and any other subject deemed obscene, including novels, magazines, and comics. Along with staying as anti-Soviet communist as possible, the censorship of things like printed works, film, and even radio was also a means to keep children innocent and compliant for as long as possible before being corrupted by so-called smut (Cohen 254). Comic books, for example, were targeted for being inappropriate for the youth and society in general. In 1954, *Seduction of the Innocent*, a book by German American psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, was published. In the book, Wertham argued that comic books were dangerous for America’s youth and would lead to delinquent behavior. He stated that Wonder Woman was a terrifying figure for boys and was anti-feminine, and because of this, she was a lesbian and promoted lesbianism (McClelland-Nugent 115). In addition to promoting homosexuality, it was also argued that comics, particularly ones that included violence and crime, would create psychopaths and sadists, as the violence and crime would encourage the youth to commit similar acts (Strub 110) (a more contemporary equivalent of this argument is the idea that violent video games

can lead to actual violence committed by gamers). The parade of anti-comics was steeped in both homophobia, extreme paranoia, and misplaced fears.

Magazines were also heavily censored. A contrast from comic books, which were mainly geared towards young children and teenagers, magazines had attracted the attention of both teenage and adult audiences and were sometimes explicit. Magazines geared towards teenagers oftentimes had advice columns dedicated to sex, dating, and marriage (Cohen 253). One adult magazine in particular, *Sunshine & Health*, was quite controversial and progressive for its time. Not only was it a nudist magazine that displayed the completely nude bodies of men, women, and even children on the cover pages and within the magazines themselves, but the models represented a wide range of different body types and racial backgrounds, including African Americans. It promoted both body positivity and healthy racial relations. The magazine was seized by the United States Post Office in several cities in 1947 (Hoffman 708), making it another victim of oppressive laws.

Some interesting, contradictory conclusions came from the *Sunshine & Health* and other nudist magazines cases. The Post Office decided that its policy would allow for the publication of the nude breasts of African American women, but not the nude breasts of white women (Hoffman 719). In addition, the presiding judge over the case, Judge Kirkland, and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) agreed that the publication of nude children's bodies was *not* obscene; it was argued that the innocence of children and childhood sexuality were non-threatening to American society (Hoffman 724). In 1958, the Supreme Court surprisingly ruled that the Post Office refrain from censoring *Sunshine & Health*.

Books were no stranger to merciless obscenity laws, the overreaction to the possible infiltration of communism, and the fear of sex and smut ruining conservative America. The seizing and banning of books were not an uncommon practice. James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) famously became a target for its foul language and sexual situations. A case was eventually brought to the Supreme Court when the book made its way to the United States. The case ruled that books of literature that contained sexual situations or themes with scholarly and academic value were not obscene (Hoffman 726). Despite this ruling, books like *Strange Fruit* by Lillian Smith, which depicts the interracial relationship of a white man and a black woman, was slapped with the obscenity label by a Massachusetts court in 1945 *after* acknowledging the book had literary value (Strub, "Obscenity" 77). The book was banned in Massachusetts in fear of the multiple sex scenes possibly placing sexual thoughts and desires into the minds of its readers, leading to corruption (Hicklin Test statute). Another book that saw its way to the Supreme Court was Edmund Wilson's *Memoirs of Hecate County* (1946). The Court was split evenly but the book was deemed obscene and was banned in the United States until its re-publication in 1959 (Strub 126). These are just a few examples of the plethora of books that were harshly condemned over the course of many decades for being too violent, too sexual, and too inappropriate for American society.

Although anything containing smut, crime, murder, and similar themes was almost guaranteed to face condemnation from the federal government, there were some exceptions. Hugh Hefner's *Playboy* magazine, debuting in 1953, successfully dodged any legal troubles, as well as the "pornography" label. *Playboy's* audience was undeniably the heterosexual male, as covers and spreads always featured scantily clad and sometimes

nude women (the first issue featured a nude, colored photo of Marilyn Monroe). A rather straightforward message that was written and included in the first issue made it quite clear of the intentions of the magazine:

If you're a man between the ages of 18 and 80, *Playboy* is meant for you... We want to make clear from the very start, we aren't a "family magazine." If you're somebody's sister, wife or mother-in-law and picked us up by mistake, please pass us along to the man in your life and get back to your *Ladies Home Companion* (*Playboy* 3).

This message was a representation of typical heterosexual masculinity and stereotypical female behavior, such as finding new things for the home, two things that perpetuated the American society that was strived for. *Playboy* encouraged both casual and marital sexual activity in their magazines with the use of pictorials and cleverly written articles and advice columns. The classic bunny logo wittily harkened to the hypersexual activity of rabbits, while also playing on the innocence and playfulness of them. *Playboy* logically should have received the same backlash as magazines and books with similar content. But unlike other erotic material, *Playboy* (and Hugh Hefner) was sophisticated and catered to the suave, respected, and classy heterosexual male; it was simply too refined to be labeled "obscene" or "pornography" (Strub 112). Like *Playboy*, Mickey Spillane's series of detective novels escaped federal persecution. The books were graphic, containing both sexual situations and violence, but the protagonist, detective Mike Hammer, was straight and despised and killed communists and "queers," all acceptable character traits and habits of anti-communist America (qtd. in Strub 111).

Lolita in the Midst of Anti-Obscenity and Anti-Communism

Reflecting on the politics and social climate of the 1950s, context must be considered regarding the long and enduring process Nabokov was forced to endure to get *Lolita* published. After his wife Vera saved *Lolita's* burning manuscript (Nabokov did actually attempt to burn it), (Dirda), Nabokov walked a long journey to get his masterpiece published. He unsurprisingly found difficulty getting his novel published in its home country of the United States and was forced to get it published abroad first, specifically in France, in 1953. Interestingly, copies of *Lolita* were held and released at customs in the United States and some copies had entered the black market (Boyd 300), showing that despite America's anti-sex society, there was a demand for sexual content. After facing multiple rejections from American publishers out of fear of breaking obscenity laws and possibly facing prison time, five years later, *Lolita* was finally published by G.P. Putnam's Sons in the United States in 1958.

Nabokov's newest novel was met with both praise and scorn. One critic from The New York Times stated that *Lolita* was "one of the funniest and one of the saddest books that will be published this year" (Janeway). Speaking on the novel's suggestive content, they had this to say: "As for its pornographic content, I can think of few volumes more likely to quench the flames of lust than this exact and immediate description of its consequences" (Janeway). One opposing critic claimed that *Lolita* was not "worth any adult reader's attention," that Nabokov wrote "highbrow pornography," and "*Lolita* is disgusting" (Prescott). Considering the politics of the 1950s, it is no wonder it took Nabokov years to find an American publisher that would successfully get *Lolita* published in its home country of the United States. The mixed reviews put a spotlight on

two things that were occurring in the 1950s: the continuation of vague definitions of terms like “obscene” and “pornography” and the direction towards sexual liberation.

The accusations of *Lolita* being pornographic are reflections of the lack of a clear and specific definition of what constituted as pornography at the time. It appears that anything containing sexual situations could have been deemed pornographic. Yet magazines like *Playboy*, which had pictorials of bare breasts, buttocks, and female genitalia, never saw a day in court for accusations of pornography and *Lolita*, although also never facing court, was labeled as “porn” by multiple critics. Certainly, *Playboy* was designed and written to arouse its audience; this is the objective of pornography, to sexually arouse. Taking another look at Cody Roy’s piece, he asks the question, “why were some reviewers in the 1950s vehemently bent on silencing something that neither *Wise Blood* nor *Lolita* actually represents” (87). He answers this question and theorizes that those who criticized *Lolita* and called it “pornography” were experiencing self-guilt for dabbling in literature that may have forced them to think about their own sexuality and sexual desires. While this theory is conceivable and not in the least far-fetched, I believe those critics were simply products of their time, the time of the anti-obscene, and genuinely believed that *Lolita* was smutty and filthy, and therefore was pornographic.

As hinted at previously, the praise *Lolita* received from critics, as well as its failure to face a state court or the Supreme Court for obscenity violations, were signs of the movement towards sexual liberation and a generally more open American society. *Lolita* was published at the right time, a time where the reins on anything considered inappropriate and obscene were beginning to loosen. The ancient Comstock Act had long been getting questioned and the ruling of the 1930s *Ulysses* Supreme Court case opened

doors for work of literature that contained both sexual situations and literary value. Metaphorically speaking, Soviet communism had infiltrated the United States in the sense that it took residence in the minds of Americans, causing paranoia. The United States of course never became a communist country in the way that the Soviet Union did, but the fear of becoming one did cause harm, as it led to overly exaggerated paranoia and censorship, as well as a modern-day witch hunt that was the Red Scare, creating a monster that had been eating away at American society. However, Joseph McCarthy's political career and reputation began to decline in the mid-1950s, easing that tension and paranoia a bit, despite the continuation of the Cold War.

It can be argued that the vague definitions of what constituted as obscene and pornography in a way helped *Lolita* successfully enter American society. Had the definitions been clear and specific and had they proclaimed that anything containing sexual situations was obscene and pornographic, Nabokov would have likely had a visit to court and *Lolita* probably would have been banned. Had *Lolita* been published five or more years earlier, it may have had a different fate, especially considering some of the taboo themes in the novel. Not only is sexual intercourse alluded to, but there are characters with homosexual tendencies as well, including the titular character. Humbert attributes Lolita's kissing abilities to clearly having had experience kissing other girls, Lolita admits to Humbert of having sexual liaisons at a summer camp with both a boy and a girl, and Clare Quilty, Lolita's other older male lover, hints at being bisexual. I imagine an earlier, more homophobic American audience condemning *Lolita* for the homosexual themes alone.

Although there was still a strong urge to censor works of art and throw obscenity violations at authors and artists, the social and political climate were undoubtedly shifting in the 1950s. Even the novel was beginning to change: “Novels...grew increasingly psychological, not in the modern sense of committing narrative to replicating the workings of the mind but in the journalistic style of allegorizing a conventional understanding of Freudian premises” (Hutner 270). This coincides with a detail left in a piece by Brian Hoffman that states that post-World War II parenting relied on Freudian psychoanalysis to understand their children’s sexuality (724). Moreover, these facts could possibly explain the country’s open response to *Lolita*, as the novel is essentially a long psychological trip into the mind of a pedophile.

As the novel was changing, it also was beginning to fade into a place where it was no longer one of the main sources of entertainment. Hollywood films and television programs were quickly replacing the novel as means of entertainment in the United States. It is important to note that films, even in the 1950s, were able to get away with more “crude” content due to production codes that allowed the film industry to self-regulate and self-censor. Speaking of films, *Lolita* saw itself on the big screen just four years after publication in 1962. The sexual revolution of the 1960s comes as no surprise; the country had proven that it was heading in such a direction in the late 1950s. *Lolita*’s 1958 publication year is probably what saved the novel from becoming a victim of banishment and condemnation like many of its predecessors. *Lolita* was published at the right time and proved that it was ahead of its time.

Chapter Two: An Evolving Twenty-First Century American Society

Since the 1950s, American society and politics have drastically changed. Many factors of the Comstock Act were considered unconstitutional and Comstock laws are no longer in effect. The communism paranoia eventually died and the Cold War came to an end in 1991 after nearly forty-five years. The sexual revolution starting in the 1960s opened a door for freedom of sexual expression and a change in attitude towards the act of sex and sexuality in general. Despite the work we as a society need to do to continue to do to assure rights and equal treatment for members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) community, a tremendous amount of progress has been made since the 1950s, including states making gay marriage legal, gay couples being able to adopt, and obtain government jobs, and other freedoms. Finally, with the exception of book bans for children in some school districts in different states around the country, books, magazines, and other forms of written entertainment are not bound to specific content and do not face harsh censorship as they once did decades ago. We embrace comic books and graphic novels, study them in college, and run to the nearest movie theater to catch the next film adaptation of famous comic superheroes, those same superheroes that some adults once feared would make their children gay.

A 1950s lens of censorship is no longer, but some twenty-first century Americans would argue that we are currently a society that enjoys censoring and limiting others; I am specifically referring to “cancel culture” here. In addition, it is argued that political correctness (PC) is a form of censorship because it sets standards for how people should think about, talk about, and refer to just about anything, thus limiting authentic expression. The Me Too Movement that sparked in 2017 (though the original creator

came up with “Me Too” in 2006) has encouraged both women and men to come forth with their experiences regarding being sexually harassed and assaulted, which in turn has created spaces for the discussion of rape culture in the United States. Cancel culture, political correctness, the Me Too Movement, and a list of other factors have changed the culture on college campuses in the United States. Considering these factors within our current society in the United States, it is likely that *Lolita* in the American college classroom, both the professor’s teaching of the novel and student’s learning of it, will be influenced by said factors in the same way some responses to the novel in the 1950s were influenced by society and politics at the time.

Political Correctness and Cancel Culture

Political correctness (PC) is a phrase used to describe the respectful manners which to refer to groups of people and social conditions. More broadly speaking, Susan P. Robbins defines political correctness as “the language, attitudes, and actions of those who value multiculturalism and attempt to portray marginalized people in respectful ways” (1). To be politically correct is shed what is typically considered harmful diction and rhetoric and to replace said diction and rhetoric with that which is more appropriate. Some examples of this would be using “special needs” instead of “retarded” when referring to those that are cognitively, behaviorally, and intellectually delayed, or referring to people as “indigenous,” “Native American,” or “American Indian” instead of “Indian.” Political correctness is often seen as something that is perpetuated by left-leaning people, often to the dismay and discomfort of those who lean right. However, political correctness originated within conservative circles and it is argued that conservatives also partake in being PC, specifically when it relates to Christian beliefs

and what they consider to be offensive to those beliefs (Robbins 1). Still, those championing political correctness tend to be liberal.

There are those who argue for political correctness and those who argue against it. Those who are for it may argue that it creates more welcoming spaces for people and ideas to be shared, while those who oppose it may argue that it limits self-expression. While political correctness does not “traditionally” limit free speech, it does regulate speech, which is arguably problematic. By regulating speech and controlling how society refers to and discusses groups of people and social conditions, it can possibly help eliminate backlash and prevent people from being offended. With that being said, too much regulation of speech and political correctness can create hypersensitivity and strain the process of creating actual and meaningful change within society.

Political correctness has seeped its way out of simple social media posts; it can be found in the world of education and literature, the STEM fields, (Dr. John F. Furedy, referring to political correctness as a “foe” and a “threat” states that it is present particularly within the physical and biological sciences (299)), and even abroad. In 2020, an Australian writer by the name of Stuart Cooke, with the help of publisher Verity La, published a creative writing piece called “About Lin” that told the story of a white Australian man who sexually exploits a Filipina woman. The piece drew outrage from the Asian Australian community and accusations of racism and the fetishization of Asian women from white men were thrown at Cooke. Verity La issued an apology and removed the piece from their website. A blog called “Being Asian Australian” published an article that called out both Cooke and Verity La for “About Lin.” The article argued that the piece promoted “sex tourism, colonialism, misogyny and racism,” suggested that such a

story should not be labeled “creative,” and wondered why a white man would write a story like “About Lin,” claiming Cooke to be “sitting on his white privilege pedestal” (Erin). It is important to note that in “About Lin’s” Preface, Cooke had taken quite a liberal stand and suggested that all white men who travel to the Philippines were colonizers, denied the validity of white male narrators, and stated that he believed conversations needed to be had concerning the topic (qtd in King).

Erin’s questioning of Cooke’s race and his ability to write about a white man’s sexual exploitation of a Filipina woman ushers in the debate surrounding white authors writing stories about people of color, something that is anti-politically correct. Erin’s questioning suggests that she did not believe Cooke, as a white man, had the right to write “About Lin,” even though it is about a white man. Should white people be allowed to write about experiences through the lens of people of color? Australian author, Malcolm King, speaks of this debate and his own experiences; he was labeled a “cultural appropriator” by a literary judge for writing a short story about a group of park rangers and poachers in Somalia, told from the lens of the head ranger, a black man; for this reason, the short story was not published (99). These writers mentioned are Australian, but it is not unimaginable to see their experiences possibly being repeated in the United States. Are we headed into a society that is so politically correct that stories written about specific groups of people can only be written by members of said group? Is there a benefit to this? Considering higher education, should white professors be shielded from teaching history and literature that is not of their own culture, such as African American history and literature and vice versa? These are the questions we must consider in the field of education as political correctness continues to evolve in the United States.

When people within society choose not to be politically correct, and, in addition, express their views publicly, it can sometimes lead to those people being “cancelled” by those who deem their views as unacceptable and inappropriate; this is referred to as “cancel culture.” When someone has done or said something considered inappropriate, rude, or offensive, the offended, usually through social media, will call for that person to be “cancelled,” which could mean a variety of things. If they are a celebrity, “cancelling” them could mean refusing to watch their films, listen to and purchase their music, support their brand, etc. If they are a “regular” member of society, “cancelling” the individual could and often means calling for them to be fired from their job. There have been many instances where nearly decade-old tweets, Facebook posts, photos, etc. have resurfaced, been made public, and have been called out. Although cancel culture seeks right in a wrongful situation, it can rob the “cancelled” individual of a second chance and a rectification of their wrongdoing(s). Similar to political correctness, cancel culture is both praised and criticized. It is encouraged by those who see it as a tool for holding people accountable for their actions and condemned by those who see it as a tool that seeks perfection from society and can possibly permanently ruin one’s reputation and career. Cancel culture appears to have more haters than fans who express their disapproval of it, particularly through social media.

Cancel culture has seen a variety of “events”, such as typical social media posts condemning people, the defacing of historical monuments, the removal of Confederate and colonialist statues, the cancellation of meetings and events of famous and well-to-do public figures, and more. Cancel culture has been likened to a “disease” in the United States that needs a fast cure (Pilon 183). Discussion surrounding the problematic topic at

hand is usually nonexistent when something or someone is being cancelled for it; the cancelling comes quickly and discussion is seen as unnecessary. In an interview with Nick Gillespie, author Jonathan Rauch states that cancelling something or someone is propaganda that is designed to manipulate, isolate, and harm (46). Cancel culture has shown no sign of discontinuing and will most likely evolve, as political correctness has. We as a society need to ask ourselves if there is a current limit to political correctness and cancel culture, and if there is no limit, what one should look like. We also must consider both the good that has come from political correctness and cancel culture and the bad. To claim that these concepts are all good or all bad would be disingenuous; a medium should be established but doing so is so far proving to be quite difficult.

The Me Too Movement

Throughout history, people, particularly women, have spoken out against sexual harassment and have found ways to come together to make their voices heard. Take Back the Night, an ongoing organization that was established in the 1970s, is just one example of community protests against rape and sexual assault. The Me Too movement is the twenty-first century's most recent form of a collective protest against sexual harassment and assault that has seen both women and men come forward with their personal stories of sexual harassment. The Me Too movement has shined a light on the normalization of sexual violence (Rosenbaum 251) and has been able to do so with the use and power of social media. An awareness of rape culture in the United States has stemmed from the Me Too movement. Rape culture is defined as "societal norms that promote stereotypes about rape and rape survivors, as well as other cultural norms that excuse or otherwise tolerate sexual violence" (qtd. in Greene and Day 449). Me Too has exposed the perpetuation of

rape culture in American society and has linked rape culture to the normalization of common ideas and behavior that can often lead to sexual assault.

The original creator of “Me Too” is a black woman named Tarana Burke. Burke is a survivor of several sexual assault incidents that occurred sporadically between the ages of six and twenty-five (Millner 95). In 2006, Burke co-founded an organization called Just Be Inc., where “Me Too” was first introduced. The organization was designed not to necessarily call attention to sexual assault perpetrators and demand for justice, but to express empathy for the sexual assault survivor, thus providing support and room to heal (Millner 95). Despite contacting members of the community for outreach support, including celebrities, to help the success of Just Be Inc., it was difficult for Burke to gain support because of the number of other organizations and people that were already doing the same work she was doing, which was helping sexual assault survivors (Millner 95). Burke would eventually find success with the influence of a famous actress.

Burke’s luck changed in 2017 after multiple accusations against prominent film producer, Harvey Weinstein, of sexual assault sent the entertainment community into a frenzy. Actress Alyssa Milano used her Twitter to send out the following message to her followers in a response to another message regarding sexual assault: “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet” (@Alyssa_Milano). Millions of people used the hashtag “#MeToo” within days after Milano’s tweet publication. She was originally credited for creating the hashtag, but eventually Burke was credited for being the originator of Me Too. Since 2017, Me Too has catapulted discussions surrounding sexual assault and rape culture, both on social media and outside

of it. Me Too has undoubtedly become useful for both bringing awareness and educating others on how they can help sexual assault survivors.

Lolita in an American Twenty-First Century

To assume that *Lolita* would not face as much similar backlash in the twenty-first century as it did in the middle of the twentieth century is not far-fetched. I doubt contemporary readers would be offended by the discrete details of sexual intercourse described in the novel, as we as a society are more open to discussing sex and topics under the umbrella in a comfortable manner, though sex is arguably still a taboo topic in the United States, at least minorly. The obvious factors of *Lolita* that remain uncomfortable, and most likely always will be, are the pedophilia and borderline incest (though Humbert and Lolita are not blood-related, she does refer to him as “dad” in the novel), as they should. The pedophilic nature of the book in theory might cause it to be affected on college campuses in ways related to some of the topics mentioned before.

Political correctness might not necessarily correlate with *Lolita* and its themes, but the novel has potential to be “cancelled” by some today. Technically, books have a long history of being “cancelled.” Many books, most notably Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and many others have found themselves deemed too inappropriate for readers and put on a long list of banned literature. Given *Lolita*’s nature, it very well may upset people. Popdust, a website covering American popular culture, published an article that referred to *Lolita* as “predation under the guise of poetry,” proposed that the novel be cancelled, and suggested that society re-think what should be considered classic and art (Hanson). This was in response to a statement made by singer Madison Beer, who

claimed that *Lolita* was her favorite book and that she romanticized it. Beer's statement angered her fans and people called for her to be cancelled on Twitter.

Lolita is ripe for conversations surrounding sexual assault, especially in the midst of Me Too. It contains examples of grooming, kidnapping for the purposes of underage sex, and statutory rape. As stated in the introduction, *Lolita* is a case study; the novel could easily be a source to use to study multiple psychological disorders and experiences. Though Me Too has emboldened women and men to come forward with their experiences of being sexually assaulted, some people may not want to think about or relive their experiences without being emotionally prepared first. This is understandable. Still, if any text is relevant during this era of Me Too, it is *Lolita*. It is an appropriate segue into discussions related to the movement. If we as a society can agree to not cancel sexual assault victims, maybe we can also agree that Dolores Haze, also a victim of sexual assault, should not be cancelled.

Chapter Three: Collegiate Pedagogy and Higher Education Trends

Higher education in the United States began in the seventeenth century, a time when European settlers were landing on American shores. The first state in the colonies to see its first college was Massachusetts. In 1636, Massachusetts allocated funds for a college to be established in a city called Newtown, now known as Cambridge (Lucas 104). A few months after instruction began at the college in 1638, one of the college's benefactors, Reverend Mr. John Harvard, passed away. It was decided that this new college would be named after the Reverend, Harvard College, in remembrance of its benefactor. Nearly four hundred years later, Harvard College, now Harvard University, has remained one of the most distinguished universities in the country and one of the best in the world.

Higher education and collegiate pedagogy trends have evolved immensely since 1636. Once a country where college was strictly reserved for white men, shutting out women and people of color, where professors opened lectures with prayer and trained students to join the clergy, where college admission depended on Greek and Latin proficiency (Lucas 109), and where collegiate extracurricular activities included foot races and "satanic" dances, the United States is now a country that welcomes students from all backgrounds, gives students academic freedom to study the major of their choice, and is famous for its divisions of collegiate sports. As the country and the world evolve, so do higher education and pedagogy. Colleges and universities are not just places where students go to earn degrees. No longer are college professors solely expected to educate students; there are expectations of professors that require them to think about student well-being outside of participation, attendance, and passing grades.

Similarly, the college experience for students is more than just attending courses. The current trends in higher education and pedagogy in the United States are reflections of the evolution of higher learning.

Teaching Controversial Topics

Controversiality in the classroom is almost guaranteed, especially for humanities and social sciences courses. Controversial topics can range from language in a text to real world social issues currently happening across the globe. Some educators may attempt to refrain from introducing controversial topics in their classes in fear of unhealthy debate and disagreement among students. Nevertheless, controversiality in the classroom is a topic of importance because it sets up conduct expectations for both professors and students. Moreover, discussing controversial topics in class is commonly viewed as important for understanding different views.

Douglas Walton's argumentation theory lists six types of dialogue commonly used during controversial discussion in academic environments, or classrooms, and they are information-seeking, persuasion, negotiation, inquiry, deliberation, and eristic dialogue. Distribution of knowledge is attributed to information-seeking; resolving conflicts of belief is attributed to persuasion; resolving conflicts of interest is attributed to negotiation; establishing truth or reason is attributed to inquiry; achieving a shared goal is attributed to deliberation; and airing grievances is attributed to eristic dialogue (qtd. in Gregory 629). Maughn Rollins Gregory argues that negotiation, persuasion, and inquiry are the most important for discussing controversial topics in class (629), but each taxonomy is relevant and useful for keeping a stable classroom environment. For

example, if eristic dialogue does not occur, one's classroom may become a toxic environment where effective learning is not nonexistent.

The general consensus about teaching controversial topics is that the instructor should remain neutral and should not go into a lesson with an extremely biased view or agenda and that students should come to their own conclusions and form their own opinions. In spite of this, Michael Hand argues and makes the distinction that professors *should* persuade students to accept a certain position on a topic that is *not* "rationally controversial," even if met with backlash, and should *not* persuade students to accept a certain position on a topic that *is* "rationally controversial" (qtd. in Gregory 628).

Applying this to *Lolita*, encouraging and expecting students to empathize with Lolita and to condemn Humbert's actions is acceptable. On the other hand, to attempt to persuade students on one side about the ethics of Lolita being bisexual would not be encouraged and should not happen. Pedophilia and bisexuality/homosexuality are both controversial topics, but pedophilia is a psychological disorder that is lawfully wrong and socially unacceptable, making it "irrationally controversial", while sexual orientation is a highly opinionated topic which considers individual views and religious beliefs, making it "rationally controversial." Speaking of psychological disorders, the cognitive processes students may or may not experience when discussing controversial topics is important to consider. Douglas Yacek lists several psychological factors that can impede both the teaching process for professors and learning process for students:

- (1) There are certain psychological conditions that must obtain in the minds of students so that they can appreciate an issue as controversial in the first place;
- (2) Students' reasoning is subject to various cognitive obstacles or 'corruptions' that

characteristically prevent these psychological conditions from obtaining; and (3) directive teaching methods are instrumental for helping students to overcome these cognitive obstacles and thus for establishing the necessary psychological conditions that constitute controversy (72).

If we are again to apply this sound and reasonable logic to *Lolita*, if a student who is reading the text has experienced signs of pedophilia and has never received treatment for pedophilia, they may find Humbert's behavior to be acceptable, as they may not be able to fully understand how morally wrong pedophilia is. But as much sense as Yacek makes here, professors are not always trained psychologists; they are not usually equipped with the skills to detect psychological disorders in students. If professors are to consider the psychological health of students (as they should) but are not necessarily trained to do so, they need to establish trust with their students, at the very least.

Building Rapport

The phrase "building rapport" is commonly used for one-on-one relationships, such as patient and doctor, as well as relationships with multiples, such as teacher and students. Rapport-building is vital for both professors and students because both parties can experience positive outcomes. Studies show that positive and healthy student-teacher relationships can increase student participation in class, encourage students to complete their work, and be more open to approaching professors (Wilson and Ryan 82), which ultimately helps student retention rates. Additionally, professors are more likely to receive positive semester feedback from students. Professors can build rapport with students in a number of ways, including having positive energy, being kind to students, being available for office hours, and using slang (not necessarily profanity) and dressing

casually (Wilson and Ryan 81). Building rapport with students is one of the simplest ways that professors can help their students succeed in their classes.

Safe Spaces and Community in the Classroom

A safe space is a resource usually found on college campuses that provides support for students who tend to come from minority backgrounds. While safe spaces are typically reserved areas on campus for students to go to, they can also exist within the classroom. Establishing a healthy classroom community is just as important as building rapport because it builds trust between students and professors and offers a welcoming learning environment. Similar to trigger warnings, though, safe spaces are sometimes seen as avenues for students to take to refrain from encountering harm or discomfort. One scholar refers to classroom safe spaces as “emotional” or “dignity safety,” where one is void of experiencing anxieties, emotional discomfort, and feeling inferior to others (qtd. in Harless 331). I argue that professors who value welcoming classrooms for their students do not necessarily create environments as such so that students do not experience any and all discomfort. Rather these classroom safe spaces are created for healthy learning environments that will in turn inspire adequate student performance. An educator can teach *Lolita*, a novel with controversial themes that may make students uncomfortable, and still have a safe space in the classroom. An example of this could mean not forcing students to share their feelings and keeping student-disclosed information private and confidential. Classroom safe spaces can encourage student productivity both inside and outside the classroom, thus encouraging student success and retention.

Trigger Warnings

Trigger warnings are becoming more mainstream, especially in classrooms on college campuses. A trigger warning is a message, written or verbal, that is given prior to an activity to prepare an audience mentally and emotionally for potentially traumatic or triggering responses. Trigger warnings originated in feminist spaces, specifically online, where women openly discussed their experiences with sexual assault in comfortable environments that offered brief warnings to establish understanding of discussion topics (Fenner 87). Trigger warnings can now be found in many places, including on social media platforms, in college course syllabi, and even before programming on streaming services.

It is not uncommon for students to request warnings from their professors prior to reading texts for a class and even prior to lectures (Wilson). Trigger warnings are sometimes seen as counterproductive and considered excuses for students to use to refrain from having to participate in class. One of the arguments against trigger warnings is the long and broad list of things that are considered “triggers,” which could range from topics such as rape, sexual intercourse, mental, physical, and emotional abuse, topics regarding psychological and mental health, racism, sexism, and more (Robbins 2). There is no official list of triggers that are universally accepted as permissible for students to request; anything can be considered triggering because no two students are triggered by the same thing necessarily. If a professor allows for a student or students to refrain from participating in a reading or a lecture due to discomfort, how will the student learn? This is the question that those who oppose the usage of trigger warnings pose. They argue that trigger warnings coddle students by refusing to expose them to difficult topics and are anti-free speech, as professors might feel forced to limit topics and discussion out of fear

of upsetting students (Mendoza 97). Moreover, studies have shown that trigger warnings are not as effective as some might believe and do not always make students feel more comfortable (students for one study actually felt worse) (Fagan 14). The question of the use of trigger warnings has been debated for years and the debate is continuing.

It is argued that trigger warnings, when used properly and not sporadically, can be effective and therefore should be used. Going back to the origins of trigger warnings, they were used for sexual assault victims who may have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). If there are students who legitimately suffer from PTSD and can experience mental episodes when triggered, their learning experience in a class where the professor refuses to warn students of any and all uncomfortable subjects could be just as counterproductive as that of a student who claims to be triggered to refrain from class participation (Fenner 89). To effectively teach students suffering from PTSD and keep other students from using a broad range of triggers to refrain from class participation, Sofia Fenner at Bryn Mawr College suggests that professors individually ask for students' needs, save trigger warnings for individual students only and not for the entire class, have clear intent for the material chosen for their courses, and provide alternative options (92). She argues that these actions will help both students and professors because it personalizes both the needs for individual students and the class as a whole, as well as manages the professor's expectations in terms of their classes' structures.

Challenges with Diverse Student Populations

American colleges and universities in the United States are undoubtedly diverse, and not just racially. Student populations vary, from first generation, to LGBTQ+, to legacy students. Schools across the country emphasize the importance of diversity and

inclusion. While diversity and inclusion are important, meeting the needs of diverse student populations is just as, if not more important. No two student populations are the same; students experience specific and unique challenges in colleges that pertain to their background. Speaking on diversity in terms of race, for example, Asian American students oftentimes experience parental pressure that can make transitioning to college difficult (Museus 716), especially when their parents exude “helicopter parenting” qualities. Helicopter parenting refers to parents who hyper-focus in on their children and their education. The pressures of helicopter parenting can cause unwanted stress and unrealistic expectations of oneself. Latinx students also face difficulty when transitioning to college, specifically when it comes to finding college aid. Many Latinx students rely on federal aid to pay for college and yet receive the least amount of money out of all other ethnic groups (qtd. in Crisp, et al. 252). A lack of aid can turn into a domino effect that could force students to balance classes with side jobs or to drop out of school.

African American students experience some of their own unique issues. Predominantly white institutions (PWI’s) can sometimes be hostile environments for African American students. African Americans have reported experiencing microaggressions at PWI’s, leading to “feelings of isolation, hostility, and inferiority” (Jackson and Hui 464). Because of this, African Americans will look for safe spaces on campus, which could even be a black student union club, to have a sense of community. Another racial group that has reported feelings of isolation at PWI’s and college campuses in general is Native Americans. One of the most oppressed racial groups in the United States with a long history of forced assimilation, poverty, racism, and other comorbidities, in addition to these issues, Native Americans are the least represented

racial group on college campuses in the United States and have low retention rates. This is attributed to the factors listed above, as well as issues related to family, fiscal, and socio-psychological factors (Cech, et al. 2019). Overall, ethnic students face barriers while attempting to earn a degree. While each of the racial groups mentioned experience unique barriers, there is one issue that is commonly faced by all: a lack of encountering faculty of color on campus. There is a significant gap between white faculty members of faculty members of color on college campuses. Faculty members of color are vital for student success. According to research, faculty members of color are more likely include topics on race and ethnicity in their courses, value student interactions in their classes, and use collaborative teaching techniques, all of which are important for the success of students of color (Benitez, et al. 50). Faculty members of color can help mitigate feelings of isolation and inferiority for students of color and can also act as mentors to them, making them extremely helpful for not only student success, but student retention.

Race aside, student populations such as first generation, LGBTQ+, and international students experience hardships. Because they are the first in their family to attend college, first generation students might be ill-equipped for some basic college knowledge, such as applying for financial aid and finding resources on campus. LGBTQ+ students have reported feelings of being unsafe on college campuses because of the emotional, intellectual, and physical violence they oftentimes face on campus and in classrooms (Check and Ballard 6) and international students can experience things like culture shock and homesickness. Regardless of whichever student population professors are interacting with, professors should be sensitive to the needs of any student. Because students face both similar and different obstacles, they cannot be treated the same and

held to equal standards all the time. Moreover, a student who is failing a class may be doing so because of personal issues that have nothing to do with understanding the class material; outside factors can and do affect student performance. Therefore, it is crucial for professors to handle difficult situations with students on a case-by-case basis, talk to their students about the struggles they are facing, and never assume inadequate student performance is due to the student refusing to take their education seriously.

Title IX

Title IX is a law that was established in 1972 that offers protection against sex-based discrimination in education-related spaces. Title IX specifically states that “no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to the discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (U.S. Department of Education). In essence, Title IX is designed in part to protect and support employees and students regarding cases of sexual assault. All colleges and universities in the United States that receive federal funding are required to have a Title IX coordinator, effectively share their policies, and inform students of the process in filing a complaint (qtd. in Diamond-Welch and Hetzel-Riggin 258). The extent of sexual harassment training at universities and colleges for both professors and students is unclear, as Title IX does not enforce a specific program of training to be implemented. However, the completion of sexual harassment training videos will usually be required of students and faculty/staff members and these videos are created and distributed by the institutions themselves.

Mental Health Awareness on College Campuses

Mental health awareness is on the rise in the United States. This is not to say that stigma surrounding mental health issues is no longer, but society has become more in tune and accepting of those who suffer from problems stemming from mental health. Despite the rise in awareness, there is a severe lack of mental health support, including on college campuses. Studies have shown that 20-36% of college students experience some sort of mental distress or discomfort, yet only about 30% seek and receive help (Sontag-Padilla et al. 500). This is common at colleges and universities of all kinds in the United States.

Despite the chasm between mental health problems and treatment for them, while not designed to completely alleviate students from all mental health distress, colleges and universities in the United States do implement resources and services that help make students' experiences more comfortable. On-campus counseling services are one example. Depending on the school's policies, students can usually see counselors by referral, self-made appointments, or by walk-in. Safe spaces are on-campus resources that colleges and universities sometimes provide support for students. A safe space, usually seen on college campuses, is an implemented program that is designed to support marginalized people, such as people of color, LBBTQ+, Muslims, etc. It is important to note that safe spaces do not necessarily keep students safe and exempt from experiencing harmful behavior from others, contrary to the belief of naysayers of safe spaces. Rather safe spaces can provide a sense of community for students and can help with feelings of isolation (Harpalani 131). In addition, student-led clubs, organizations, and racial and ethnic clubs on campus are known to create community on campus, which in turn helps with student retention.

The Current State of Collegiate Pedagogy and Higher Education

The evolution of pedagogy and higher education over time in the United States has altered expectations of faculty members on college campuses in a good way. Reflecting on these current trends, it is clear that professors are expected to think about how they can encourage healthy student learning beyond giving them the usual lectures on modernist literature, the cause of the French Revolution, the Pythagorean Theorem, or the process of photosynthesis. Professors must study their student dynamics, make at least *some* effort to become acquainted with their students, and put thorough thought into the structure of their classes.

So, how does *Lolita* fit into the discussion? I believe introducing *Lolita* to college students in this day and age could not come at a better time. The current dynamics of pedagogy and higher education creates a promising path for *Lolita* in classrooms because of the amount of emphasis on the well-being of students and the responsibility of faculty members in cultivating healthy and productive learning environments. Briefly leaving pedagogy and going back to the current political and social climate in the United States, there are many topics pertaining to politics and social issues, like censorship and Me Too, that are relevant for discussion about *Lolita*. This coupled with the dynamics of pedagogy and higher education is a potential recipe for successfully introducing *Lolita* to students. And should a student reading *Lolita* for class be uncomfortable and desire to speak to someone, whether that someone is a professional or another student, they will have access to on-campus resources that can help them. Professors should be prepared for referring students to on-campus resources, whether it is Title IX, counseling, a club on campus, advising, or anything else that is available to assist students. If there is a time to

read *Lolita* for college, it could be now, but the limited research conducted for this study may or may not confirm this theory. Nevertheless, despite not having perfect systems in place and having room for improvement, it cannot be disputed that current collegiate pedagogy and higher education in the United States have made tremendous strides over time. Hopefully we will always consider how we can do better, for the sake of our students, professors, and even our colleges and universities themselves.

Chapter Four: Research

One of the original questions I had asked myself regarding this project was if Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* had a place on college campuses in the United States. I eventually realized that *Lolita* has always been able to fit into some sort of space here in this country, whether it was in a college classroom, in the hands of members of a book club, or on a bookshelf in a public or personal library. Once I answered my own original question, I knew that my new question was not a matter of "if", but "how." Given its context, *how can Lolita* be both taught and learned effectively within a college setting? What do professors looking to teach this novel need to consider? How should students be prepared to read it? What should students expect from themselves when asked to read this novel for a class? These are samples of some of the questions I posed to myself for this project. I knew that my research had to be sourced directly from parties that my questions were aimed at: professors and college students. An approval from Bridgewater State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained before conducting research.

Students: Data Acquisition

To obtain data from students, a survey was created and the decision was made to not interview them. The survey was open strictly for college students. I wanted the opinions of a variety of college students, including four-year university students, community college students, undergraduate and graduate students, and students of all majors and studies. College students from various states around the country took the survey. A one sentence summary of *Lolita* was included in the survey for those who had not read it, as well as a trigger warning for the summary. *The survey consisted of twelve

questions. Some were typical demographical questions, such as age, sex, what year of college they were in, and so on. The rest were probing questions. These questions were designed to not only measure students' comfort in reading *Lolita*, but to also obtain their thoughts and opinions about how they might best learn in a course where the book was being taught. The probing questions were as follows:

Student Survey Probing Questions
1. Have you ever read Vladimir Nabokov's <i>Lolita</i> ?
2. If you have read <i>Lolita</i> , would you feel comfortable reading it for class?
3. If you have not read <i>Lolita</i> , based on the summary above, would you feel comfortable reading it for a college course?
4. Do you find <i>Lolita</i> inappropriate for college learning?
5. What about <i>Lolita</i> may or may not be uncomfortable for you?
6. Should professors who teach <i>Lolita</i> provide trigger warnings in their course syllabi?
7. Should professors who teach <i>Lolita</i> provide alternative options for those who don't want to read it?
8. How do you think professors should best prepare students for reading <i>Lolita</i> ?

* A complete list of survey/interview questions can be found in the Appendix.

Students: Survey Results for Demographic and Close-Ended Questions

It is important to note the limitations for this research. The results for this research come only from a sample of college students who completed the survey and do not

represent the thoughts and opinions of all college students in the United States.

Therefore, the results and concluding thoughts will be based solely on the research data that was collected for this project.

Table 1: Student Demographics

Gender	Higher Ed	Year
Female: 76.36%	Community: 6.36%	Freshman: 20.18%
Male: 20.91%	University: 88.18%	Sophomore: 16.51%
Non-binary: 1.82%	Other: 5.45%	Junior: 18.35%
Other: 0.91%		Senior: 22.02%
		Graduate: 22.94%

A total of 110 college students from various studies and majors completed this survey.

Table 2: Student Survey Close-Ended Questions

Have Read <i>Lolita</i>	Have Read: Comfortable Reading for College?	Haven't Read: Comfortable Reading for College?	Inappropriate for College?
Yes: 16.36%	Yes: 15.74%	Yes: 37.38%	Yes: 14.81%
No: 82.73%	No: 7.41%	No: 15.89%	No: 64.81%
Don't Know: 0.91%	Maybe: 4.63%	Maybe: 32.71%	Maybe: 20.37%
	N/A: 72.22%	N/A: 14.02%	

Include Trigger Warnings?	Alternative Options?
Yes: 79.44%	Yes: 62.26%
No: 7.48%	No: 15.09%
Maybe: 13.08%	Maybe: 22.64%

Students: Survey Results for Open-Ended Questions

The first open-ended question inquired about any discomfort students may feel about reading *Lolita* for a course. Pedophilia/the age difference between Humbert and Lolita, incest, and sexual assault, particularly statutory rape, were factors of the novel that were mentioned the most in response to this question. Some other concerns that were mentioned were possible graphic details of the sex scenes between Humbert and Lolita, fear of *Lolita* negatively influencing others and/or condoning pedophilia, feeling sympathy for Humbert, and discomfort with discussing these sensitive topics in class with peers. Several students, all female, self-disclosed their own personal experiences with incest and being sexual assaulted, but they also indicated that reading *Lolita* for higher learning was not inappropriate.

Some respondents offered semi-alternative responses to this question. While they acknowledged that the material in *Lolita* is controversial and can be discomfoting, they also acknowledged that one's discomfort was intentional and good for discussion. These respondents indicated that they found both literary and educational value in reading *Lolita*. They also stated that exposing students to real-life issues such as pedophilia,

incest, and sexual assault can help bring awareness to said issues. A recurring response was the idea that college learning requires a sense of maturity and students should be able to read and learn just about anything without advocacy of censorship or self-removal from the learning process. It is interesting to note that these responses mostly came from students who were psychology, education, and English majors.

The second and final open-ended question was designed for respondents to think about both themselves as students learning in an English course. The question asked respondents to give their opinions as to how professors could effectively and best prepare students for reading *Lolita*. There were three common suggestions that respondents gave. The most common was the inclusion of trigger warnings, either written in the course syllabus, course description, verbally given, or a combination of all three. Nearly every respondent suggested that professors give some sort of cautionary message (trigger warning) about the plot and themes to students prior to reading the novel. Respondents specified that professors should inform students that the story contains pedophilia and the rape of a child. This naturally leads into the second popular suggestion: provide a summary of the novel to students in advance and have discussion about the themes and any feelings and concerns students may have. Along with this idea, some respondents suggested professors inform students of how explicit *Lolita* is and point out the scenes describing sexual intercourse between Humbert and Lolita prior to beginning the novel (this particular suggestion was not too common). Thirdly, respondents suggested that professors should provide context surrounding the novel, both historically and literary, explain why they are reading the novel for class, how it connects to the overall theme of the course, and have alternative readings on deck for students who cannot/will not read

the novel for any reason. One respondent suggested having the class vote anonymously on alternative readings and having *every* student read said alternative readings, not just those who cannot/will not read *Lolita*.

Other suggestions were provided regarding this question as well. Professors should confirm that they themselves do not condone pedophilia and statutory rape and explain that neither does *Lolita*. In addition, it should be emphasized that although *Lolita* is fictional, people do experience these things in real life and this message should be conveyed throughout class discussions. Along with this, ideally professors would inform students about on-campus resources that they can take advantage of in case they are mentally and emotionally triggered and/or bothered by *Lolita*, including a wellness center or counseling. Some other, more unique suggestions were provided. One respondent suggested showing the film adaptation first, though they did not specify which adaptation. By doing this, students can get a better feel of the story before reading the novel. Another proposed inviting a speaker, ideally an expert, to the class to discuss sexual assault. One student advised that professors should not pre-plan anything for their students when reading *Lolita* and two students stated that no college professor should teach the novel at all because of its controversial themes and because other stories, particularly those written by women and people of color, deserve to be read and studied instead.

Student Survey Response: Analysis

The large quantity of students who have never read *Lolita* is unsurprising, as it is probably not typically found on the list of readings for middle and high schools in the United States. The split results showing that some students would either feel comfortable

or possibly comfortable reading *Lolita* for a college course indicates that students are not too put off by the context of the book. The fact that some are unsure is actually promising. Not only does it show their discomfort with the themes in the novel (*Lolita's* themes *should* disturb readers), but also that they are not completely against hypothetically reading and discussing it for college. Similarly, the majority of respondents having the opinion that *Lolita* is not inappropriate for college learning is encouraging. That there are more women than men who would not feel comfortable with *Lolita* could be linked to the commonly known fact that women are more likely than men to experience sexual assault and therefore may feel uncomfortable reading about a girl being sexually abused. In addition, the fact that most students support professors providing trigger warnings reflects the social times we are currently living in. I would theorize that because most students are in favor of professors providing alternative options for students, it indicates that they could have been thinking of the needs of other students as it pertains to reading sensitive material and figure that alternative options would help these students.

Students feeling uncomfortable about the pedophilic and incestuous themes in *Lolita* was another unsurprising response. This supports my theory mentioned in the introduction of my thesis, that contemporary Americans would not be bothered by sex, but would be brought discomfort by the pedophilic themes; it is not necessarily the inclusion of sex that makes *Lolita* uncomfortable for twenty-first century readers, but sex specifically between a pubescent child and a grown man that is alarming. Again, this is a natural response to pedophilia and people should be bothered by it. This discomfort would naturally lead to worry regarding reading graphic details of sexual intercourse

between Humbert and Lolita in the story. In terms of students' fears of *Lolita* perpetuating pedophilia, for those who have not read it, which is the majority of respondents, this is another natural concern. As long as professors inform students that the novel does not endorse pedophilia, as well as provide context about Vladimir Nabokov, who indicated that he did not support pedophilia, it can help alleviate a situation like this. Similarly, if professors try to establish rapport and create comfortable spaces for in-class discussion, students may feel more comfortable with talking about the novel with fellow classmates.

The students who wrote more about their views on the purposes of college and the value of learning about real-life issues like pedophilia went a bit further and detached themselves from their feelings towards the book. As stated earlier, there was a pattern with these responses; the students were a mixture of English, psychology, and education majors. I would like to briefly theorize why students of these majors would respond in this manner. English majors naturally tend to be open to reading almost anything for class to dissect and discuss possible meanings of the text and/or the purposes of the author; this is the job of an English scholar, therefore, reading *Lolita* or almost any controversial novel may not be a heavy task for the English student. Pedophilia is a psychological disorder, one that some psychologists might specialize in. Psychological disorders would be an obvious topic of discussion for a psychology student, hence why reading *Lolita* may not pose to be an issue for one. Like psychology majors, education majors may take courses on child development, psychology, and pedagogical theory, and would therefore be “naturally” open to reading about and discussing topics such as pedophilia and statutory rape.

Returning to the finding of patterns, the top three responses to the question asking respondents how they believe professors can best prepare students for reading *Lolita* have a commonality: they all concern some sort of pre-preparation prior to delving into the novel. Students requesting trigger warnings, a summary of the novel, and context along with pre-planned alternative readings for those who do not want to read and engage with the novel would prefer *some* knowledge of the text before reading it. Many students specifically stated that these suggestions would benefit *other* students; these respondents considered the experiences of others and not just their own. It is conceivable to assume that based on the responses in this survey regarding this question, trigger warnings would not automatically dismiss anyone from reading *Lolita*, contrary to what some anti-trigger warning people may believe. It would simply provide context of the content which they would be reading. Perhaps rather than saying “trigger warning,” a more appropriate phrase to use to describe this is “content preview,” in this case the content being *Lolita*’s themes and plot. Considering *Lolita*’s themes, students believe that sharing some of the book’s content prior to reading would be beneficial for the class because it would mentally prepare them for the story.

In general, the responses for this survey were positive and welcoming towards *Lolita*. As mentioned, only two students suggested that it should never be taught. These students did not directly state that it should be “cancelled,” but they arguably came very close to doing so and may have insinuated that it should. The results of this survey show that while students may be naturally concerned about reading *Lolita* due to its heavy themes, they would not be completely opposed to reading it for college, with adequate preparedness.

The Professor Process and Data Acquisition

For this study, professors, specifically current English professors, were also surveyed. However, unlike the college students, English professors were interviewed. I felt it was important to personally speak with those in the field because of their experience with introducing students to texts that are controversial and/or that have sensitive material. Although this project pertains to *Lolita*, I believe recommendations based on the results of this research can be applied to *any* text that is deemed controversial. Because of this project's universality, I interviewed both professors who have and have not taught *Lolita*. It was important to get both perspectives because each brings something significant and unique to this study.

The professor survey was much shorter than the student survey and acted more as a pre-interview to gain information that helped sort which questions each professor who agreed to be interviewed would be asked. Those who had taught *Lolita* were asked a different set of questions from those who had not taught it. English professors from various specializations, states, colleges, and universities across the United States who teach an assortment of classes were contacted to be surveyed and interviewed; English professors did not need to meet a certain criteria to qualify to participate in this study. Interviews were conducted over phone or Zoom and the survey was distributed by email.

The professor survey consisted of six questions. The questions did not inquire about the opinions of respondents regarding *Lolita*, as those types of questions were saved for the interviews.

College Professor Survey Questions
1. What level of college courses do you teach?
2. Have you ever taught Vladimir Nabokov's <i>Lolita</i> for a course(s)?
3. If so, what type of course was it for? Please very briefly describe the course objectives, if possible.
4. If you have never taught <i>Lolita</i> , but are familiar with it, would you consider teaching it for a future course?
5. If you have taught or currently teach <i>Lolita</i> , would you consider teaching the novel again in the future?
6. May I contact you for a future phone or Zoom interview for further inquiry?

Being aware that not every professor who took the survey would agree to interview, I wanted to get some information from them that may have given me some idea about their feelings towards teaching *Lolita* for a class; questions four and five are examples of this. Question three was designed to help me understand which directions professors took their classes where they taught *Lolita*, including the subject(s) and theme(s) of the class. Some respondents did not agree to interview but gave brief explanations of their experiences teaching *Lolita* in the survey.

English Professors: Survey Results

Level of College Courses	Taught <i>Lolita</i> ?	Never Taught: Consider for Future?	Have Taught: Would Teach Again?
Undergraduate: 50.34%	Yes: 23.40%	Yes: 21.15%	Yes: 70.83%
Graduate: 3.40%	No: 74.47%	No: 43.27%	No: 29.17%
Both: 46.26%	Maybe: 2.13%	Maybe: 35.58%	

A total of 142 college professors participated in this survey. Those who have taught Lolita did so for a variety of different types of courses, which is outlined in the report.

Respondents replied with a variety of different types of courses for which they taught *Lolita*. Some of them include twentieth century American literature, creative writing/fiction writing workshops, composition, American modernism, twentieth century Anglophone literature, general literature and English, American literature surveys, honors surveys, and Nabokov seminars, just to name a few on the long list of courses. Some respondents described the focuses for the courses for which *Lolita* was taught, including narrative, crimes and punishments, censorship, literary forms, and immoral narrators. This is evidence that *Lolita* can be introduced in an assortment of courses with a diverse array of topics and emphases. In addition, it should be reiterated that English professors of all concentrations and backgrounds were asked to participate in this study, which most likely skewed the outcome of some of the questions, for example the large percentage of professors who indicated that they would not teach *Lolita* in the future. An English professor who specializes in and teaches nineteenth century British literature would of course never teach *Lolita*. This would possibly explain the large chasm between those who have taught *Lolita* and those that have not. Of course, it is also possible that some of

the responding professors who teach twentieth century American literature, one of the categories which *Lolita* falls under, have never taught *Lolita* for whatever reason.

The majority of survey respondents did not interview. However, some did include commentary about teaching *Lolita* in the past. One respondent taught the novel in the 1990s, but one particular group of undergraduate students did not like the book and were upset by it. The respondent decided to stop teaching it after that incident with their class and mentioned that they read the book for a class during the 1970s and the students in that class were not bothered by it. Another respondent mentioned teaching *Lolita* over twenty years ago as a graduate student but would not teach the book now due to its content. A respondent stated that teaching *Lolita* today would be extremely difficult because students are resistant to reading about rape.

Another respondent taught *Lolita* in its entirety on and off for over thirty years. In 2017, they taught only excerpts for the novel, but while they were away at a conference, their teacher's assistant showed the class the 1962 Stanley Kubrick film adaptation. When the respondent returned from the conference, they received an anonymous complaint from the president's office and has decided to refrain from teaching *Lolita* in its entirety again for now. The most interesting story from a respondent involved several incidents of bad luck and close calls. The respondent attempted to teach *Lolita* for a graduate seminar, with the purpose of exploring if it can legitimately be taught. During their first attempt, a fire started near their home and they were unable to make it to work. The second time, a gunman was on campus, forcing the school to close and the third time, the COVID-19 pandemic had begun to sweep the country, forcing schools to close. The respondent has decided to never attempt to teach *Lolita* again.

Professor Interviews: Have Not Taught *Lolita*

A total of twenty-six English professors were interviewed for this study; eighteen of them have never taught *Lolita*. Because these English professors had never taught the novel, they were asked a different set of questions. Despite some professors indicating that they were familiar with *Lolita* and had read it, the questions were kept general to prevent possibly limited responses. The questions were as follows:

Interview Questions for Those Who Have Not Taught <i>Lolita</i>
1. How long have you been teaching at the collegiate level?
2. What is your process for choosing texts for your classes? Do you provide trigger warnings for sensitive material?
3. Are you concerned about “cancel culture” affecting your classes? Are you worried about student backlash towards your classes?
4. Would you ever consider offering alternative readings/options for students who don’t want to read something due to personal reasons?

The amount of years of collegiate teaching ranged from five and a half years to thirty-three years, teaching a mix of both undergraduate and graduate courses. When choosing texts for their classes, many interviewees said they have themed courses and will pick texts that coordinate with said theme(s). While most professors stated that they teach texts they have previously read and taught before, I was surprised to hear that some professors sometimes teach texts that they have never read. When asked the reason as to why, they claimed that it is an exciting way to freshen up their classes and is also a way

to challenge themselves to create lessons based on something they have just read. Many professors talked about teaching texts from writers of diverse backgrounds, including women writers, queer writers, and writers who are of color. Other popular answers included picking texts that contain real life experiences and topics, engage with other authors, and challenge readers to create rich discussions.

Regarding trigger warnings, 72% indicated that they do provide some sort of written or verbal description of texts that contain sensitive material. Some of them put the descriptions in the syllabus and even in the course descriptions. Those who verbally explain sensitive content do so on the first day of class or right before the text is going to be read. They explained that they see no harm in briefly informing students of texts with sensitive material and do not believe they are giving students passes by providing these warnings. None expressed dissatisfaction with providing trigger warnings. The majority of the remaining professors who stated that they do not provide trigger warnings claimed that they refrain from doing so simply because they do not think about it and not because they disagree with providing them. In other words, they have yet to pick up the habit. Only two professors expressed disinterest in ever using trigger warnings, as they find them to be potentially disruptive to class discussions and student learning.

Professors were asked about cancel culture and hypersensitivity, particularly within the collegiate academic setting, and their own concerns, if they had any at all. Fourteen professors, 77.7%, claimed that they were not concerned about cancel culture and hypersensitivity affecting their jobs and classes. Some professors were tenured and others talked about the benefit of working in higher education and the certain academic freedom and protection that comes with that. There was also discussion about being

upfront with students from the beginning and setting expectations, providing a welcoming circle for class discussion, and establishing rapport. These professors do their best to create comfortable learning environments that would hopefully deter their students from feeling unwelcomed and/or the need to file complaints to higher-ups. There were personal stories told by some professors about a student in their respective courses going to the dean and department chair to express disapproval. These incidents did not discourage the professors. The remaining professors who did express some concern regarding cancel culture work at colleges and universities with conservative student populations and stated that their liberal views had potential to upset and discourage their conservative students.

The last question professors were asked during this interview process needed modification as the interviews progressed. They were asked if they would consider providing students who did not want to read a text required for the class with alternative options, including alternative readings, assignments, and excused absences from lectures where the text was being read, analyzed, and discussed. Professors answered this question by first distinguishing between a student who suffered from mental illness-related issues that related to the content in the text and a student who did not want to engage with the text simply because they were uncomfortable with the content. I quickly learned that I needed to present these two kinds of students to professors for future interviews, which I did. Fourteen professors indicated that they would consider providing alternative options for a student who may significantly be mentally and emotionally distressed by a text, while two professors claimed that they would do so for any student, and the last two claimed that they would not do so for any student for any reason.

Every interviewee talked about first privately discussing the issues a student in this situation was having before giving them alternative options. They expressed that they would never want to see students so mentally and emotionally harmed by a text that they would possibly feel discouraged from participating in the course at all, let alone the text. However, some interviewees made it clear that the student would still have to read something related to the themes and topics of the text which they would be excused from reading and would most likely be given longer assignments. On the contrary, these interviewees stated that a student who did not want to read a text because they were uncomfortable was undeserving of such treatment. They talked about how discomfort was normal, expected, and good for discussion, and would encourage the student to use their discomfort to create arguments that produced quality discussion topics and assignments.

The two interviewees who indicated that they would accommodate any student who did not want to read a required text for the class felt it was not their job to force students to read something that would be uncomfortable for them. They talked about not judging students and making sure their students felt comfortable and welcomed in class. The last two interviewees who indicated that they would not accommodate any student who for any reason did not want to read and/or engage with a required text for class stated that they would refer to the course syllabus and encourage the student to either accept a lowered grade or drop the course.

Professor Interviews: Have Taught *Lolita*

A total of eight professors who taught or currently teach *Lolita* interviewed for this study. These professors were asked more questions, nine to be exact, and while some

of them matched the general questions the professors who have never taught *Lolita* were asked, the rest of the questions pertained to their personal experiences teaching *Lolita*.

The questions were as follows:

Interview Questions for Those Who Have Taught <i>Lolita</i>
1. How long have you been teaching at the collegiate level?
2. When did you begin incorporating <i>Lolita</i> into your courses?
3. What about <i>Lolita</i> brings/brought value to your courses? Why do/did you teach this novel?
4. Do/did you include a trigger warning when teaching <i>Lolita</i> ?
5. How are/were your class discussions? What were some topics that were brought up?
6. Did any of your students object to reading <i>Lolita</i> for your class? If so, how was the situation handled?
7. Would you ever consider offering alternative readings/options for students who do not want to read something due to personal reasons?
8. Would you consider teaching <i>Lolita</i> again in the future/do you plan to continue teaching <i>Lolita</i> ? If so, are you concerned about cancel culture? Would you make any changes to your teaching of it?
9. Do you have any advice for professors who are planning to teach <i>Lolita</i> for the first time?

The amount of years of collegiate teaching ranged from seven to forty-six years, teaching a mix of both undergraduate and graduate courses. The dates when interviewees began incorporating *Lolita* into their courses varied, from as long ago as the 1980s to as recently as 2020; only one interviewee currently still teaches it. The most common answer as to why they wanted to teach *Lolita* was their general love for the novel and for Nabokov. Other responses included the novel's importance and value to the literary world, its beautiful prose, the fact that it is often misunderstood and controversial, and the discussion topics that can stem from reading the book. The discussion topics that were mentioned were Nabokov's process in tricking and convincing his readers to have sympathy for sexual assaulter Humbert Humbert, questions about ethics and aesthetics, and exploring Dolores Haze through the lens of Humbert. Some of the more interesting reasons for why they chose to teach this book include never having read it before and wanting to read and teach something new and students requesting to read another controversial novel after reading Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, to which the professor then picked *Lolita* for the class to read.

Five of the eight interviewees, 62.5%, stated that they provided their classes with either a written or verbal warning regarding *Lolita's* content. They mentioned that they would be reading about a pedophilic character and the rape of a child. One interviewee could not remember if they had warned their students, but the other two interviewees who did not warn their students were special circumstances; one had never read the book prior to teaching their class and the other had a class of students who requested controversial material, therefore making the inclusion of a warning unnecessary. Only one professor

stated that they do not provide trigger warnings because their students, who are mostly conservative, ask that they refrain from doing so.

The class topic discussions surrounded a variety of topics. Some of these were style and prose, America versus Europe and the American landscape, the unreliable narrator, how Nabokov tricks his readers into feeling sympathy for Humbert, and sexual assault in society/rape culture in the United States. All of the interviewees claimed to have lively discussions with generally positive responses from students. However, two professors did have at least one student who reacted negatively. One professor had a student who filed a complaint with the dean and the other professor had a student walk out in the middle of class. Both professors were successful in working things out with their respective students. One professor in particular had both a very interesting and concerning experience with the students for one of their classes. They designed a court activity where students were assigned the roles of the defense, prosecutor, judge, and jury members for the trial of Humbert Humbert for having a sexual relationship with a minor. After the trial, the student jury found Humbert not guilty, ruled that Humbert and Lolita's sexual relationship was consensual and therefore okay, and blamed Lolita for everything, stating that it was she who seduced Humbert first. This experience stunned and disturbed the professor. They stated that they stopped teaching *Lolita* after this experience, but if they could reverse time, they would have used that incident as a teaching moment about sexual assault, grooming, and statutory rape.

In a stark contrast between the interviewees who have not taught *Lolita*, just 37.5% of the interviewees who have taught *Lolita* indicated that they would provide alternative readings and assignments for students who did not want to engage in a text for

whatever reason, making them more reluctant. Despite interviewees stating that they would give some priority to students dealing with mental health concerns, they kept their opinions that students should be required to read what is located in class syllabi. With this being said, it was made clear that they would talk to students about the problems they were facing with the material for the class and would encourage them to relate real world issues to the topics and texts being discussed for the class.

Every interviewee mentioned something they would do differently if they were to teach *Lolita* again in the future. The most common change mentioned was relating *Lolita* to contemporary American society, specifically framing the novel around cancel culture and the Me Too Movement. Many professors also spoke about being more careful in their approach and doing closer readings of the novel. Other responses included pairing *Lolita* with another text, incorporating more interactive activities, and including one of the film adaptations in the syllabi, which directly correlates with one of the student responses in the student survey. Out of the eight interviewees, just one professor expressed concern about cancel culture, their reason being having an experience with a student making a complaint to the dean. The remaining seven interviewees stated that they were comfortable with dealing with situations with students who questioned their classes and felt supported by their institutions.

When speaking to interviewees about their advice for professors, the final and probably the most significant question, there was a lot to say. Because of the final question's significance, every piece of advice mentioned by the interviewees will be listed. However, the more common responses will be explained in text and the rest will be provided in bullet points. The most common response was intent. For professors

preparing to teach *Lolita* for the first time, they must have clear intent and a specific framework planned *prior* to teaching it. Professors must consider why they want to teach the novel and where they want discussions to go. Pre-preparation was a common theme among the responses, both in terms of prior to the start of the course and prior to starting the novel. According to the interviewees, professors should go into teaching *Lolita* with as much pre-planning as possible, given the novel's intensity and themes. Pre-planning also includes providing content warnings, both in the syllabus and verbal content warnings; this was another one of the popular responses. Interviewees expressed importance in not only telling students about the content before reading, but also reassure them that neither Nabokov, the novel, nor they themselves condone pedophilia and statutory rape. Overall, professors looking to teach *Lolita* for the first time should set expectations for their students and more importantly for themselves. Other responses to this question were as follows:

- Consider what is currently happening with the removal of art and statues and relate it to reading controversial texts
- Question students on censorship
- Seek advice from the department and administrators
- Gain teaching experience first before introducing *Lolita* to students
- Invite sexual assault survivors to speak/bring in real-world experience
- Remind students that the occurrences in *Lolita* happen in real life
- Encourage engagement, but do not push too far
- Give alternative readings and assignments

- Provide historical background information on Nabokov and the process of getting *Lolita* published
- Consider showing one of the two film adaptations
- Keep your students' feelings in mind

Professor Interview Analysis: Have Not Taught *Lolita*

Looking over what was recorded during these interviews, regarding the question asking how texts are chosen for class, responses from interviewees were not out of the ordinary. This question did help probe interviewees on whether they sometimes choose texts with heavy themes or if they decide to stray away. Despite having never taught *Lolita*, the results from this question, as well as the sub-question pertaining to trigger warnings, have shown that the majority of interviewees are not against teaching texts with controversial and heavy themes. These interviewees strive to challenge their students, which includes having them engage with texts that will make them feel uncomfortable. The majority of interviewees stating that they provide trigger warnings proves this, and also shows that, similar to the respondents for the student survey, they are keeping up with current times, as we are currently living in the era of the trigger warning.

The majority of interviewees feeling comfortable teaching at the collegiate level in the midst of cancel culture is partially a testament to the influence of tenure and the academic freedom that is provided for collegiate-level teaching in comparison to secondary school teaching. It also speaks to the value of having discussions with students and establishing healthy relationships with them to help gain trust. This was another significant reason as to why interviewees claimed to be unbothered by "cancel culture. In

addition, that the majority of interviewees would be open to providing alternative options for students with serious mental health issues shows that student mental health is important to these interviewees and is considered when managing their students.

Professor Interview Analysis: Have Taught *Lolita*

It is no coincidence that the majority of the interviewees who have taught *Lolita* no longer teach it currently. While some interviewees did not directly state why they have chosen to no longer it, some of the things that were mentioned during our conversations indicate that the current political and social climate in the United States have something to do with it. Several professors did specifically state that their reasoning was linked to the current political and social climate. Despite this, interviewees did indicate that they *would* teach it in the future, after proper and effective redesigning of lesson plans. It would appear that the current political and social climate, particularly the Me Too Movement, has had an influence on the teaching of *Lolita* in college for these particular interviewees. It is important to note that many professors taught *Lolita* prior to the Me Too Movement and therefore have no experience teaching the novel in the midst of an influential anti-sexual assault campaign of this magnitude.

Continuing on the topic of current political and social influence, this leads back to the topic of trigger warnings. I spoke with various interviewees who had begun teaching *Lolita* as long ago as the 1980s and these same interviewees indicated that they warned their students about the novel's themes and content and had discussions prior to reading it for class; maybe trigger warnings are not as contemporary as some may believe. It can be acknowledged that some students may misunderstand the point of trigger warnings, which is what we are sometimes seeing in this day and age, but professors have been

warning students about uncomfortable content in texts for decades at least. Lastly, that professors stated that they would incorporate current societal issues, including the Me Too movement, into the curriculum if they were to teach *Lolita* in the future is another reflection of our current times' influence on collegiate teaching.

The plethora of directions that interviewees took *Lolita* with their respective classes shows the richness of the novel's content. I am reminded of a particular interview with a professor who stated that *Lolita* is a book of many genres and themes. It is a traveling novel, a suspense, mystery, an arguably romance novel, a murder novel, a 1950s pop culture novel, and more. Professors will not find themselves pigeon-holed into only talking about Nabokov's use of prose or Humbert as an unreliable narrator. On a related note, the responses and reactions from the interviewees' students were pleasing to hear about. The overall positivity from students shows that *Lolita* is not a novel that cannot be taught in college and is therefore not a novel which students will necessarily disavow. The positive reactions and openness to discussion from interviewees' students correlates with the expressions of openness found in the student survey responses for this study.

Although there was small number of interviewees who indicated hesitancy in providing students with alternative texts and assignments, it does not correlate to insensitivity regarding students' needs. There was indication from interviewees that they would discuss issues with their students and attempt to understand their concerns. This leads to the final discussion point in this analysis. The importance of having discussions with students, as well as proper preparation prior to teaching *Lolita*, cannot be stressed enough. This was yet another crossover response from both professors and students. Students want to be prepared and professors want students to be prepared. Students want

to be able to discuss difficult themes in class and professors want the same. Despite its reputation, *Lolita* has successfully been welcomed in both the literary canon and the American college classroom. Once again, the question is not *if* it can be taught, but *how* it can be taught.

Chapter Five: Strategies and Approaches

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* is rightfully controversial, questionable, and naturally attracts negative attention from both those who have and have not read the novel. Fortunately, the novel has maintained a healthy enough status that it is not only a respected text within American literature but has also been introduced to college classes for decades. Although it is clear that its presence is welcome on college campuses, because of its heavy and uncomfortable content, the process of teaching one chooses for collegiate-level teaching should be carefully thought out. The strategies and approaches for presenting *Lolita* for effective teaching and learning at the collegiate level that will be detailed in this chapter are based on the responses from student surveys and professor interviews that were conducted for this study and the current pedagogical trends discussed in chapter three. Moreover, the strategies and approaches presented are not to be understood and taken as those that professors should absolutely use when teaching *Lolita*, but merely suggestions. Lastly, it is to be understood that these strategies and approaches are not presented for the purposes of making students feel comfortable when reading *Lolita*, as discomfort when learning is productive and expected, but to prepare them to engage with the text.

Planning in Advance

1. All professors planning to teach *Lolita* should ask themselves why they want to teach it. What about the novel will bring value to their class? The answer or answers to this question will be essential to making sure that students understand why they are being tasked with reading such a novel, as they will probably naturally question this on their

own. Not only should the professor's reasons be clear, but they should bring significant value to the class. In other words, it is probably not enough to teach *Lolita* simply because one enjoys it.

2. Be very specific with the direction the course will be taking. As the professor interviews proved, there are many topics that *Lolita* has birthed for teaching and discussion. If the course is themed, the direction will naturally stem from said theme. However, if the professor has no distinct theme planned, they should decide what they want to focus on, whether it is Nabokov's prose, the unreliable narrator, the development of America versus that of Europe, cross-country traveling during the 1950s, or others (a combination of topics is of course possible). In addition, having secondary readings that correlate with *Lolita* and the direction of the course could strengthen the quality and significance of the lessons.

3. Professors should *strongly* consider including a brief content preview in their course syllabi and possibly even the course description. Fenner suggests using the phrase "content warning," instead of "trigger warning." However, I propose using the phrase "content preview" instead. The terms "trigger" and "warning" can oftentimes have negative connotations to them. A warning indicates that there is possible danger, but there is nothing inherently dangerous about reading literature. Moreover, reading or hearing "trigger warning" may automatically prompt a student to put their guard up. I propose the use of "content preview" to replace "trigger warning" and even "content warning" because anything related to trigger warnings for both professor and student responses during the collection of my research always led to discussing plots in texts and their content. When I spoke to professors and asked them about providing trigger

warnings, I noticed the responses surrounded the act of talking to their students about textual content and not actually warning them about potential triggers. The student survey responses were similar. Students correlated giving trigger warnings with giving brief plot summaries. If students want to know the basic plot and professors are already providing brief plot information, using “content preview” probably will not make a significant difference. In addition, it may help prevent students from trying to take advantage by refusing to participate, something that naysayers of trigger warnings accuse them of encouraging.

Providing a content preview could weed out students who would have no interest in reading about pedophilia and the sexual assault of a child. Fenner states that they have students fill out index cards with personal information, including things that trigger them, during the first week of class (90). While this may be useful, I propose a slightly different approach, one that has students informing professors of potential triggers for one text at a time and not all at once. This will halt potentially long lists of triggers that do not pertain to any of the texts and keep them contained and specific to the texts being read for the class.

Both professors who have and have not taught *Lolita* confirmed that they have and continue to provide trigger warnings (content previews) for students and none reported any students of having taken advantage. In addition, dozens of students indicated that they would find trigger warnings (content previews) to be helpful if they were to read *Lolita* in the survey responses. Providing content previews does not necessarily remove students from their responsibilities, but simply informs them of the difficult content which they are going to encounter.

4. Understand that solid planning does not always guarantee success without failure. For this reason, professors need to think about and prepare how difficult situations with students will be handled. Professors should not go in to teaching *Lolita* with the assumption that every student will respond well if they plan their course effectively enough. Professors are not fixers and there is only so much that can be done when they are called to help students outside of teaching, but this does not excuse the list of things professors *can* do to help students. Professors can refer students to counseling, encourage them to speak with their advisors if they are having difficulty with the course, or refer them to other campus resources for assistance. Lastly, it will be helpful for professors to determine if they want to provide alternative texts and assignments for students having difficulty reading *Lolita* and what exactly those alternatives will be prior to the start of the semester.

Lolita in the Classroom

1. Be upfront on the first day of class. When reviewing the syllabi, professors should provide a verbal content preview, briefly talk about *Lolita's* plot, and clearly explain their expectations for students just as they would do for any other text. For example, if a professor has no intention on providing students with alternative options, they should inform their students that failing to read *Lolita* will result in a lower grade, thus providing students who doubt they will want to read it with the opportunity to drop the course early without repercussion should they wish.

2. Leading up to the start of the novel for class, professors should consider conducting a lesson plan where Vladimir Nabokov is introduced and *Lolita's* publication history and responses from critics and the public are discussed. Talk to the class about

why the novel is controversial and describe how graphic it is. It may be helpful to pull a passage directly from the text, specifically one that concerns Humbert and Lolita's intimacy to help students understand the level of detail and how their time together is described prior to the start of reading. This would also be an appropriate time for the professor to explain to the class why they are reading *Lolita*. Discuss its relevance to the course and why it is academically beneficial for the students to read and engage with. Lastly, professors should confirm with their students that neither they, Nabokov, nor *Lolita* promote and support pedophilia and sexual assault of any kind. Make the distinction between the fiction of the novel and pedophilia and sexual assault outside of the novel and inform the class that there is no correlation between the events in the novel and the support of said events. This strategy is supported by a 2010 essay about teaching Nabokov. Professors from around the world concluded that when teaching *Lolita*, it is important to remind students that "Nabokov's skill as a writer enabled him to create fictional worlds" (241) and that "fictional situations are...nothing but words" (Meyer, et al. 242).

During the Lessons of *Lolita*

1. Allow students to openly discuss how they are engaging with and reacting to the novel. Let them discuss any uncomfortable feelings they may have in conjunction with the topics that have been pre-planned for discussion. The responses from professors, both from those who have and have not taught *Lolita*, commonly surrounded the topic of having meaningful discussions with their students and making them feel comfortable to express themselves freely, thus creating a better learning environment for them. Pulling

from these interview responses, professors teaching *Lolita* should build rapport with and listen to their students to encourage further class engagement.

2. Building on the notion of listening to students and allowing them to express themselves, given *Lolita*'s disturbing content, allowing students to possibly walk out of class or remove themselves from a lesson by not participating or by being absent is recommended. If a student decides to remove themselves for the day, the professor should make time to talk to the student afterwards to discuss the situation and how to move forward.

3. Consider relating *Lolita* to current events and real cases when possible. This approach is based on a combination of several factors: responses from the student survey concerning relevance of the text, responses from professors concerning the importance of exposing students to real-world problems, and the continuous relevance of the Me Too Movement. As many students and professors stated, while the events in *Lolita* are fictional, they do unfortunately occur in real life. This is one of the many tragic realities of society. The Me Too Movement and the other various anti-sexual assault campaigns that came before are proof of such. Multiple students in the student survey self-disclosed that they were survivors of sexual assault and one indicated that they were both a sexual assault and incest survivor. Linking *Lolita* to the real world could not only strengthen students' understanding of the novel, but also help them understand that it is not a promotion of sexual assault and pedophilia, but merely a fictional story about real-life things.

4. The final approach is on the lower end, but still may be effective for teaching and learning, depending on the style of the course. Professors might consider screening the

original 1962 Kubrick film adaptation (the 1997 Lyne adaptation is more graphic and therefore a full screening might be unsuitable for class) or clips from either film adaptation in class prior to beginning reading. Doing so could potentially soften any negative pre-conceived feelings and mistrust students may or may not have towards the novel. In addition, designing a trial activity similar to the one that was carried out by one of the professors I had spoken to for their class (there were in fact two professors who designed trial activities for their students when reading *Lolita*) could be useful. It is a unique way for students to learn about things like statutory rape laws, pedophilia, grooming, and other things related to the sexual assault of minors. Again, such activities such as film screenings and trial activities could prove to be useful and relevant depending on the style and direction of the course.

Epilogue

The experiences and learning lessons I have taken away from this project are invaluable. The input of students is probably the most important research I was able to extract. When I begin teaching, my students will be my main priority and providing a welcoming learning environment and having the ability to listen to them are of extreme importance to me personally. With that being said, I cannot disregard the importance of the input of those already in the field, doing what I am aspiring to do, which is teaching the subject of English to college students. The English professors this study has allowed me to come into contact with, strangers from around the country who graciously gave some of their time to speak to me for the purposes of research have impacted me in ways I never expected.

After analyzing my research, I do not see political correctness and cancel culture encroaching upon the teaching of *Lolita* in college English courses on such a scale that it would significantly halt its presence in classes as a whole in the future. This is not to say that there will never be cases where students and maybe even professors may be so taken aback by *Lolita* that they will write it off or have the opinion that it should be done away with or cancelled. Additionally, political correctness can be applied to *Lolita*. One of the professors I spoke with talked about political correctness from their view as a male professor and the appropriateness of teaching *Lolita* in the future. Would it be more appropriate for a female professor to teach *Lolita*, given that the victim of sexual assault is a little girl? Should something like this matter at all? We talked about this topic and pondered these questions and could not come to a clear resolution. Of course, there were the two students from the survey that felt that *Lolita* should never be taught and their

feelings and opinions should be heard, as well as others who feel the same way. Still, overall, there was nothing presented in my research that suggested that *Lolita* could be heavily affected by political correctness and cancel culture, but I do believe professors looking to teach this novel, even ones who have taught it before, should consider potential backlash that they will probably face from students.

My assumptions about English students and scholars being open to reading anything were false, something I learned from this study. Not only did I come across a few students of English who had no interest in engaging with *Lolita* for a college course, but I met more than several professors who felt the same and had no interest in teaching something with content related to that of *Lolita*'s. Moreover, I realized that almost any text can contain something deemed too inappropriate personally for a student to engage with. A professor I interviewed shared that they had an incident where a student requested to be excused from reading Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The professor did not inquire as to why, but it did not matter. How could anyone find fault in *Jane Eyre*, I thought. As I pondered this, I eventually remembered a few things from the book that were problematic. If one were to take time to think, they could probably discover something problematic in every text from the literary canon and every text outside of it. This is not a problem necessarily, but both professors and students should consider how to navigate through these things without completely ignoring them and excluding them from the classroom altogether.

I want to reiterate the universality of the research that was conducted for this thesis. *Lolita* is undoubtedly one of the most controversial novels of the literary canon, but there are other novels that seem to gain recognition for their controversiality every

year like clockwork, the most notable text probably being Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It is the countless use of the "N" word and other racist rhetorical language and terms that has gotten this classic novel landed on multiple banned lists, as well as been deemed racist by readers. Yet still, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is popular in college English classes. What are we to make of and how do professors introduce Toni Morrison's *Beloved* or *The Bluest Eye* to students? What about J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or George Orwell's *1984*? Even more contemporary texts such as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series contain controversial themes. I strongly believe the research from this project and the strategies and approaches that have stemmed directly from the responses from college students and professors could prove to be helpful for any text with obviously controversial material. With the exception of the strategies and approaches concerning the topics of sexual assault/pedophilia/incest, *Lolita*'s film adaptations, and the trial activity, the remaining strategies are very general and can be applied to the teaching and learning process of any text. As we continue to navigate through reading controversial and banned texts as English students and scholars, thorough planning and respectful and engaging circles of discourse have never been more important.

Ultimately, I have learned that my adoration for *Lolita* is not a good enough reason to teach it as a professor, especially as someone brand new to the field; this is the biggest and most important piece of new knowledge I have personally taken away from this project. There is so much more that I need to consider before attempting to teach such a novel to a class of college students, even older and more mature ones. I have a deeper understanding of the potential risks that may accompany teaching this novel, as

well as a better picture of how topics such as sexual assault, pedophilia, and incest can impact students and professors within a classroom setting. There is great value in *Lolita*, but to introduce it to a class without clear consideration as to why and without thorough planning could result in negative reactions and backlash from students that were not initially expected.

As someone with a Master's degree in educational counseling and will soon have a Master's degree in English, I have a unique perspective of what a successful college student looks like. My English degree, which is preparing me to teach at the collegiate level, may frame student success as passing grades, good attendance, and participation in class. However, my educational counseling training not only considers passing grades, good attendance, and participation in class as factors of student success, but also how a student is navigating their way through the college experience, mentally, emotionally, and physically. As one with both English and educational counseling training, I naturally think about how I can be supportive for students both as a professor and as a counselor who is concerned about the academic processes *and* the mental health and overall well-being of students. For these reasons, I have made a mental note to refrain from teaching *Lolita* as a professor until I have both years of experience teaching and a solid plan for how I would go about teaching the novel. It is possible that I may never teach *Lolita* and it will continue to only be a text that I engage with alone, in the comfort of my home or with fellow colleagues. This is something I am content and comfortable with, as I would rather keep the mental and emotional well-being of my students in mind, something that all professors should consider doing for success of their students.

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APPENDIX

Permission to create and distribute student and professor surveys, as well as conduct interviews with professors was given by Bridgewater State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) committee.

Student Survey Title: *Lolita* in the Classroom: College Student Survey

Thank you for agreeing to respond to this 15-25-minute survey about your experiences with Vladimir Nabokov's 1958 novel, *Lolita*. Although you may or may not personally benefit from taking this survey, this study is beneficial for the field of education because of its potentiality to introduce pedagogical methods to college classrooms. There are no foreseeable risks, your answers will be kept anonymous, and you may answer whichever questions of your choosing or withdraw from the survey at any time.

Trigger Warning: *Lolita's* summary contains pedophilic and incestuous material. Proceed with caution.

Summary: *Lolita* (1958) is a novel about a middle-aged man named Humbert and his ongoing sexual relationship with this 12-year-old stepdaughter, Dolores "Lolita" Haze.

Questions	Options					
1. Please select your gender.	Male	Female	Transgender	Non-binary	Prefer Not to Say	Other
2. What type of higher education institution do you attend?	Community/junior college	Four-year college/university	Other			
3. What year are you in?	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Graduate	
4. Have you ever read Vladimir Nabokov's <i>Lolita</i> ?	Yes	No	Maybe			
5. If you have read <i>Lolita</i> , would you feel comfortable reading it for a college course?	Yes	No	Maybe			
6. If you have not read <i>Lolita</i> , based on the summary above, would you feel comfortable reading it for a college course?	Yes	No	Maybe			
7. Do you find <i>Lolita</i> inappropriate for college learning?	Yes	No	Maybe			
8. Should professors who teach <i>Lolita</i> provide a trigger warning in their course syllabi?	Yes	No	Maybe			
9. Should professors who teach <i>Lolita</i> provide alternative options for students who don't want to read it?	Yes	No	Maybe			

Free Response Questions:

10. Please list your major/field of study.
11. What about *Lolita* may or may not be uncomfortable for you? Please briefly explain.
12. How do you think professors should best prepare students for reading *Lolita*? Please explain.

Professor Survey Title: *Lolita* in the Classroom: College Professor Survey

Solicitation Email:

DISCLAIMER: I am interested in surveying and interviewing both professors who do/have and do not/have never taught *Lolita*. In addition, your specialization is of no importance to this research project. ANY English professor can be of help to me.

Hello,

I hope all is well. My name is Jasmine Revels and I am an English graduate student at Bridgewater State University. I am currently working on writing my graduate thesis and collecting research for it. I am inquiring about the teaching and learning process for Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* in college courses within the current political and social climate in the United States. This project requires me to survey and interview English college professors of all backgrounds and specializations in the United States.

If you are interested in taking the time to contribute to this project, I would greatly appreciate it! The survey will be linked below; it is very short (just six questions, should take no more than one minute to complete) and offers the opportunity to be interviewed for this project, which I would be incredibly grateful for. If you would be willing to

interview, please do not forget to leave your name and contact info in question six of the survey, as the survey is anonymous, and I will not be able to reach out if contact information is not provided. The interviews will be kept confidential and will not be recorded. I will take notes by hand. If you have any questions or concerns, please email me. Thank you for your time and assistance!

Questions	Options			
1. What level of college courses do you teach?	Undergraduate	Graduate	Both	
2. Have you ever taught Vladimir Nabokov's <i>Lolita</i> for a course(s)?	Yes	No	I don't remember	
3. If you have never taught <i>Lolita</i> , but are familiar with it, would you consider teaching it for a future course?	Yes	No	Maybe	Not Applicable
4. If you have taught or currently teach <i>Lolita</i> , would you consider teaching the novel again in the future?	Yes	No	Maybe	Not Applicable

Free Response Questions:

5. If so (in reference to question two), what type of course(s) was it for (i.e. 20th century American literature, Nabokov seminar, etc.)? Please briefly describe the course objectives, if possible.

6. May I contact you for a future phone or Zoom interview for further inquiry? If so, please provide your full name, email, and/or phone number.

Interview Questions for Those Who Have Not Taught <i>Lolita</i>
1. How long have you been teaching at the collegiate level?
2. What is your process for choosing texts for your classes? Do you provide trigger warnings for sensitive material?
3. Are you concerned about “cancel culture” affecting your classes? Are you worried about student backlash towards your classes?
4. Would you ever consider offering alternative readings/options for students who don’t want to read something due to personal reasons?

Interview Questions for Those Who Have Taught <i>Lolita</i>
1. How long have you been teaching at the collegiate level?
2. When did you begin incorporating <i>Lolita</i> into your courses?
3. What about <i>Lolita</i> brings/brought value to your courses? Why do/did you teach this novel?
4. Do/did you include a trigger warning when teaching <i>Lolita</i> ?
5. How are/were your class discussions? What were some topics that were brought up?
6. Did any of your students object to reading <i>Lolita</i> for your class? If so, how was the situation handled?
7. Would you ever consider offering alternative readings/options for students who do not want to read something due to personal reasons?
8. Would you consider teaching <i>Lolita</i> again in the future/do you plan to continue teaching <i>Lolita</i> ? If so, are you concerned about cancel culture? Would you make any changes to your teaching of it?
9. Do you have any advice for professors who are planning to teach <i>Lolita</i> for the first time?