

**'PROMISES OF PARADISE': CRITIQUES OF CONSUMERISM IN VLADIMIR  
NABOKOV'S *LOLITA*, MARTIN AMIS'S *MONEY: A SUICIDE NOTE* AND  
MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ'S *ATOMISED***

**Nicola Ophelia Lavey**

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**Institute of Government and Politics  
Faculty of Social Sciences and Education  
Centre for Baltic Studies**

**Supervisor: Professor Marina Grišakova**

**UCL Candidate Number: BVFL1**

**UCL Student Number: 000902899**

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this master's thesis is to examine the critical presentation of late twentieth-century consumerism as 'deception' in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, Martin Amis's *Money: A Suicide Note* and Michel Houellebecq's *Atomised*. This study has two primary goals:

- (1) To outline how these texts provide critical perspectives on the way signs and language are used to stimulate consumer desire
- (2) To demonstrate how these authors undermine the consumerist ideals of the self-sufficient maximisation of pleasure through the immediate gratification of wants and desires.

In the first section, the main characteristics of 'consumerism' are discussed, drawing primarily on Zygmunt Bauman and Colin Campbell's theories of consumerism as a social system of values prioritising the individual maximisation of pleasure. These social theories are combined with the semiotic methods of Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard to show how traditional religious, mythological and cultural signifiers are used to stimulate consumer desire. The following chapters are devoted to the analysis of the novels. First, the author's presentation of the seductive language used in consumerist discourse is analysed, highlighting the type of narrative voice and literary devices used to criticise it. Secondly, attention is drawn to how the authors use the metaphor of an earthly utopia or paradise to highlight the protagonists' fascination with the promises of unadulterated pleasure suggested in consumerist discourses, such as the mass media, Hollywood films and advertising. Special focus is given to the authors' use of metaphors evoking the paradisaical conditions of eternal youth, oneness with others and the purification of personal shame, as intrinsic features of prelapsarian joy. It is highlighted how the protagonists in the novels think they can acquire this bliss through consumption. Thirdly, this study explores how these authors use subject matter and formal techniques to undermine the consumerist ideal, as formulated by Campbell and Bauman, of man as a self-sufficient individual autonomously creating his desires. It may be concluded that fictional texts provide an elucidating perspective on consumerist culture, as they enable both empathic and critical attitudes towards the states-of-affairs portrayed in the work.

As consumerism is largely a symbolic and linguistic phenomenon, they demonstrate how aesthetic language can be used to undermine the seductive words and promises of consumerist discourse through the use of satire and parody.

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## INTRODUCTION: CONSUMERISM AS THE 'ECONOMICS OF DECEPTION'?

In a recent article, the journalist Tanya Gold commented upon how consumerist culture supposedly 'alienates' the individual from others, while paradoxically triggering promises of pleasure, love and comfort. Instead, Gold argues that 'the market feeds on unhappiness', while:

'Even the language corrupts. Advertising ratchets up the stress, and places us in imagined competition with each other. It encourages yet more materialism, which follows the paths of drug addiction: it offers *a false promise of ecstasy*, and it does not work. The more we spend on unnecessary material goods, the less happy we are.'

(Gold, 'How materialism makes us sad' on *Guardian*, 2014) [my italics]

It is worth noting that Gold pinpoints how consumerism is linked to a particular use of *language* that may 'corrupt'. In this vein, Roland Barthes described mass consumerist culture as a form of 'ideological abuse' (Barthes, 1957, 10). Barthes shows how the mass media and advertising endow commodities with 'natural' emotional qualities above their physical properties, in order to stimulate demand. As such, consumerism depends on the use of a specific discourse, which evokes particular emotions by associating products with fantasies and dreams of wish-fulfilment. This study will explore the potential of literary texts to criticize this use of 'entrancing' symbols and signs within consumerism. It will focus particularly on the way in which three novels may be read as critiques of consumerist 'promises' of ecstatic pleasure and freedom.

In 2007, Zygmunt Bauman demonstrated how the marketing of commodities relies on the stimulation of emotions and 'the *irrationality* of consumers', rather than 'on cultivating *reason*', thus criticising the ideal of consumer sovereignty (Bauman, 2007, 20, 48). Bauman explains how the success of the consumer society must be measured by its own values, rather than those important in other social systems. He states that one

of the main 'consumerist values' is the maximisation of pleasure and 'happiness' *in this world* (Bauman, 2007, 44). Ironically, Bauman outlines how the relationship between consumption and happiness is actually characterised by the law of diminishing returns. According to various 'happiness' polls, after basic physical needs have been satisfied, increased consumption fails to intensify happiness. In order to answer why this is so, Bauman systematically criticises the models of freedom and desire that provide the basis of consumerist ideology (Bauman, 2007, 100). He describes consumerism as the '*economics of deception*' (Bauman, 2007, 47). Accordingly, 'deception' constitutes the foundations of consumerist culture, rather than being an accidental 'malfunction'.

This study will compare the presentation and critique of consumer discourse in three novels by Vladimir Nabokov (b. 1899 d. 1977), Martin Amis (b. 1949) and Michel Houellebecq (b. 1956). This reading will focus on how these literary texts provide distinctive perspectives on the notion of consumerism as 'deception'. A thorough exploration of these depictions of consumerist culture may contribute to the reader's empathic understanding and critical awareness of the manipulative effect of emotive signs in consumerist discourses, such as advertising. As Colin Campbell has proposed, 'literary criticism has been found to be especially valuable' because of the light it sheds on 'the "unconscious mental habits" of people living in consumer societies (Campbell, 2005, 12, 91). Campbell draws upon literary texts by Virginia Woolf or Jane Austen to illustrate how the figures in their novels provide examples of 'ideal types' within consumerist society (Campbell, 2005, 146). As will be explored below, Campbell elucidates how consumerism can be historically linked to the imaginative and emotional pleasure obtained from reading fiction, both practices having developed simultaneously during the Romantic era. It is no coincidence that Nabokov's *Lolita* constitutes a parody not only of consumerism but also of certain stereotypes and genres identified with Romanticism.

The imagined worlds portrayed in *Lolita*, *Money: A Suicide Note* and *Atomised* share a common property: they are depicted by the first-person narrator as being in some way fallen or corrupted. All these narratives are set in post-war Western society and present the quotidian existence of these misery-stricken characters in excruciating detail. Moreover, each novel may be seen as reflective of a particular watershed 'mo-

ment' in the development of consumerist society, which may have shaped the novels' stylistic differences. Whereas Nabokov's depiction of consumerism is often characterised by wit and parody, it is largely ambiguous regarding the passing of any ethical judgement. In contrast, Amis's and especially Houellebecq's novels present a more polemical and bleaker image of consumerism, which may be reflective of the disillusionment concerning the emancipatory potential of the free market in public discourse that characterised the 1980s and especially the late 1990s, compared to the 1950s.

The main characters in the novels are all presented as struggling with the suffering characteristic of a 'fallen' and corrupt world. This apparently 'fallen' state is demarcated by the characters' existential anguish and crippling fear of any signifiers of death and ageing; their sense of alienation between themselves and others, and a paralysing sense of personal shame that restricts their moral agency. Unable to rationalise these forms of suffering, the novels' protagonists are depicted as perpetually seeking to transcend this anxiety through the only mode of action that seems to be offered to them: by gratifying their sensual desires through the act of possessing idealised objects or objectified people.

In each section, I will begin by illustrating how the style of each narrative is placed in dialogical relation with the language of consumerist discourse, showing whether it is imitative, parodic or polemically and directly satirical. Having discussed the relevance of this affective framework for the authors' presentation of consumerism, I will proceed with a thematic consideration of their depictions of 'the promises of ecstasy' offered in consumerist discourse, including the mass media, the Hollywood film industry and advertising. I will focus particularly on the authors' use of metaphors, figurative language and allusions to an earthly 'paradise', as a unifying motif for framing the critique of these characters' bewitchment with 'false promises of ecstasy'. These novels illustrate how signifiers of paradisaical joy associated with eternal youth, romance and cleansing from shame can be attached to idealised objects of desire. The accumulation of these mythologised commodities may provide momentary relief 'from the pains of inadequacy' (Bauman, 2007, 93). However, this fleeting bliss and enchantment with Edenic promises seems to intensify rather than alleviate the protagonists' suffering and guilt. I will analyse this ironic contrast, focusing on the critique of the characters' pride

and arrogance as archetypal consumers, trying to create their own pleasure autonomously. As such, it will be demonstrated how these texts challenge consumerist ideas of joy and freedom, especially by parodying the idea of the individual *qua* self-sufficient agent who attempts to maximise his pleasure through controlling things and people.



## CHAPTER ONE: THEORIES OF CONSUMERIST SOCIETY

It is essential to clarify the distinction between consumerism and consumption. Not every capitalist society is a consumerist society. Consumption has been defined as 'a permanent and irremovable condition and aspect of life', unconditioned by time or space (Bauman, 2007, 25). Contrastingly, consumerism can be perceived as a historically-contingent, twentieth century social phenomenon. Bauman refers to a *consumerist* revolution, which inaugurated:

'a type of social arrangement that results from recycling mundane, permanent and so to speak "regime-neutral" human wants, desires and longings into the *principle propelling and operating force* of society'

(Bauman, 2007, 28).

As such, consumerism may be understood as a 'regime of desire', suggesting that the gratification of individual wants has become the *supreme value*. This implies that other values (such as responsibility, duty or compassion) have become subordinate, relative or instrumental to the maximization of individualised pleasure. Furthermore, it has long become clear that commodities are not appropriated merely to fulfil a based material 'need', but a more complicated emotional function.

Thorstein Veblen was one of the first thinkers who acknowledged the *symbolic* function of commodities (Veblen, 1899, 70). This contrasted with earlier formulations of the commodity, including those positioned by Karl Marx, as an object which fulfils a particular *need*:

'A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another.'

(Marx, 1887, 26)

Marx then defined this object as a 'useful thing', describing this 'utility' as 'limited by the physical properties of the commodity'. Although Marx described how a product had the potential to become fetishised due to the imposition of exchange value, hiding the real human labour expended to produce the object by giving it an abstracted sign, he still maintained that there *exists* such a thing as real use-value, only that this had been distorted (Marx, 1887, 46). This prioritisation of the physical-material utility of a commodified object was undermined by Veblen's work on 'conspicuous consumption' (Veblen, 1899, 51). This theory posits that once humanity reaches a certain level of physical comfort, commodities are desired not for their utility but rather for their largely honorific value. Individuals are driven to accumulate commodities to signify their social standing (Veblen, 1899, 37). Veblen thus discerned the existence of the desire to possess a commodity for its *symbolic* value within a social system of communication.

Bauman states that the defining feature of consumerism has not been the quantitative rise in consumption but a change in attitudes towards it. Consumerism is outlined as:

'the emancipation of consumption from its past instrumentality that used to draw its limits – the demise of 'norms' and the new plasticity of 'needs', setting consumption free from functional bonds and absolving it from the need to justify itself by reference to anything but its own pleurability.'

(Bauman, 2001, 12-13).

As such, in contemporary consumerism, the acquisition of pleasure has become a supreme value. Supposedly, this value system has 'colonized' all the other spheres of life (Bauman, 2007, 24). As Bauman suggests, the success and efficiency of consumerism, must partially be judged by its 'ability to live up to its *own* promise' [author's italics] (Bauman, 2007, 43-44). It is clear that one of the supreme values of consumerist ideology, as articulated in both governments and advertising, is the pursuit of perpetual and instant pleasure and happiness *in this world* (Bauman, 2007, 44). Slavoj Žižek delineates how people buy commodities not because of their 'utility' or value as 'status symbols', but mostly to make life more 'pleasurable and meaningful' (Žižek, 'Fat-free chocolate and absolutely no smoking', 2014). Additionally, a chief property of this prioritization of pleasure is that it is self-sufficiently and autonomously obtained. It is the

individual's 'responsibility' to engineer and construct his own pleasure, as an internal and individualistic experience. The typical vocabulary employed to describe the 'American dream' is centred on the goal of appropriating wealth through one's *own* will and exploits, without the assistance of others. Anyone is therefore able to 'make it' and pursue happiness through his own agency (Bauman, 2007, 11, 16). The theoretical critiques of consumerism outlined here will focus on two areas: the prioritisation of pleasure and the ideology of the autonomous subject.

### **i. Historical Perspective: Colin Campbell's Theory of 'Autonomous Pleasure'**

Campbell has also described consumerism as a 'new attitude towards spending' (Campbell, 2005, 18). His ambitious work, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, complements Max Weber's theory on the cultural roots of capitalism. Following on from Weber's discernment of the Puritan world vision of self-discipline as the ideological basis of modern productive capitalism, Campbell raises the question of how, if modern capitalism apparently developed out of the Puritan values of 'rationalism, materialism and security', it has increasingly taken on a pleasure-seeking and hedonistic quality (Campbell, 2005, 3). The fascination with 'mystery, magic and exotic religion' that Campbell sees as a primary feature of consumerism seems 'inexplicable' using the Weberian model (Campbell, 2005, 3-6). Campbell thus explores what he deems to be the romantic and 'irrational' roots of consumerist mentality, weaving together two important cultural 'strands' of the capitalist ethic: the Weberian emphasis on Puritanical rationality, and an 'alternative' Protestant ethic, described as the Romantic tradition of self-sufficient 'emotional hedonism' (Campbell, 2005, 70).

Campbell outlines how advertising often draws upon 'romantic' cultural material to stimulate demand for objects, especially those of a luxury nature, such as perfume, lingerie or cigarettes (Campbell, 2005, 1). However, rather than claiming that market researchers and advertisers solely 'use' this material to stimulate demand, he delineates how Romanticism *itself* had a crucial role in the historical development of consumerism. According to Campbell, the 'spirit' of modern consumerism consists of 'autonomous, self-illusionary hedonism'. 'Traditional' hedonism involved a focus on 'pleasures'

rather than 'pleasure', whereby enjoyment was usually associated with particular activities, such as 'eating, drinking' and 'sexual intercourse' (Campbell, 2005, 69). According to Campbell,

'the shift of primary concern from sensations to emotions, for it is only through the medium of the latter that powerful and prolonged stimulation can be combined with any significant degree of autonomous control, something which arises directly from the fact that an emotion links mental images with physical stimuli'

(Campbell, 2005, 69).

'Modern hedonism' thus gives the individual a degree of control and autonomy over his pleasure-seeking. The emotional associations triggered by *words* and *language* constitute the addictive form of modern pleasure that characterises late capitalist consumption, exemplified in the fantasies stimulated by the exotic and bewitching symbols used in fashion magazines and advertising. Campbell thoroughly demonstrates how both novel-reading and the promises embedded in consumerist discourse allowed for the private and individual stimulation of dreams, wishes and fantasies through a particular use of language. According to him, the cultural grounds for both of these phenomena developed during the eighteenth century and culminated in the Romantic period. Nabokov, Amis and Houellebecq's literary works can potentially provide an elucidating insight into this *process of acquiring pleasure through the autonomous construction of fantasies through the manipulation of symbols and signs*, which constitutes one of the dominant properties of modern consumerist consciousness.

Campbell's theory outlines how references and allusions to religious and mythological signs were increasingly used to provide pleasure rather than fear (Campbell, 2005, 75). The secularisation that occurred in the eighteenth century did not thwart the power of traditional religious signifiers, such as images of hell, heaven and earthly paradise, to evoke a reflexive emotional reactions. However, these allusions were increasingly seen as sources of enjoyment due to the gradual eradication of absolute metaphysical threats. Campbell provides the examples of the eighteenth-century Gothic novel, which developed into the modern horror genre, or Romantic fixation with the 'sublime' as symptomatic of this (Campbell, 2005, 175, 135, 192). The enjoyment arising from allusions to the supernatural, resulting from the vicarious combination of safety and fear,

provides an example of how once traditional and religious signifiers can be used implicitly to arouse specific emotions.

However, Campbell's theory of consumerism is limited by his simplistic view of the origins and form of desire. For instance, Campbell acts somewhat as an apologist for consumerist pleasure as he champions the 'self-sufficiency' and 'self-illusory autonomy' involved in its generation (Campbell, 2005, 68). As will be demonstrated now, there is much to suggest that the consumerist ideal of 'autonomous emotional hedonism' has not been achieved in practice. It will now be illustrated how the idea of the consumer as the creator of his imaginative pleasure, free from social codes, is overly idealistic.

## **ii. Sociological Perspective: Zygmunt Bauman on the Critique of Consumerist Pleasure and Freedom**

Bauman has challenged the idea of the 'autonomy' of the modern consumer as the master of his own pleasure, attacking the traditional economists' idea of consumer sovereignty as a rational and autonomous subject (Bauman, 2007, 11). This includes Campbell's version of this model. Although Campbell attacks the conventional model of consumer sovereignty based on utility and rationality, he continues the primacy placed on the vision of the consumer as the master of his emotional pleasure (Campbell, 2005, 44). Contrastingly, Bauman demonstrates how consumerism diminishes these ideals of pleasure and autonomy rather than maximising them. He does this in a more nuanced way than constructing a moralizing critique of the consumers as 'cultural dupes' believing in advertising campaigns that engender 'false needs' (Bauman, 2007, 11).

Bauman illustrates how pleasure is obtained not only through the emancipation of *individual* desire but how it relies on the individual's relationships with others (Bauman, 2007, 45). Modern consumerism is fuelled by the desire for 'trouble-free' human relationships and the possibility of 'friendship, solidarity and love', yet this is ironically counteracted by the consumerist prioritisation of safety and ease over risk and effort (Bauman, 2007, 22, 107). Moreover, Bauman demonstrates how pursuing these 'promises of ecstasy' augments frustration rather than pleasure, acknowledging the suffering and alienation that characterises modern interpersonal relationships. Bauman describes

how the model of consumer sovereignty leads to the commoditization of other individuals as opportunities for pleasure, citing examples from contemporary culture such as social networking and internet dating (Bauman, 2007, 11, 19). He calls this phenomenon 'subjectivity fetishism', whereby the sovereign consumer is cast in the role of the Cartesian subject, who rationally chooses and calculates who will offer the most pleasure (Bauman, 2007, 11). Other individuals are treated as commodities on a shopping trip: sized up and compared in terms of the maximum degree of joy they can provide, and discarded if they prove to be inconvenient or faulty. Advertising campaigns suggest that it is only a matter of finding the 'right object', or person, to acquire an instant 'big bang' experience of ecstasy and bliss (Bauman, 2007, 36).

According to Bauman, models of consumer sovereignty continue the Cartesian division between the calculating subject and the passive object (in its function as a pleasure-giving commodity). He argues that the ideal of consumer as a self-sufficient, autonomous individual, in control of his own pleasures and desires is fundamentally misleading. Bauman points out how in contemporary consumerism, every consumer is also a commodity, thus undermining the subject-object opposition defining this ideal (Bauman, 2007, 11, 13). He recognises how the desire of an individual is always the *desire to be desired*. In order to acquire recognition from the chosen object of desire, the individual must also 'sell himself' by making himself seem fun, conventionally attractive, low maintenance, instantly gratifying, and most importantly, 'confident' (Bauman, 2007, 12). Bauman cites examples from consumerist discourse to concretise these claims. For instance, he looks at the way in which individuals are driven to 'market' themselves on social networking sites, in job interviews, on internet dating websites and in the media. Furthermore, the modern fascination with the mundane details of celebrities' lives is symptomatic of the consumerist despair for recognition from the other (Bauman, 2007, 13). Beneath every fantasy of fame is the 'dream of no longer staying [...] dissolved in the faceless and insipid mass of commodities' (Bauman, 2007, 13). This intensified thirst for fame can therefore be seen as an expression of the frustration of not receiving the sufficient degree of recognition from others in everyday life; an expression of the loneliness, which consumerist discourse ironically promises to transcend. As

such, the model of emancipation through the prioritisation of the fulfilment of individual fantasies is displayed as untenable (Bauman, 2007, 62).

### **iii. Semiological Perspective I: Roland Barthes on the Consumerist Stimulation of Pleasure through Mythological Language**

In 1957, Barthes formalised his conceptualisation of 'myth', thus constructing a convincing answer to the question of how mythical and cultural signs may be distorted in newspapers, mass tourism, and advertising discourse to evoke emotional pleasure (Barthes, 1957, 121). Barthes demonstrated how an analysis of 'semiological mechanics' could provide the basis of the critique of consumerist mass culture (Barthes, 1957, 8). The political theorist Andrew Robinson proposes that Barthes' theory of myths 'pre-figured' the various methods of qualitative discourse analysis (Robinson, 2011).

Myth is defined as a particular type of speech (Barthes, 1957, 107). Drawing on the model of Saussurian linguistics, Barthes how myth involves a *distortion* of original meaning (Barthes, 1957, 120, 128). According to Saussure, the original sign is composed of a signified and a signifier. The signifier is usually equated with the auditory feature of a word. The signified (or referent) denotes the 'thing' denoted by the signifier, such as the 'real' tree or a chair, as distinct from the sound 'tree' or 'chair'. The signifier and the signified are combined in order to create a third quality: the sign. The process of myth-making takes this sign as a ready-made object, empties it of its original referent (its first meaning), keeping its signifier but saturating it with its own utilitarian or political content. Myth is therefore described as being a parasitical 'second-order semiological system' (Barthes, 1957, 58), which draws upon a primary sign and empties it of its content, only to 'fill' it with its own 'nebulous' political or cultural agenda (Barthes, 1957, 118). The primary signifier takes on the function of the 'alibi', as its original meaning is used as a mask for when the myth is threatened with the revelation of its utilitarian content (Barthes, 1957, 121). In that moment, the original meaning is paraded as 'proof' for the innocuousness of the myth, letting the sign appear natural and apolitical.

Advertisements may be read as contemporary myths that give meaning to the inexplicability and chaos of the world. As Marina Grišakova has noted, 'advertising and mass media reproduce social and cultural stereotypes', transmitting cultural myths while stimulating desire, for instance by recycling well-known Romantic clichés of paradise and innocence (Grišakova, 2006, 275). Many people would claim that twentieth-century progress has liberated them from any irrational or emotional inclinations, such as religion or political ideology, with religious 'cults' such as Scientology or other New Age movements being positioned as a superstitious and exoticized primitive 'Other' that is contrasted with the majority of rational agents. Such rational individuals claim to have been liberated from the irrational power of myth, believing only in 'objective science'. However, as Grišakova's reading of Passikoff and Holman's study of the semiotics of possessions illustrates, in contemporary society visual and auditory methods of mass communication have replaced oral tradition in terms of its function of transmitting myths. Myths are therefore still very much part of the fabric of contemporary life. In the consumerist code, signs and fragments that may have been emptied of their absolute explanatory power, are mobilised to seduce the consumer subject due to the emotional associations they evoke (Barthes, 1957, 116). They work on the basis of connotation rather than denotation. Whereas 'denotation' refers to the 'obvious' meaning of a sign, or what the dictionary attempts to outline, 'connotation' refers to the suggestive socio-cultural and personal emotional associations evoked (Chandler, 2007, 137). Literal and 'denotative' meaning does not have so much force as an emotional stimulus.

One could think how countless shopping centres named *Eden* and *Arcadia* use original signifiers of paradise, evoking the implicit promises of infinite freedom, happiness and self-determining choice. One of the defining characteristics of myth is its constant ambiguity – the flitting between the sexual, political or economic content and the innocuousness of the original 'meaning'. The 'pivot' holding together these relations, is the signifier, which pins down the perpetual swivelling between the politicized content and the original signified, which is described as 'constituent ambiguity' (Barthes, 1957, 123). Consequently, the structure of myth is based upon the eternal alternation between presence and absence of meaning (Barthes, 1957, 63). It will be shown how the struc-



ture of desire itself is characterised by this feature of 'veiled-ness' and equivocality, with the idealised object never being fully exposed.

According to Barthes, it is possible for any cultural 'sign' to be usurped by myth (Barthes, 1957, 108). An example of this is the consumerist appropriation of communist symbols. The original context of the sign becomes insignificant, such as the case of Western teenagers wearing 'CCCP' t-shirts with a hammer-and-sickle or a portrait of Che Guevara, with their main purpose being a fashion statement. Even an originally subversive sign which denotes something that is directly oppositional to consumerism, can still be absorbed into consumerist rhetoric.

#### **iv. Semiological Perspective II: Jean Baudrillard on Consumerism as the Exclusion of Pleasure**

Rather than contributing to the establishment of 'prolonged' and 'autonomous' pleasure, as suggested by Campbell, consumerist discourse and its use of romantic allusions has been positioned as having eliminated true pleasure (Campbell, 2005, 66). Baudrillard elucidates how, although it seems 'paradoxical', the consumerist system actually excludes genuine pleasure (Baudrillard, 2001, 49). The 'permanent festive celebration of objects in advertising' thwarts rather than incites genuine pleasure (Baudrillard, 2001, 32). The decontextualisation and arrangement of different exotic objects and cultural artefacts side-by-side in shopping malls and drugstores leads to the annulment of real meaning and difference. The only real differentiator between these objects is that of their price; a quantitative rather than a qualitative difference, leading to nonchalance and boredom. Any true experience of difference is forbidden, as this would undermine the consumerist prevalence of safety and comfort over the raw immediacy of bliss.

The impossibility of attaining pleasure in consumerism is recognised by Baudrillard. He states that whereas genuine pleasure may be 'autonomous and final', consumption 'is never thus'. Although 'we experience pleasure for ourselves, when we consume we never do it on our own' (Baudrillard, 2001, 49). Like Barthes, Baudrillard explains how consumers are 'implicated' in a system of exchange and in the 'production of coded values'. One's 'individual fantasies', which Campbell identifies as the mainstay of con-

sumerist 'autonomous hedonism' are part of 'the ideological *discourse* on consumption' maintained within consumerist society. Baudrillard has diagnosed consumerist discourse, as manifested the mass media and advertising, as 'a systematic act of the manipulation of signs' (Baudrillard, 2001, 25). Consumerism is identified with the endless play of the forms of cultural myths and images, coalescing into a semiotic discourse or code, rather than any determined physical or emotional needs.

'the system of consumption is based on a code of signs (object/signs) and differences, not on need and pleasure'.

(Baudrillard, 2001, 50)

As such, the analysis of consumerist language is important to the understanding the functioning of consumerist pleasure and its impracticability. Baudrillard's *On Seduction* provides a detailed consideration of how fragments of religious and cultural signs 'haunt' consumerist discourse and mythologies in order to contribute to the suggestive allusiveness that inveigles the buyer (Baudrillard, 1979, 153). It outlines a response to the question of how forms, which have lost their normative strength, are frequently mobilized to seduce the consumer by triggering emotions and associations deeply embedded in cultural and collective memory.

#### **v. Jacques Lacan's Theory of Imitative Desire: Why the Notion of the Individual 'Liberation' of Fantasies and Desires is Essentially 'deceptive'**

In each novel, the protagonists are depicted as being caught up in a seemingly infinite cycle of addictive urges. These characters seem incapable of surmounting their harmful desires, despite the fact that at many points in the narrative, they state that they want to or have tried to in the past (Nabokov, 2000, 24; Amis, 2012, 145; Houellebecq, 2001, 174). Rather than being 'liberated' through the fulfilment of autonomous desires, these characters are presented as becoming increasingly enslaved within cycles of addiction. As such, some words on the nature of human desire seem fitting.

According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, all desire is shaped by the individual's desire for the Other's recognition and acceptance (Hewitson, 'What Does Lacan Say

About... Desire?'). This 'Other' can denote another person, or the network of social and cultural norms and codes within which an individual has grown up. As such, this 'Other' may be any idealised authority whom the subject believes has the power to respond to his basic existential anxiety and provide the feeling of absolute comfort (Lacan, 1957, 197). This anxiety springs partially from the inability to rationalise the suffering arising from the fear of death, including its symbolic form as the lack of recognition from others (Becker, 1973, 27; Dawson, 2007, 398). In contrast, recognition by the Other is thought to invoke feelings of absolute security, warmth and comfort, as a momentary relief from the individual's intrinsic 'lack'. The first self-Other relationship experienced by the individual is with the primary care-giver, or mother, who is perceived as having the power to fulfil all the infant's basic needs. This emotional structure is then transposed into later self-Other relations.

As a result, the structure of desire understood in Lacanian terms undermines the notion of the self-sufficient individual. It is not possible for the individual to express their 'real desires' through purchasing commodities, as the desire of the individual is always shaped by the desire of the Other. It is thus misleading to speak of desires as belonging to an individual subject, as though they were latently waiting to be materialised. On the other hand, in consumerism, it is often suggested that commodities are endowed with the potential to become materialisations of the individual consumer's 'real' fantasies. Lacan demonstrates how the only way in which to be 'recognised', or feel as though one exists, is through the persistent questioning of the desire of the Other, whether this Other is taken to mean other individuals or socio-cultural values and norms (Lacan, 2002, 148; 359).

Lacan suggests that desire is structurally insatiable. The individual desires to be what the Other wants, but the Other always lacks something else, projecting its desire elsewhere, a parallel to the way in which the Mother always desires the imaginary object of the *phallus* (Lacan, 2002, 463-465). This idealised object that may fulfil the lack on which desire is founded, or what the Other really wants-to-be (Lacan, 2002, 471). As such, the fulfilment of desire always seems imminent but is endlessly deferred. This imaginary object signifies the Other's inherent lack, and may be concretised as an idealised entity bestowed with magical promises of wish-fulfilment, being either another per-

son or a commodity (Lacan, 2002, 581-582). This magical object is always viewed as veiled and elusive, marking its intrinsic negativity or lack of real content.

Consumerist discourse may be seen as 'deceptive' because it is strongly implied, through the mass media and in advertising, that this intrinsic lack or frustrated desire is contingent rather than essential. Absolute pleasure and fulfilment always seem imminent, as though they were only slightly out of reach. The individual is therefore led to believe that he is the one to blame for the failure of satisfying his desire.

Even the desires we believe are our 'own' are actually conditioned by the internalisation of social values and rules. Consumerist discourse deceptively positions the emancipation of desires as a pathway towards autonomous pleasure, while actually affirming the cultural ideologies of the day. The consumerist economy relies upon the stimulation of 'individualist' desire, to a greater extent than other societal systems of values, which were usually characterised by the need to thwart or control one's desires – either through religious self-denial or through the early capitalist Protestant 'work ethic', where immediate gratification was always put off, for instance, through emphasising saving and investment over spending. In consumerist culture, people and objects are endowed with promises of pleasure and ecstasy, which suggest that the lack is contingent rather than intrinsic. As such, consumerist culture is based around the refusal of recognising the essential lack on which desire is founded, the total negativity behind the 'veil' of the idealised commodity (Lacan, 2002, 512).

## **vi. The Post-War Existential Crisis**

The successfully 'deceptive' power of consumer discourse may partly be viewed as an existential response to the modern relativisation of stable values and identities. Since the early twentieth century, the unequivocal faith in absolute values claiming to represent 'reality' has come under attack from within a range of academic disciplines, such as Heidegger's criticism of Platonic metaphysics, Einstein's theory of relativity, and the prioritisation of the 'form' as opposed to the humanist 'content' in literary theory. As John Lye has argued, Formalist literary theory challenged not only 'the role of literature as the privileged articulator of universal value' but the objective existence of any value and

meaning itself, demonstrating how these are culturally constructed (Lye, 1992, 92). As such, it seems as though metaphysical and absolute claims about reality have been significantly undermined, at least in the scholarly world. According to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, this has created an intensified sense of nostalgia for simple values (Gumbrecht, 2004, 45-46). Although many religious individuals would contest the claims of secularization theory, most theorists of modernity would agree that the twentieth century has witnessed a large scale relativisation of traditional values, contributing to the destabilization of meaning and identity (Bauman, 1991, 157). Anthony Giddens has acknowledged that contemporary life is characterised by an intrinsic sense of uncertainty, due to the dissolution of stable meanings and rituals (Giddens, 2013, 109). Sut Jhally has argued that advertising provides a deceptive yet alluring response to this modern 'need to search for *meaning*' to make sense of the uncontrollable aspects of existence (Jhally, 1991, 189). Jhally has illustrated how mythological language and commodity fetishism provides a response to the post-war crisis of meaning, and the resulting sense of continual flux and anxiety. Moreover, James Twitchell has controversially proposed:

'that advertising is the gospel of redemption in the **fallen world** of capitalism, that advertising has become the vulgate of the secular belief in the redemption of commerce. In a most profound sense advertising and religion are part of the same meaning-making process'.

(Twitchell, 1996, 30) [my emphasis]

Twitchell goes on to compare how advertising discourse mobilises mythological references in order to replace 'rituals, and penance' with 'the promise of purchase', suggesting that 'advertising has taken on some of the functions previously performed by religion' (Twitchell, 1996, 30). Whether one agrees with this perhaps exaggerated view, there seems to be a relationship between consumption and the manipulation of symbolic and evocative language. The American media scholar Rick Clifton Moore published an article under the cynical title 'spirituality sells' (Clifton Moore, 2005). The object of the study was the empirical investigation of the frequent use of religious imagery in the mass media. Clifton Moore remarks that an increasing number of scholars have elaborated upon the statement that 'advertisers will use *anything* to sell a product', a repetitively common description of consumerism. It therefore seems as though advertising acts

as a kind of depository or bank for traditional cultural values, establishing a sense of continuity in the face of widespread anxiety.

## CHAPTER TWO: VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S *LOLITA*

### i. The Language of Seduction

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* may be read as a metafictional commentary and allegory on the persuasive language that makes consumerist discourse, such as advertising, so seductive. The reader is positioned as a potential 'consumer' of the first-person narrator's myths, and has to be wary of being enchanted by his 'fancy prose style' (Nabokov, 2000 [1958], 9). There is a link between the three kinds of mesmerising language depicted in the novel; that of consumerist advertising, political coercion and sexual seduction (Grišakova, 2006, 275). As Rachel Bowlby states, there is an important connection between 'consumer culture' and Humbert Humbert's language of 'violent seduction' (Bowlby, 1993, 51); both evoke 'words and ideas' that beguile the individual by triggering associations with paradisaic pleasure (Bowlby, 1993, 53).

The main characters in the novel are presented as being entranced by the promises suggested by mythical consumerist discourse. Nabokov repeats the adjectives 'entranced' or 'enchanted,' to describe the spell cast by a 'seductive name'. These enchanted characters include Humbert's potential addressee, the 'Reader' (Nabokov, 2000, 154). Humbert's aptitude for seductive myth-making is corroborated by the fact that his first profession in the United States was in advertising: selling perfume (Grišakova, 2006, 278). As perfume is such a luxurious commodity, advertisements for it are laden with romanticized signifiers. To provide another example of the link between seduction and consumerism, Humbert states:

'Somehow, **in connection with that quiet poetical afternoon of fastidious shopping**, I recalled the hotel or inn with the **seductive name of The Enchanted Hunters'**  
(Nabokov, 2000, 108)

His choice of 'The Enchanted Hunters' inn because of its 'seductive name' is presented as the logical outcome of his afternoon of shopping, during which he is entranced by the illusive opportunities of pleasure before him. This choice of this hotel as the site of his seduction of Lolita is connected 'somehow' with Humbert's experience of the shopping mall. This direct link between shopping and seduction, has frequently been neglected by critics of the depiction of consumer society in *Lolita*. The curious juxtaposition of words like 'poetical' and 'fastidious' emphasise the dual nature of consumption: the dreamlike indulgence in mythologised fantasy and the simultaneous process of extracting the maximum possible value. The phrase 'Enchanted Hunters' also triggers associations with 'bargain hunting', the pleasure acquired from the ability to find the best value for a product. This dichotomy between daydreaming and the utilitarian calculation of values seems to be a quintessential portrait of consumerist culture, as conceptualised by Campbell in his description of capitalism as a symbiotic relationship between Puritan rationalism and Romantic indulgence (Campbell, 2005, 227).

Nabokov depicts the shopping centre as a site of 'mythological' possibility, where the 'dream of the day' is just a transaction away (Nabokov, 2000, 108). Nevertheless, this fantastical landscape offering infinite possibilities is laced with a sense of sinister temptation: the commodities Humbert selects 'seemed to fall from siren hands', a reference to the lethal power of mermaids to seduce their prey, leading the unfortunate sailor to his death. This juxtaposition of freedom and entrapment is characteristic of the way in which consumerist discourse manipulates language to suggest 'false promises' of paradisaical joy. The parallels between sexual and monetary seduction are emphasised by the listing of the different shades of swimming suits, 'Dream pink, frosted aqua, glans mauve, tulip red, oolala black.' This subtle interspersing of esoteric associations like 'dream' and 'frosted' with clear phallic references, to 'glans' and 'tulip', expose the connection Humbert has made between 'buying beautiful things for Lo' and his plan of seducing Lolita, as after he buys her clothes he can 'of course visualize' with 'hallucinational lucidity' (Nabokov, 2000, 107). Consequently, Humbert's sexual desire seems to be stimulated by the connotations of immediate pleasure engendered by the shopping experience: 'according to ads', the career girl can remake her ambitions, whereas the 'little sister' envisions making the boys in the class 'drool' over her due to a new 'wool



jersey', highlighting the inflated belief in the acquisition of pleasure through romanticised commodities.

The fact that Humbert chooses 'The Enchanted Hunters' because of its entrancing name, provides an example of the subliminal way that advertising uses language to evoke certain associations. The consumer is provided with the illusion of endless choice, when in fact his selection of a product comes down to this superficial reason – the entrancing catchphrase attached to a particular object. As a result, despite his self-assured and derogatory characterisation of Lolita as the 'ideal consumer', Humbert is also manipulated by the lure of 'crazy purchases' as a possibility of wish-fulfilment and the materialisation of his daydreams (Nabokov, 2000, 148).

As mentioned above, the technique of juxtaposing allusive signifiers is characteristic of consumerist discourse. According to Barthes, myth always springs from a 'historical concept' (Barthes, 1957, 123), yet when an original sign is absorbed by myth, it is 'deprived' of its original meaning (Barthes, 1957, 152). This device of de-contextualising traditional religious, metaphysical, literary, historical and cultural signs is prevalent in Nabokov's description of 'the crazy quilt of forty-eight states' (Nabokov, 2000, 152). In order to keep her placated 'from kiss to kiss' (Nabokov, 2000, 154), Humbert must tempt Lolita with commodities: fudges and ices, junk food, magazines about Hollywood stars, and most importantly, visits to consumerist heterotopias, predecessors of the American theme park, such as Disneyland, where historical or cultural objects are decontextualised and emptied of their original religious or cultural importance (Nabokov, 2000, 155). Disneyland can be seen as the distilled quintessence of mass consumerism, wherein 'real sites that can be found within the culture – are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted....' (Bruchansky, 2010). 'Disneyfication' has been described as the 'decontextualisation' of reality, the formula for 'mass-consumerism'. Nabokov highlights the way in which this mythologised landscape is constructed from decontextualised referents through his use of syntax. Humbert's narrative is filled with five pages of lists of tourist attractions and consumerist artefacts, the 'sentences' often lacking a verb – for example,

'Hundreds of scenic drives, thousands of Bear Creeks, Soda Springs, Painted Canyons. Texas, a drought-struck plain. Crystal Chamber in the longest cave in the world, children under 12 free, Lo a young captive. A collection of a local lady's homemade sculptures, closed on a miserable Monday morning, dust, wind, witherland. Conception Park, in a town on the Mexican border which I dared not to cross. There and elsewhere, hundreds of gray hummingbirds in the dusk, probing the throats of dim flowers.'

(Nabokov, 2000, 157)

This stylistic device of listing countless references to cultural artefacts, side by side, with no additional context, such as Lincoln (Nabokov, 2000, 155) or Shakespeare (Nabokov, 2000, 157), is an excellent example of decontextualisation (Barthes, 1957, 116, 117, 119). History 'drains' out of these forms, as arbitrary cultural landmarks are stripped of any referential content and placed within a monotonous list. These objects are differentiated only through their exchange value, 'pubescents sixty cents' (155), 'Lolita fifty cents' (158). All other information is rendered meaningless, a striking example of the commodification of history and culture. These cultural signifiers, whether tropical, heavenly, rustically Romantic or even Platonic and philosophical (Lolita is desperate to visit a 'Magic Cave' on their last journey), are fundamental to stimulating desire because of triggering particular emotional associations, with otherworldly pleasure or exotic excitement (Bowlby, 1993, 53). They tap into the storehouse of an individual's cultural memory, therefore triggering associations with traditional meaning-giving myths, while retaining the safety and lack of responsibility that is given by the fact that these signifiers are merely hedonistic and aesthetic, removed from any spiritual or moral purpose.

Nabokov highlights the fallacy of Humbert's belief that he can fetishise Lolita and subjugate her to his constructed role. Humbert characterises Lolita as an 'ideal consumer' or a 'disgustingly conventional little girl', entranced by all these kitsch consumerist promises (Nabokov, 2000, 148). However, Lolita herself deflates his fantasies, saying 'Not me.' when he wants her to be entranced by the Romantic images evoked by the advertisement for the Magnolia Garden (Nabokov, 2000, 155). There is an important difference between the way that Lolita and Humbert consume products. Whereas Humbert absorbs the implicit promises of otherworldly bliss, Lolita rebuffs any inflated pre-

tensions to metaphysical allusions (Nabokov, 2000, 154-155). For instance, Humbert exalts in its commercialised description of Magnolia Garden:

'because... O, Reader, My Reader, guess! ...because children (and by Jingo was not my Lolita a child!) will "walk starry-eyed and reverently through this foretaste of Heaven, drinking in beauty that can influence a life.'"

(Nabokov, 2000, 157)

The use of ellipses and the apostrophic appeal to the reader evoke the sense that Humbert can barely contain his excitement regarding the fantasy triggered by the use of mythical language. Instead, Lolita is oblivious to these suggestions, grimly responding 'Not I' to the allusive promise of the artificial Edenic garden to 'influence a life'. (Nabokov, 2000, 154). Bauman points to 'the stubbornness of the human subject' to resist attempts at its objectification by others (Bauman, 2007, 20). The simplistic 'duality' between the powerful consumer and the passive commodity is undermined, due to the irrepressible freedom of the 'object'. However, Bauman also points to a consumerist 'solution' for this: 'exchanging the 'not fully satisfying commodity for a new and improved one'. The prevalence of Humbert's egotistical lust, despite any pretences to self-sacrificing love, is clarified when he is already planning the acquisition of future nymphets when Lolita reaches adulthood (Nabokov, 2000, 174). Just like any commodified object, Humbert's prey has a 'short life expectation' (Bauman, 2007, 20).

*Lolita* provides a commentary upon the way that consumerism stimulates and manipulates desire. The nature of desire is that it is never satiated, as it is predicated on a form of ontological lack (Lemaire, 1979, 162). Bauman has defined consumer society as the manifestation of 'the impossibility of gratification' and 'ever-rising demand.' where 'we seek and find the dénouement to the drama of mortality not in things we gain and the states we attain, but in desiring them. (Bauman, 2001, 13). The consumption of various mythologised promises and objects is met with disappointment and boredom the second they are obtained. This is illustrated through Lolita's disdain when she actually arrives at the fervently anticipated pleasure gardens and historical sites. She is never interested in what the place actually has to offer, because she is already aiming towards visiting a new landmark (Nabokov, 2000, 155). Similarly, Humbert's desire is portrayed

as though it were an unquenchable thirst, satisfiable only for a few moments before his 'lust would swell again' (Nabokov, 2000, 285). As a result, the infinite cycle of want and desires that is so essential for the consumer economy to function is exposed by the author, through his characterisation of figures who can never 'have their fill' (Nabokov, 2000, 285).

## **ii. Humbert Humbert's Promises of Paradise**

Humbert treats Lolita as a commodity that can be purchased and controlled in order to gratify his personal desires (Nabokov, 2000, 184). He tries to 'immortalise' her or 'fix' her into the mythological figure of the nymphet (Nabokov, 2000, 17, 134). Humbert describes 'nymphets' as an essential *type*, a common practice in advertising discourse, where people are categorised into stock characters with a set of discernible characteristics. He describes 'nymphets' using a distinctive plural form, as though they were a species or category: 'nymphets do not have acne although they gorge themselves on rich food' (Nabokov, 2000, 41) or 'Nymphets do not occur in polar regions.' (Nabokov, 2000, 33). Moreover, Humbert refuses to call Lolita by any of the names by which she has been known, giving her his own romanticized nickname, thus making her 'mine, mine, mine' (Nabokov, 2000, 161). He consistently distorts traditional values and mythical references in order to fabricate his vision of Lolita, positioning her as a passive object for the maximisation of his own pleasure, which he expresses in the bombast terms of an earthly paradise. He universalises his physiological impulses to a mythological level by mobilising references and imagery evoking man's blissful pleasure before the Fall. Humbert's seductive allusions mirror the techniques used in mass consumerism, such as drawing upon traditional religious and literary allusions to trigger certain words and associations. The non-'astute' reader, who allows himself to be bewitched by Humbert's mystifications, is therefore placed in the position of the 'ideal' consumer, enchanted by promises of joy offered by seductive discourse. The mythical and fantastic quality of the atmosphere Humbert evokes, in order to 'seduce' the recipient, is acknowledged by Nabokov's voice: 'The implied sun pulsated in the supplied poplars' (Nabokov, 2000, 60). This points towards the way in which Humbert sees himself as a

Romantic myth-making artist, aestheticizing his passion to seduce his reader. The following sections will demonstrate how Nabokov's protagonist distorts signifiers evoking promises of paradisaal joy to achieve a seductive purpose, echoing the suggestions of infinite pleasure in consumerist discourse.

One element of Humbert's fixation with obtaining Edenic pleasure is his longing for immortality and eternal youth. He evokes pathos when depicting his childhood as being suddenly broken through the untimely intrusion of death (Nabokov, 2000, 13). The first time Humbert sees Lolita, significantly in a garden, a clear paradisaal reference, he says that this returns him to the 'immortal day' of his shattered childhood (Nabokov, 2000, 39). He extends this vocabulary denoting deathlessness by describing Lolita as an 'immortal demon' (Nabokov, 2000, 139). Humbert persistently combines references to nymphets with promises of his own eternal youth ('as if it could give me magic wisdom, youth, freedom, **a tiny concubine**, 84), innocence ('little innocent cotton frock', 59) and immortality. Contrastingly, older women, or girls who display more womanly characteristics, specifically those recalling female reproductive functions, are portrayed using allusions to decay, rotting flesh and death, such as 'the coffin of coarse female flesh within which my nymphets are buried alive' (Nabokov, 2000, 175). Humbert thus constructs a binary opposition between the 'brown core' lying next to Charlotte Haze's 'three ash-trays' with the 'sudden rush of greenery', and references to 'fruit vert' and 'apple-green light' surrounding Lolita (Nabokov, 2000, 1955, 37). This immediately conflates the maturity of womanhood with the mortality that is attributed to Man after Eve's temptation of Adam during the Fall. The persistence of the ideal of childlikeness in consumerism, as a criterion of feminine attractiveness, is evident in the obsessive search for girlish youthfulness that characterises plastic surgery and cosmetics advertising. The ubiquity of the desire to look like a wide-eyed and innocent child, or 'infantilization', exemplified by the Marc Jacobs perfume advertisement 'Oh, Lola!' (a direct distortion of Nabokov's text) has been acknowledged by critics of the mass media (Turton-Turner, 2013). As such, both Humbert and advertising discourse distort traditional and religious signifiers of feminine 'innocence' and chastity to stimulate male desire. This obsession with immortality and eternal youth is paralleled in consumerist discourse, which Humbert ironically acknowledges; Lolita is fascinated with the movie industry 'where from death and

truth were banned' (Nabokov, 2000, 170). Death and truth, or rather mortality and knowledge, are the two inflictions man was burdened with following the exile from paradise.

Humbert insidiously makes use of single adjectives, such as she 'was musical and apple-sweet', or 'innocent shanks', at the most tense and exhilarating points in the plot, such as the scene where he is masturbating with Lolita lying across his lap (Nabokov, 2000, 59-60). As such, it is unlikely that the first-time reader would be conscious of the seductive quality of these allusions, as they are so subtly interwoven into the whole of the text but never explicitly bared. This echoes the subliminal quality of advertising discourse. Ironically, the scene when Humbert sets 'all paradise loose' while masturbating, occurs on a Sunday morning, during which Charlotte and Lolita are supposed to attend church (Nabokov, 2000, 57). The ironic nature of Humbert's invocation of paradise is also highlighted by his blasphemous comment when he momentarily satisfies his perverse desire; 'Blessed be the Lord.' (Nabokov, 2000, 61). It is evident that Humbert not only strips the signifiers of paradise of their biblical meaning but twists them to suit his 'dark' paradise.

His behaviour also contradicts the primary religious and moral meaning of the signifiers he mobilises to create his seductive discourse. Humbert's obsession with pre-pubescent girls is presented as the indirect cause of the deaths in the novel. He persuades the reader into thinking that he has killed Lolita, by alluding to the 'Carmen' song, about a jealous lover who kills his beloved woman (Nabokov, 2000, 62). When it is revealed that it is not Lolita, but her seducer, Clare Quilty, whom Humbert murders, this relief manipulates the reader into believing in Humbert's sincerity as a Romantic hero. The protagonist thus tries to divert attention from the gravity of his crime of corrupting Lolita's innocence. When she is only seventeen, she already seems considerably older, and her teenage pregnancy, due to which she dies in childbirth, is the result of Humbert's conduct (Nabokov, 2000, 277). Rather than immortalising Lolita, Humbert only infects her with premature decay. Similarly, the contemptuous descriptions of Charlotte in his diary may be seen as the trigger for her running out in hysterics and getting hit by a car. Despite Humbert's conjuration of paradisaal immortality and eternal youth, his behaviour ironically contributes to suffering and death.

Another distinctive feature of Humbert's confession is his alienation from others or 'solipsism' (Nabokov, 2000, 12). Following the Fall, the suffering encountered by man is first and foremost that of his separation from the world and from others. Humbert tries to make the reader believe that his possession of nymphets is necessary to his recovery of the total unity he felt before the ruin of his childhood, his secularised correlative of earthly paradise. He writes that 'in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel', excusing himself by positioning his childhood love's death as the cause of his perversion (Nabokov, 2000, 14). 'Annabel Leigh' is a poetic and literary reference to Poe's Romantic heroine, Annabel Lee, who also dies at an untimely age. Thus styling himself as a Romantic hero, Humbert remarks that he 'broke her – Annabel's - spell by incarnating her in another', blindly ignoring any difference between Lolita and Annabel and mythologising his desire (Nabokov, 2000, 15). A connection may be established between these Romantic “archetypes” and the idealised object of desire in mass consumerism (Grišakova, 2006, 276-277). Both consumerist discourse and romanticised aestheticism posited the object's capacity to endorse 'limitless' pleasure while neglecting its 'practical purposefulness' (Grišakova, 2006, 276).

The language with which Humbert recounts his childhood is interspersed with paradisaical signifiers. Describing his childhood relationship with Annabel, the protagonist describes how they formed a single whole, an example of perfect unity between the self and the Other, characteristic of Edenic oneness. Humbert says that he 'felt her thoughts floating through mine' (Nabokov, 2000, 14). The 'spiritual and the physical' had been blended to a 'perfection' in his childhood love (Nabokov, 2000, 14). Similarly, Humbert's experiences with Annabel in the garden, another paradisaical signifier, connote an uncanny sense of unity and cohesion with nature; 'But that mimosa grove – the haze of stars, the tingle, the flame, the honey-dew and the ache remained with me' (Nabokov, 2000, 15). The choice of words such as 'tingle' blurs the difference between internal sensations and those of external nature. In contrast, when Annabel dies, he remarks on how his world was 'split into' two. This break with this sensation of unity between subject and object, may be viewed as a correlative to the shameful awareness of one's ego that occurred after the Fall. According to Humbert, the only way he thinks he can recover

this unity with the world and with another human being is through possessing Lolita (Nabokov, 2000, 39).

However, rather than recovering the unity between his thoughts and those of the other, he only manages to imprison himself in his solipsistic hell. In one of the most emotive passages at the end of the novel, Humbert remarks on how he 'simply did not know a thing about' Lolita's 'mind', that behind the 'juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate – dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden'. This reference to the 'palace gate' and 'garden' evokes associations with Eden or the Kingdom of Heaven and therefore of unadulterated bliss. The garden reference may also be to a garden of 'forbidden' desires, highlighting the ambiguous fusion of metaphysical and dark elements in Nabokov's depictions of paradise, also noted in Link's article on the recurrent motif of a fallen or dark Eden in the author's texts (Link, 2009-2011, 95). Humbert states that his separateness from Lolita is due to the fact that they are living 'in a world of total evil' and would be

'strangely embarrassed whenever I tried to discuss something she and an older friend, she and a parent, she and a real healthy sweetheart, I and Annabel, Lolita and a sublime, purified, analysed, deified Harold Haze, might have discussed – an abstract idea, a painting, stippled Hopkins or shorn Baudelaire, God or Shakespeare, anything of a genuine kind'.

(Nabokov, 2000, 284)

The state of 'evil' in which their relationship is enclosed renders 'further conversation impossible' (Nabokov, 2000, 284). Although Humbert wishes to recover the paradisaical unity of his beloved's thoughts blending with his own, he manages only to 'safely solipsize' Lolita (Nabokov, 2000, 60). As such, the way in which his fantasies strip other human beings of any individual freedom of self-determination, only entrenches him in his solipsistic prison. Moreover, his egotism becomes apparent in his occasionally witty yet condescending remarks about all the other characters, who threaten to interrupt his enjoyment of Lolita (Nabokov, 2000, 164 – 'repulsive type', 215, '*Gros Gaston*', 'his prissy way'). Humbert's idealisation of a single person-object is really what contributes to his loneliness and alienation from the rest of the world, instead of providing genuine joy.

Eric Goldman has argued that Humbert mobilises references to the Fall,



identifying himself with Adam and forcing Lolita to play the role of Eve, in order to exculpate himself from his personal shame (Goldman, 2004, 89). Humbert is obsessed with using Edenic references to blame women for tempting him (Goldman, 2004, 90). The traditional juxtaposition between the woman as either an angel or a demon has been continually reified in late consumer culture. For instance, according to Zsófia Anna Tóth's work on the representation of women in Hollywood cinema, the industry continuously recycles the motifs of 'the gender dichotomies' of the Victorian era, the vampiric and demonic *femme fatale* and the saint (Tóth, 'The Representation of Aggressive Women', 2008). Tóth argues that the stereotypical dichotomy between the innocent angel and the fallen woman reaches back to the inception of 'Judeo-Christian heritage', wherein piety and purity are juxtaposed against degenerate temptation.

As Rob Moore suggests in his reading of René Girard's theory, the function of myth since time immemorial has been to mask the innocence of the scapegoat, the victim of sacralised violence (Moore, 2012, 4). The myth of the fallen woman serves this purpose: to mask the victim's innocence and the perpetrators' criminality. The combination of demonic vulgarity with angelic innocence contributes to the forming an idealised object of desire, corroborating a man's sense of masculinity, while providing an alibi for his guilt. Humbert's descriptions of Lolita's purity are contrasted with idealized projections of himself, characterised by references to his manly good looks and the way he sees himself as Lolita's strong 'protector' (Nabokov, 2000, 121). This discourse of masculine virility contrasts with allusions to Lolita's vulnerability, encapsulated in Humbert's references to her little white socks and panegyrics to her innocent helplessness (Nabokov, 24, 111). As Link demonstrates, culturally, when woman does not conform to the idealised standards of 'innocence', the angelic Eve figure is often transformed into 'the spectral, succubus figure of Lilith' (Link, 2009-2011, 109). Any deviation from angelic chastity is immediately transformed into 'proof of woman's evil demonic nature.

Moreover, Goldman has demonstrated how Humbert's positioning of all women as potential temptresses in his 'Edenic fantasies' serve as a way of redeeming himself of his own shame while intensifying his pleasure (Goldman, 2004, 90). According to Baudrillard, the aim of advertising is not limited to the stimulation of

consumer demand. It is also to enable the consumer to 'feel moral', which he describes as the replacement of 'puritan' with 'hedonistic morality' (Baudrillard, 2001, 15-16). As such, Humbert's idealisation of Lolita, as both a perfect object of desire and the paragon of purity that can 'cleans' him of personal shame, seems to parallel the consumerist dialectic of overindulgence and absolution.

Humbert is disappointed whenever Lolita fails to live up to his idealised fantasies of innocence and corruption. When she confesses that she has already had sexual experiences, he refers to her 'nymphaean evil' (Nabokov, 2000, 125). Additionally, when she begins to bring home boys her age, he states 'Welcome fellow, to this bordello' (Nabokov, 2000, 185). Finally, Goldman illustrates how Humbert is disappointed when he discovers that Lolita has become the 'quintessential American housewife' instead of 'reaping the ruin of the fallen, deviant woman'. He takes Lolita's "decent" life' as an affront to his aestheticized worldview (Goldman, 2004, 100). This emphasises how Humbert's attempts to manipulate the world to intensify his pleasure autonomously, thus forcing other people conform to his wishes and myths, constantly elude him, as people turn out to have an independent will of their own.

### **iii. Consumerism and the Delusion of Man's Omnipotence**

As explained above, consumerist ideology suggests that the individual is the master of his own pleasure, providing that he has sufficient material means. In *Lolita*, Humbert believes that he can attain paradisaic ecstasy (the freedom from shame, eternal youth and fusion with the Other discussed above) through a simple financial exchange. However, Humbert's pretensions to the autonomous creation of joy in this self-sufficient manner are sharply undermined.

For Humbert, the recovery of earthly Eden has been rendered possible through monetary exchange: Humbert laments that Lolita proves

'to be a cruel negotiator whenever it was in her power to deny me certain life-wrecking, strange, slow **paradisaal philters** without which I could not live more than a few days in a row'.

(Nabokov, 2000, 184)

Lolita the 'cruel negotiator', the girl whom Humbert has kidnaped and routinely exploited, is described as having 'managed' to 'raise the bonus price of a fancy-embrace to three, and even four bucks.' Humbert continuously links Edenic bliss with financial exchange, comparing Lolita to a temptress or prostitute (Nabokov, 2000, 285). The protagonist therefore suggests that the 'paradisaal philters', which provide him with a temporary restoration of the bliss of his childhood, the 'state of absolute security, confidence and reliance not found elsewhere in conscious life.' are accessible largely through an exchange system (Nabokov, 2000, 60). The purchase of Lolita offers Humbert the recovery of his personal paradise (Nabokov, 2000, 10, 15, 39). Link has termed Humbert's fantasy a '*false Eden*', where sensual desire is confused with true devotion. According to Link's reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, it is possible to recover and 'even surpass' Adam's lost paradise *in this world* through the implementation of patience and love (Link, 2009-2011, 84). Through virtue, self-sacrifice and humility, man can receive 'a peaceful reconciliation with mortality' that will act as a 'hidden entryway into eternity' (Link, 2009-2011, 84). Humbert tries to circumvent this, thinking he can restore the paradise of his childhood autonomously. He wants to recover Eden through controlling another person as a objectified commodity – as is made evident through the fact that he bribes his prey with monetary payments and expensive attractions. As Dana Brand has argued, Humbert's flaw lies in his desperate attempts to force reality to conform to his personal fantasy, rather than developing impartial creativity and rejoicing in aesthetic pleasure (Brand, 1987, 20-21). Nabokov's authorial voice undermines Humbert's aspirations as naïve and unethical, demonstrating how the hero is easier to manipulate because of his obsession with recovering paradise through erotic passion. Although the ending of *Lolita* is markedly ambiguous, one may argue that Humbert's only chance of obtaining genuine redemption and 'immortality' is through love and art, divorced from obsessive desire and sensual gratification (Nabokov, 2000, 309).

One reason why the appropriation of signifiers denoting traditional values and myths is so effective, is that they create associations between the acquisition of the commodified object and the promises once offered by these traditions – the return to a paradisaical state of immortality. As such, the spectre of death is silenced and cancelled out in consumerist promises. Humbert visualises the realm of mass culture as an implied 'grief-proof' paradise from which 'death and truth' are forever excluded (Nabokov, 2000, 170). Advertising discourse makes use of endless references to the promises of immortality and eternal youth, glossing over the need to become reconciled with death. If you only buy a certain product, you can be young forever. Erotic affection from other individuals, the promises of unity and lack of shame which characterise the condition of paradise, are often promised in advertisements for exotic tourism and perfume. However, the original requirements which were conventionally linked to the recovery of paradise on earth have been conveniently removed, leaving only the guaranteed and easy promise of gratification. This renders the religious conditions of man having to express the virtues of patience, love and humility irrelevant – all the forms of the dictate of obedience, not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, are made redundant. In consumerism, man thinks he can become God, as he does not have to submit to the instructions of a higher authority.

Nabokov undermines this very notion of acquiring paradisaical pleasure through consumption and accumulation. The author criticises Humbert's naïve aspirations towards obtaining autonomous pleasure by creating elaborate fantasies and attempting to make individuals conform to them. The relationship between the narrator and the author may be read as an allegory of the relationship between humanity and God, or a fatal agency that curbs man's pretensions to complete knowledge and autonomous happiness. Humbert incessantly prides himself on his skill in seeing patterns in everything, for example his knack at playing chess, where he instantly recognises all the possible strategies (Nabokov, 2000, 233). Nabokov presents him as being far removed from this concept of the all-seeing deity. Contrarily, Humbert is constantly outwitted in his attempts to know and control everything that happens to him. Rather than recovering earthly paradise, the first-person narrator descends into an intolerable cycle of suffering and hell (Nabokov, 2000, 283). Despite Humbert's claims to omnipotence and omni-

science, manifested by his disposition to mock and deceive characters like Gaston Godin and Charlotte Haze, depicting them as laughable clowns, his arrogance and pride is undermined by the eventual realisation that he has been fooled by Lolita and by Quilty - the authorial presence in the novel, who undermines the narrator's pretensions to being a god or an artist. Humbert recognises his lack of control over the world and others at the end of the novel, when he says that the whole course of events was just an 'ingenious' play 'staged' for him by Quilty (Nabokov, 2000, 305). Rather than Humbert believing that other characters will predictably play the roles of the 'stock' characters he has constructed for them, he becomes aware that he is the one who is being tricked, who is merely playing the role assigned to him by the author. As such, Humbert is punished for his sin of pride, rather than just for the crimes related in the plot, by his creeping suspicion that he has not actually managed to create an independent (immortal) world, like a godlike figure, but that he is just a fictional character. The idea that man can dispense with the virtues of love and humility and create his own paradisaal pleasure is portrayed as delusive.

Humbert's belief that he can emulate the experience of paradise without any conditions attached to the religious promise of paradise or heaven, such as submissiveness, obedience and humility, gives him a delusions of being omniscient and omnipotent, like God. He continuously refers to his rivalry with a higher agency he calls 'McFate', attempting to show that he is in control of the states of affairs presented in the text (Nabokov, 2000, 116, 13, 21, 32, 50, 52). He constantly refers to his attempts to 'thwart fate'. Significantly, the list of Lolita's class includes 'Vivian McFate' as a pupil (52). This is a direct reference to the presence of the author, 'Vivian Darkbloom', being Nabokov's frequently used anagram and reference to himself throughout the work.

Humbert's prose is characterised by the way in which he seems to underline and revel in how vile and disgusting his actions are. He constantly describes himself as though he were being seen from a third person external perspective, through the eyes of an Other. It seems as though he gains some kind of perverse gratification by portraying himself as a foul monster. This is surprising, as it seems to contradict his desire to justify his actions to the reader and the jury. However, this is not as much of a contradiction as it may initially seem to be. In fact, Humbert's self-deprecating confessional tone is

yet another attempt he makes to escape judgement and to achieve 'self-sufficiency' by substituting of the role of the Other, traditionally God, for himself. Consequently, he attempts to acquire redemption from guilt without recourse to external agency, thus denying the principles of humility and dialogical trust constituting the foundations of Christian values and genuine paradise. Humbert attempts to exorcize his shame without having to risk exposure to the possible reaction of the Other.

The Bakhtinian model of anthropomachy lends itself well to analysing this insincere confession. Bakhtin writes that it is impossible for the individual to acquire self-sufficiency and completeness without dialogue with an Other, or God, whether one means this in literal or allegorical terms. He defines 'theomachy' or 'anthropomachy' as a form of confessional self-accounting that includes 'the refusal to accept a possible judgement by God or man' (Bakhtin, 1990, 146). Moral and aesthetic closure must always come from interaction with an Other, as it is impossible to pass judgement on one's essence in a solipsistic void. Contrastingly, Humbert denies the possibility of external judgement of his actions because he is quick to find the most repulsive moral vocabulary to apply to himself, before the reader has a chance to make his own judgement (Nabokov, 247, 39, 48, 258).

Humbert perpetuates the cycle of original sin in his hunt for egotistical self-sufficiency. He projects his guilt onto Lolita, thus diverting the attention from his own moral responsibility. Although he states he 'had hoped to deduce from my sense of sin the existence of a Supreme Being', the only 'spiritual solace' Humbert feels would absolve him is the proof that 'in the infinite run it does not matter a jot that a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac' (Nabokov, 2000, 284). Again, Humbert denies any possibility of judgement from an Other because of his rash rebuttal of the impossible nature of religious absolution. He protects himself from any judgement made by either God, other people or psychoanalysts, all whom play the potential role of the 'other supposed to know' in Lacanian terms, or who can absolve his shame. The only restoration of Edenic innocence he can see is through obtaining Lolita, whose thoughts and ideas he neglects by having her 'safely solipsized' (Nabokov, 2000, 60). Like Humbert's idealisation of Lolita as the entity that provides him with 'philters' of 'paradise', the commodified object is simultaneously the localization of he-

donistic desire and the possibility of redemption, with no need to acquire absolution from the Other. Consequently, Nabokov's novel provides an ambiguous critique of the dream of self-sufficiency, as exemplified through the protagonist's autonomous attempts to acquire paradisaal bliss through consumption.

## CHAPTER THREE: MARTIN AMIS'S *MONEY: A SUICIDE NOTE*

### i. The Totalising Nature of Consumerist Discourse

One critic has described *Money: A Suicide Note* as an unadulterated and 'powerful critique of capitalism' (Parker, 2006, 69). James Diedrick discerns, '*Money* can be read exclusively as a satirical novel, attacking the influence of capitalism on consciousness' (Diedrick, 2004, 77). This poignant character study of an individual trapped in a cycle of insatiable desire highlights the dangers entailed in becoming inordinately fascinated with the god of money. In *Money*, there is no question of the narrator's grandiloquence enchanting the reader as Humbert's does. Whereas Humbert's confession tries to seduce the reader, John Self's prose exposes the grotesquely candid reality of his addictions. His narrative is peppered with slangy phrases and obscenities, such as 'shagged out' (Amis, 2012, 20), 'They're the only guys who can hack it.' (Amis, 2012, 312), 'The only trouble is, I can't be fucked.' (Amis, 2012, 340). Self's narrative is characterised by a colloquial, chatty style of address, such as 'You know' (Amis, 2012, 4), 'Girls, ladies, have you ever copped one? It's hard.' (Amis, 2012, 22), with no hint of the pompous elitism that characterises Nabokov's elegant apostrophes and forms of address, such as 'O Reader!' (Nabokov, *Lolita*, 154). Self's 'trashiness' may be a more effective mode of establishing a relationship with the reader thirty years following the publication of *Lolita*, as he acts as a type of 'everyman' to whom the average reader can relate, demonstrating the shift in sociocultural discourses that has occurred between the 1950s and the 1980s.

Nevertheless, Amis highlights several aspects of consumerist culture in a similar way to Nabokov. Bauman describes consumerism as the constant urge to travel from one object of desire to another, with this constant motion distracting the individual from 'thinking about death and the brevity of life' (Bauman, 2001, 10). Both Nabokov and



Amis portray this trope of constant agitation; Humbert traverses the 'crazy quilt' of the 'forty-eight states', being driven to this very 'despondency and despair' when he settles in Beardsley, losing Lolita to Quilty (Nabokov, *Lolita*, 171, 203, 206). Similarly, Amis' protagonist is constantly 'on the move', in between New York and London. He is always planning his next trip:

'I've got to head back to America, pretty soon, and earn lots more.'  
(Amis, 2012, 99, 108).

This addiction towards motion and the cycle of constant deference highlights the impossibility of consumerist gratification (Bauman, 2001, 13).

One aspect of consumerism parodied by the author is the totalising and monological quality of mass culture and advertising discourse. Self struggles to give meaning to the world through an alternative voice distinct from these. His incapacity to think independently is emphasised when he meets Martina Twain, a well-educated individual and the author's double in the novel. Twain offers Self the possibility of redemption from his self-imposed hell (Martin, *Amis*, 344). She provides him with canonical literary and historical texts, to which he responds with bafflement:

'As for Hitler, well, I'm consternated. I can't fucking believe this stuff. [...] And you're telling me it's *true*?'  
(Amis, 2012, 344)

Self's cultural ignorance is presented by Amis as one of the reasons that Self wants 'to believe' in the promises of pleasure implied by advertisements (Amis, 2012, 452). The narrator's resentment of people who have received an education is illustrated when he states that 'As a rule, I hate people who are the beneficiaries of a university education.', corroborating his loathing with the reason that 'You might have thought you let us in, but you never did. You just gave us some money.' (Amis, 2012, 67). Self's depiction of money as a substitute for a feeling of social recognition and belonging is crucial to understanding his mesmerisation with wealth as a response to his sensation of inadequacy and exclusion.

Amis thus points to the dangers of the totalising quality of consumerist discourse on the uneducated individual. Self's remarks that 'I feel invaded, duped, fucked around. I hear strange voices and speak in strange tongues.' (Amis, 2012, 77). Everything about his thoughts is borrowed from somewhere else, as he passively absorbs the dictates of the mass media and advertising. He laments that 'television is cretinizing me' (Amis, 2012, 31), going on to describe the 'distinct voices' in his head as the residues of mass culture. Self identifies the first 'voice' as the 'jabber of money', the second as the 'voice of pornography', which 'often sounds like the rap of a demented DJ', the third is conceptualised as the 'voice of stung shame', and the fourth is his 'paranoia', his consciousness that he is not in control of his destiny. Self relates these voices to the mass media:

'on the TV they keep showing hysterical ads or the fucking news... All the voices come from somewhere else. I wish I could flush them out of my head. As with vampires, you have to ask them in. [...] Don't let them in, these crashers. Don't let them in, whatever you do.'

(Amis, 2012, 128-127).

Self's complains that the rich, educated classes only gave the working class 'some money', thus emphasising the way in which the imminence of sensual pleasure may be seen as coercive. Money is depicted as having a pernicious influence on the individual, imprisoning him within a cycle of bottomless hedonistic excess, if divorced from educational opportunity and the development of critical awareness.

Amis uses infernal imagery to depict 1980s consumerist society and the perpetual chase for commodities as a fallen world. Self's first flight number to America is 666, his girlfriend's closest friend works at 'Helle's Boutique' which apparently 'isn't just a clothes shop' and most importantly, New York, which Self visits to become inordinately wealthy, is described as unbearably hot (Amis, 2012, 32, 88, 313). Self frequently talks about himself 'sweating and swearing' there (Amis, 41, 101). Even Manhattan itself is anthropomorphised as 'sweating' (Amis, 171). This vocabulary of inferno and heat is extended throughout the novel, with references to a dog living in the apartment below the narrator's which supposedly 'guards the gates of hell', with his 'hellhound rage' (Amis, 2012, 15). The pub in which his father works is defended by his half-brother, who is identified as one of 'all hell's bouncers' (Amis, 2012, 67). Amis's image of Self's inner

world as a fallen universe is extended to the depiction of nature in the novel, which has also not escaped the degenerate state of humanity; 'Robin redbreasts hit the deck with psychosomatic ulcers and cholesterol overload. In the alleys, dogs are coughing their hearts out on snout and dope' (Amis, 2012, 308).

In contrast, when Self has lost all his money, the atmosphere undergoes an about turn, with snow that is 'crispy white and squeaky clean' (Amis, 2012, 440). This use of pathetic fallacy highlights the hellish nature of the rat race and obsession with money, which is sharply contrasted with the purity of Self's emancipation from his cycle of addictions when he becomes poor. This is highlighted by Self's statement that he has 'a bottle of Desdemona Cream', an allusion to the literary figure who symbolises innocence and chastity, in contrast to Othello's infernal paranoia – in New York, he attends an operatic adaptation of *Othello* (Amis, 2012, 348). The frequent use of Othello references highlights the ways in which the obsession with money makes an individual easier to manipulate, like Iago did Othello, if he has no self-worth or capacity for formulating his independent ideas.

Brian Crews diagnoses Amis's prose style as 'postmodern grotesque' or 'vulgarisation', described as the combination of the lofty and the trivial (Crews, 2010, 641). This form of juxtaposition of the sublime and the profane is used by the author in order to evoke the ways in which consumer discourse is able to manipulate and distort even the loftiest of myths. This is made manifest in the description of one of the brothels visited by the narrator in New York, called the 'Happy Isles' and modelled on the Garden of Eden. Other brothels in *Money* have names like 'Elysium' (Amis, 2012, 220). Self remarks upon the comfortable feeling he has upon entering the brothel, described as 'some lost pimp's image of a paradisaal arbour', by saying that he 'felt all right in here'. The décor of the brothel mimics a lost Eden. Countless allusions to the immemorial Garden, such as 'grape-clutches' and 'birdsong', are attached to tacky and cheap adjectives of 'plastic' or 'canned'. Self states that he has read about the place in *Scum* magazine, an example of the commercialised 'vulgarisation' of paradisaal imagery. The hair of one of the women working in the brothel is described as being as greasy as 'oil stains' or 'car blood', yet another indicator of tainted corruption in this artificial paradise (Amis, 2012, 117). The obscenity of this scene highlights the way in which even any cultural forms

can be usurped and twisted by the market economy in order to sell the most profane service.

Self is enchanted by these mythical forms, remarking on how safe and comfortable he feels, before this grotesque parody is transformed into a veritable inferno. The prostitute Self has selected demands money 'like a rockhard loan-shark reclaiming an ugly debt', thus breaking the pleasure and fantasy in which he seeks to indulge (Amis, 2012, 121). This satirises the consumerist distortion of religious and mythological signifiers to serve a hedonistic purpose. Self believes that the ambience in the brothel can 'soothe' his exhausted body, saying 'Yeah. I call this living good.' (Amis, 2012, 117). His enchantment with these promises of comforting pleasure is depicted as harmful in the long term, especially when he is confronted with the reality of feeling 'the cheapest *ever*' after he leaves (Amis, 2012, 122). Additionally, as in Nabokov's work, Amis illustrates the devices of de-contextualisation of high culture that occurs in consumer discourse; the seedy strip-club where Self has been raised is called 'The Shakespeare', whereas 'The Cymbeline' is a club that 'hires little cockteasers to police the tables' (Amis, 2012, 60, 99). The author makes it clear that these references have been stripped of their historical value and used as superficial aesthetic décor in order to stimulate desire and to sell commodities. This distortion of paradisaic signifiers to aestheticize consumption echoes Humbert's mobilisation of Edenic allusions in order to romanticise physiological desire.

## **ii. John Self's Promises of Paradise**

Amis's novel includes various descriptions of how the world of consumerism seductively offers false promises of paradise. First and foremost this is illustrated through the protagonist's obsession with recovering an artificial kind of immortality. Like Humbert, Self believes that if only he possesses enough commodities, he can escape death and ageing, this time by buying himself a new body (Amis, 2012, 32). He says that 'If you lose your rug, you can get a false one. If you lose your laugh, you can get a false one. If you lose your mind, you can get a false one.' Amis's satires Self's belief in the Californian promises of eternal youth by describing them in terms of a Frankenstein-like fashion

of collecting new body parts (Amis, 2012, 195). The urge to achieve immortality through the appropriation of commodities is formulated by Baudrillard as follows:

'the obsession with death and the will to abolish death through accumulation become the fundamental motor of the rationality of political economy.'

(Baudrillard, 1993, 146-147)

Rather than reconciling oneself with death and age, the individual in a consumer society battles against it. This is highlighted through the author's ironic descriptions of Self's fascination with individuals who have enough money to appear permanently young, yet this deathlessness is undermined by an sense of eerie morbidity. Self constantly promises himself that when he becomes rich, he will 'go off to California for that well-earned body transplant', mythologising Los Angeles as seen through the prism of celebrity culture, as a utopia of eternal youth. He watches a television programme with some celebrities whom he remembers from his childhood, remarking that 'I *know* that one has been dead for decades' (Amis, 2012, 20-21). These celebrities are described as bearing a 'funeral-parlour glow' and are presented as 'a new necropolis of old American gods'. Self's hopes that he will be able to purchase immortality when he gets rich is satirised by the author's voice that describes these celebrities using adjectives such as 'macabre brilliance' or 'like a corpse', indicative of the author's critical presence in the narrative. It is unlikely that a protagonist as uneducated and inarticulate as Self would use vocabulary such as 'succulent' or 'macabre', as he prefers to express himself in terms such as 'Man, I wish I had an American rug' (Amis, 2012, 452). This incongruity between languages used in the novel highlights the omnipresence of the author's opinions, which is also registered by the protagonist when he describes the presence of sinister voices in his head, emphasising his awareness of his constructed quality.

At the end of the novel, when Self's bankruptcy liberates him from the totalising logic of consumerism, he remarks with a sense of relief that the people emerging from the train are 'very mortal' (Amis, 2012, 454). He blames his generation of 'the Sixties', the high-point of consumer promises, for the contemporary desire 'to feel terrific forever', where it is 'hateful to be old', an indicator of the desperate urge to stave off death by affluence (Amis, 2012, 74).

Self's narrative exhibits a dichotomy between the desire to connect with the other and seemingly insurmountable solipsism. Amis's *Money* has been conceptualised by Tamás Bényei as a twentieth-century interpretation of the Fall from paradisaal innocence (Bényei, 1995, 1). According to Bényei, Self is a quintessential personification of an individual who has been deprived of his prelapsarian feeling of 'at one-ness with the universe'. Bényei argues that Self has lost 'his feeling of identity with other people, nature and his own body, having fallen:

'into a state of fear where his only conceivable reaction is the striving to protect himself against the world, "to insure himself with wealth... Money, material salvation is the only salvation. What is salvation is God. Hence money is God" (220). It seems that at this stage the state of innocence is irrevocably beyond reach: even rebelling against the money-god is inauthentic as it does not, cannot regain naïveté'

(Bényei, 1995, 182).

Self consistently emphasises the sense of estrangement he feels from other people, referring to the individuals standing ahead of him in a queue as 'Venusians, pterodactyls, men and women from an alternative timestream', speaking 'sonar, bat-chirrup, pterodactylese, fish-purr' (Amis, 2012, 2, 102). This technique of describing other human beings as unfamiliar and non-human heightens the protagonist's sense of detachment. He remarks on how he cannot have any genuine relationship with a woman because he is completely and utterly devoid of 'sympathy and trust and all the other things I seem to be really short of' (Amis, 2012, 18). Self's telephone provides a metaphor for the short-circuited property of all his communication, the device that is intended for dialogue with others is distorted as Self 'telephoned, and found no answer anyway' (Amis, 2012, 21). Philip Tew has argued that 'Self's violence signifies a wish to reduce or objectify the other, reducing any empathic economy.' (Tew, 2012, 104). Even the name of Amis's protagonist, John *Self*, highlights the way in which he cannot escape his narcissistic prison. His self-involved inability to empathise with anyone else is signified by the numerous references to mirrors in the text, whether he is in a strip-club or bar (Amis, 2012, 8, 60). These constant reflections of himself are metonymic indicators of his solipsism and loneliness, a device also frequently used in *Lolita* (Prioleau, 1975, 428).

When Self has sexual intercourse with a movie star, Butch Beausoleil, in her 'hall of mirrors', he simultaneously indulges in a fantasy of himself doing the same thing, saying, 'What shall I think about, to help me jump off the train? I'll think about Butch Beausoleil.' (Amis, 2012, 319-320). The fact that he has to *think* about the fantasy of having sexual intercourse with her while *doing* it, emphasises the insurmountable self-consciousness that is blocking him from 'the "death" of his self-image or ego', thus proscribing the 'fusion and communication between bodies' (Robinson, 'Jean Baudrillard: The Rise of Capitalism', 2012). Fantasy serves as a model for reality, which is then experienced as dull and disappointing, involving much more effort. Self cannot experience real bliss with another being, unmediated through pornographic fantasy. Pornography offers the feeling of instant oneness with another, while eliminating the risk of incompetence or humiliation, though ironically extending the consumer's solipsistic condition by distorting his expectations of sexual intercourse. As such, the more Self tries to recover paradisaal bliss through his purchased fantasies, the more his loneliness and alienation is intensified. He desperately longs for a 'human touch' but the only way he views this as possible is through monetary exchange, either by going on slot machines which 'play with you if you give them money' or by paying a prostitute to listen to him speak (Amis, 2012, 28-29). When he frequents brothels, he says that he 'can't help getting engaged on the human scale', yet this cycle of hedonistic gratification is the very obstacle that is stopping him from obtaining this 'human touch' (Amis, 2012, 120). When he has the opportunity to form a meaningful relationship with Martina Twain, he is helpless in the face of this vulnerability, and finds himself impotent. The experience of erotic fusion outside the confines of the self seems to be repressed yet promised in consumerism, with the idea that you can attain this 'human touch' if you pay enough money, yet the very system of money is depicted as an obstacle to this bliss.

Self's condition may also be characterised largely by his mobilising sense of shame that proscribes any possibility of intersubjective communication and genuine pleasure. Like Humbert's mythologisation of Lolita as a dangerous succubus, Self also portrays all women as being both potential temptresses and little girls, in order to rationalise his own sense of shame. He describes Selina Street, his concubine, as a corrupted little girl, who is blamed for his frequent recourse to rape and physical violence. He

ironically remarks, 'what am I letting her do to me?', as though his reprehensible desires, such as wanting to give her a 'clean punch', were justifiable in terms of her conduct and appearance (Amis, 2012, 21). Additionally, his description of her as 'a fifty-fifty compromise between the primly juvenile and the grossly provocative', wearing 'a transparent coating of gossamer, like a condom, or an abbreviated school uniform' is presented by Self as an justification for why she has deserved abuse. This perpetuates the demon-angel opposition in Self's mythologisation of women, along with the continued juxtaposition of the vulgar and the ethereal, 'gossamer' and 'condom' (Amis, 2012, 15). As such, the mythologised vision of woman is common to both novels, with similar language is used to describe this; the idealisation of woman as an innocent little girl, whose fault it is if she deviates from this myth. The vocabulary used by Self to describe Selina seems almost mythical, like Humbert's fetishisation of nymphets. Even her name, 'Selina Street' is highly suggestive, with 'Selina' evoking Romantic and celestial purity, and 'Street' being a direct reference to the crude way Self views her: as a woman of the streets, with whom he feels comfortable because she 'does this all for money' (Amis, 2010, 43). Moreover, Self portrays her as someone who is 'nomadic' and difficult to get a hold of (Amis, 2012, 15). This elusive evasiveness, as well as the combination of purity and profanity coincide to form an idealised object of desire or *phallus*.

Like Humbert, Self believes in the promises of Edenic ecstasy offered by a simple financial transaction. This acts as an obstacle to the possibility of his genuine reconciliation with shame and ageing. Furthermore, the objectivisation of individuals as commodities seems to pervade both novels as a consequence of the belief in the promises of consumerist discourse. Just as Humbert perpetuates his and others' suffering through consuming his own myths, Amis's protagonist, as an adman of the 1970s promoting 'smoking, drinking, junk food and nude magazines', has begun to consume the myths he has created himself (Diedrick, 2004, 74). While attempting to acquire unadulterated pleasure, they ironically succeed in distancing themselves from possibilities of joy.



### iii. The Delusion of Money as Autonomy

Amis presents his protagonist with one possibility of salvation, which counters Self's delusion that this pleasure and control can be attained through the accumulation of mythologised commodities. Although, this salvation is achieved not through the creation of art as in Nabokov's *Lolita* but through Self's symbolic suicide within the system of money, both Self and Humbert's pretensions to recovering a lost paradise on earth through accumulating fetishised commodities are presented as harmful delusions, stripping them of genuine pleasure and autonomy. Coincidentally, Amis's protagonist is also convinced that 'a show is being staged for me', long before he knows precisely how he is being exploited (Amis, 2012, 214). This echoes Humbert's line that the whole plot was a play staged for him by Quilty, Nabokov's involuted presence in the novel (Nabokov, 2000, 305).

Like an intensely materialistic Humbert, Self believes that through accumulating commodities, he can secure control over his surroundings and recover a state of bliss. He invests objects with an abstract power beyond their use-value (Bényei, 2006, 39). Self insists, if only he 'could spread money' over everything, then the 'world might be softer' (Amis, 2012, 317). At the end of the novel it is revealed that the protagonist is the victim of a scam by all the fake 'moneymen', who are in fact paid actors, promising him wealth and power. His urge to 'believe' in the promises of money makes him an easy target for the manipulation (Amis, 2010, 452). This is reminiscent of the way in which Nabokov's Humbert unsuccessfully tries to control his destiny. However, whereas Humbert deceived the reader into thinking he is the master of his own fate and those of others, Self's powerlessness over his destiny is strikingly clear to the reader, if not to the character himself. Self is directly depicted as being at the mercy of a higher agent, with no choice-making options of his own. Self's style of narration is haphazard and disjointed, and it is far more clear that he is not in control of the events related in the novel, as he often remarks on large lapses in his memory:

'I could remember nothing to speak of about last night, yesterday, or the night before.  
(Amis, 2012, 244).

As such, money is the only thing that Self believes can make up for his powerless and impotence with regard to both his happiness and his relationships with other people. For instance, Amis's novel opens with a confrontation between Self and a taxi driver, which ends in a barrage of insults. However, when Self gives the driver the money he owes him 'plus a couple more', the driver instantly replies 'Thank you, friend.' (Amis, 2012, 3, 5). This immediate change of tone from open hostility to amiable respect corroborates Self's belief that money can buy anything, including power in interpersonal relations. As Bényei has suggested, money is depicted as a form of protection from fear, which drives the individual to surround himself with commodities (Bényei, 2001, 1). Bauman's theory of consumer culture also adumbrates how the desire for money is predicated on the stimulation and dissolution of paranoia and fear, referring to the constant references to catastrophes in the media (Bauman, 2001, 26). This constant sense of discomfort is essential to the functioning of the consumerism, as it contributes to the frantic acquisition of commodities which are advertised as being able to protect the individual from the said threat (Bauman, 2001, 27). Self provides an archetypal example of this type of consumption, as he believes that through surrounding himself with money, he can control the sinister forces in the world and the people in his life.

For instance, he thinks he can buy the control over Selina Street; when in fact she takes his money, leaves him for a richer man, and then proceeds to manipulate him into having sex with her when she knows that Self's new partner, Martina Twain, will arrive. He is manipulated by Fielding Goodney, who acts for no other motive but to sadistically play with the main character's emotional weakness. As a result, the majority of characters are simply manipulating Self (Diedrick, 2004, 88). Self believes that 'money is freedom', whereas in fact the obsession with the promises of money is what contributes to his torments. The author-narrator relationship in the novel also reveals the author's intention of positioning himself as a god, with the protagonist as mankind. As Brian Finney suggests, Amis's technique, which he says he borrowed from Nabokov, is to construct a fallible narrator who becomes the butt of the narrative's joke, therefore forcing the reader to identify with the author (Finney, 2008, 127). The fact that the character named 'Martin Amis' drives a car whose model is 'Iago 666' further indicates the self-referential nature of the text, with the protagonist being a manipulated construction in

the world of the author (Diedrick, 2004, 84). In contrast, Self drives a significantly-named Fiasco, which evokes connotations of malfunctioning clumsiness, a synecdoche of the protagonist. At the end of the novel, Self engages in a chess match with the Amis character, a stand-in for authorial control. There is a pathetic contrast between Self's remarks that 'I'm good at chess', boasting 'I always win', and the fact that he loses to the character of the author, Martin Amis (Amis, 2012, 4). This clear Nabokovian reference to the game of chess points to Amis's conscious use of the author-protagonist metaphor to comment upon the relationship between the self and the Other (Nabokov, 'Luzhin's Defence', 1999 [Online] ).

Despite the fact that Self loses the game, the ending of the novel is positive, as Amis's protagonist is depicted as having recovered his freedom and autonomy. A device that Amis uses to highlight Self's 'escape' from the control of his maker, is the unusual choice of the dates of the foreword, where the mysterious signatory, supposedly the author, 'M.A.' says that 'By the time you lay' the novel 'aside', Self will 'no longer exist'. However, it is easy to miss the fact that this note is dated September 1981, whereas Self's epilogue is supposedly written in December 1981 and January 1982 (Amis, 2012, 439). This curious technique indicates the protagonist's power to gain some kind of agency, to free himself from the cycle of powerlessness and exploitation by others that characterises his fate throughout the plot. The distinction between the will of the protagonist and the author is also outlined by Amis through the blurring of the boundaries between what in the text is real and what is fictional. Although the reader is led to believe that Self's suicide note is written by him, the last page of the narrative includes the ambiguous line, that the suicide note just says, 'Dear Antonia, Don't go into the bedroom.' (Amis, 2012, 438). The cautious reader will have noticed that there is no character named 'Antonia' in the novel. However, the dedication at the beginning of the book, coincidentally says, 'To Antonia.' Initially, it would seem that this is a non-fictional dedication by the author. It would be easy not to notice these two words; although the reader would assume that this dedication is not part of the fictional world that is presented on the next page. The fact that Self's suicide note is addressed to 'Antonia' dissolves the separation between the narrator and the author, raising a feeling of ambiguity as to who is really the individual committing suicide, as the protagonist's words blur with the au-

thor's. The protagonist manages to survive, evading the control of 'M.A.'s' involuted authorial agency. In Self's epilogue, it seems as though the protagonist has recovered his putatively irredeemable innocence: he says that without money 'you're one day old and one inch tall. And you're nude, too.' (Amis, 2012, 442). This reference to nudity, which designates the absence of shame that characterises the prelapsarian condition of man, shows that Self has managed to escape the corruption of his obsession with money, and thus his manipulation by all the other characters in the novel; Fielding Goodney, Selina Street and the figure of the author.

However, this newfound autonomy is imposed on Self through his bankruptcy rather than chosen. The author indicates that Self's newfound innocence is certainly not irreversible. Self points to the threat that 'If I stay poor then Georgina may stay in luck', insinuating that he would like to become rich again and leave his girlfriend, who is from his social class rather than an idealised object of desire (Amis, 2012, 453). Just like Humbert's repentance at the end of *Lolita*, the reader may entertain doubts about the sincerity of the narrator's guilt. Nevertheless, following his suicide attempt and bankruptcy, Self states that he has become an 'escape artist' and is no longer the passive marionette of all the other voices in the novel (Amis, 2010, 453), therefore releasing the protagonist from the enchantment with consumerist discourses offering paradisaal pleasure, with 'the ads on the television' making him 'feel nausea' rather than enchanting him (Amis, 2010, 442).

## CHAPTER FOUR: MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ'S *ATOMISED*

### i. Disenchanted Consumerist Discourse

Houellebecq's novel offers a contrasting perspective on consumerism as 'deception' when compared to *Money* and *Lolita*. In the previous two novels, the authors portray the first-person narrator as 'enchanted' by the fantasies stimulated by fetishised commodities, while Houellebecq's narrator presents the landscape of consumer society through a lens of cynical disillusionment, 'disenchanted' the seductive cornucopia of consumer promises and objects by displaying them in their physiological banality. This is linked partially to the author's use of narrative voice. The plot is narrated mainly in the third person. Moreover, the narrator is writing from the perspective of a utopian post-human future populated by immortal clones. They appear to be untouched by the 'monstrous egotism' and 'misery', which pervades Houellebecq's portrait of Western consumerist society (Houellebecq, 2001, 3, 379). As such, the narrator describes late twentieth-century society with a mixture of pity and condescending aloofness, unable to relate to the characters' misery:

'the ultimate ambition of this book is to salute the brave and unfortunate species which created us. This vile, unhappy race, barely different from the apes, had such noble aspirations.'

(Houellebecq, 2001, 379)

Distance is therefore created between the reader and the characters, a stark contrast to the sense of identification generated by Humbert's poignant confession, or the sympathy incited by Self's slangy yet often humorous style. Consequently, this enables a more dispassionate and critical deconstruction of consumerism.

Nevertheless, the character of Bruno Clément occupies a curious role that may evoke the reader's empathy. As Douglas Morrey has pointed out, 'more than half the novel is told from Bruno's perspective, but on reflection it is not clear why this should be so' (Morrey, 2013, 44). Bruno serves as a representative example for the misery that is deemed 'symptomatic' of consumerist society (Houellebecq, 2001, 26). The narrative is characterised by the vacillation between the first-person narrator's scientific detachment, to the use of free indirect discourse to describe Bruno's thoughts, which enables the reader to experience empathy with the protagonist.

This seemingly objective and distanced 'realism' facilitates the narrator's demystification of quotidian commodities. Houellebecq's novel strips commodities of the seductive promises incited by mythological language. Objects promising the gratification of desire are presented solely in terms of their physicality and functional 'use' value, thus making them appear uncomfortably 'more real than real', a method of description that borders on pornography (Baudrillard, 2001, 157). As Jack I. Abecassis has argued, consumable products in *Atomised* are presented in their 'objectal nudity', or as a 'spectacle of the absolute banal' (Abecassis, 2000, 806). Passages such as 'her vulva was scrawny and sagged slightly' exemplify Houellebecq's mobilisation of the scandalous physiological 'realism'. It is certainly possible that such descriptions have the power to shock not because of the degree of detail involved but because of the scientific 'objectivity' that demythologises consumerist pleasure (Houellebecq, 2001, 69).

However, Houellebecq's novel emphasises the way in which consumption provides a substitute for the meaning given by religion. One of the main characters, Michel, consumes 'Monoprix' ready meals from the 'Gourmet range' in a monotonous fashion (Houellebecq, 2001, 14). Michel's consumption of the same meals over and over again is presented by the author as a replacement for the ritualistic nature of communal religions that has diminished in late capitalist society. He craves a life composed of 'a collection of small, endlessly repeated rituals' (Houellebecq, 2001, 140). Despite the fact that it 'could become tedious', rituals are the only thing that give the individual 'something to believe in'. Without these 'points of reference', Michel is depicted as feeling that 'man melts away'. Michel exalts in the fact that shopping in 'his local Monoprix' satisfies his desire for 'life so well organised, on such a human scale; happiness could be

found in this' (Houellebecq, 2001, 143). This emphasises how, in consumer society, feelings of security and comfort traditionally obtained through religion are provided by consumption.

The novel presents several examples of how 'prurient mass-market entertainment from America' promises to give meaning to people's lives, yet results in disappointment. Houellebecq juxtaposes ironically-cited myths from mass discourses against the sad reality of the lives of the characters who allow themselves to be enchanted by these promises of perfection, love and harmony. One example through which Houellebecq sharply criticises the 'deceptive' nature of consumer discourses, is through his characterisation of Annabelle. It is unclear whether the choice of the name 'Annabelle' is linked to Nabokov's parody of the Romantic figure of Annabel Lee, another signifier of the untimely corruption of innocence (Houellebecq, 2001, 67). Annabelle is portrayed as a classic victim of the 'deceptive' promises in *Mademoiselle Âge Tendre* and other American-style mass-produced magazines for girls. Annabelle's story invites the reader to consider the contingent nature of the myth of true love depicted in the media, which is naturalized as a universal aspect of human experience, rather than as a historical construct (Barthes, 1957, 131-132). These magazines are described as cultural exemplifications of the decline in arranged marriages and the extended family, due to the 'rise of the bourgeoisie' and the 'economic changes' of the post-war era, culminating in the idealisation of the *'love-match'*. The 1950s and 1960s, the onset of consumerism, are described as *'the golden age of romantic love'*, with songs, movies and magazines obsessively propagating this ideal (Houellebecq, 2001, 63). Houellebecq emphasises the religious and meaning-making aspect of this myth, describing how it continues the Catholic ideal of marriage, citing the biblical creed that 'Male and female created He them' and pointing to the spiritual objective of establishing world 'peace, fidelity and love' through romance (Houellebecq, 2001, 62). The veneration of romantic love in the mass media is therefore a perfect example of the way in traditional myths are reformatted to provide a sense of meaning. However, Houellebecq disenchant these alluring promises. He does this by pointing to the contingent social reasons for this mythologisation of romantic love, that of 'the real economic changes' and the 'rise of the bourgeoisie' during the late twentieth century, which resulted in the reification of the nuclear family as a marketable

ideal (Houellebecq, 2001, 62). The narrator uses sarcasm to demystify these deceptive ideals:

'The flaw in the solution offered by girls' magazines [...] only became apparent some years later with the inexorable rise in the divorce rate.'

(Houellebecq, 2001, 64).

The author presents the suffering caused by the propagation of these mythologies through the characterisation of Annabelle, a victim of consumerist sentimentality. She is one of the 'naïve girls' coming to maturity during this flourishing of mass-market entertainment and is bewitched by the discourse of '*true love*' depicted in *Mademoiselle Âge Tendre*. The author's italics highlight the satirical position taken by the narrator, portraying this discourse as sentimental and deceptive kitsch:

'It was possible, and if it happened to you it was the most wonderful thing in the world.'

(Houellebecq, 2001, 65)

Annabelle's relationships are completely conditioned by the mass media. For instance, she lets a boy kiss her because she reads 'an article about boy-girl relationships in *Stéphane*' (Houellebecq, 2001, 88). She is portrayed as being entirely a passive absorber of the consumerist promises of sexual happiness and earthly joy. In contrast to these romanticised promises of love, her virginity is taken by a man who 'had already slept with more than five hundred women' and who later becomes a serial killer (Houellebecq, 2001, 98). She engages in sexual intercourse even when she feels 'no particular affection for the guy' (Houellebecq, 2001, 102). Her childlike naïveté and enchantment with the idyll of love only makes her a victim of sexual exploitation. She dies of cancer without realising her ideal of having a nuclear family and romantic love. The hyperbolic contrast between the mythologised image of love and the frequently encountered reality of consumerist society, where short term sensual gratification is prized over the effort involved in building long-term relationships, contributes to the novel's satirical critique of the mass media. It is presented as widening the chasm between connotative promises and social reality, indulging the individual in escapism, rather than giving him autonomy in his or her life. As Bauman has argued, Baudrillard was incorrect in saying that con-



sumerism blurs reality and fantasy, proposing that the gap between the two has become so wide that fantasy has taken on its own independent existence (Bauman, 2007, 109). Unfortunately, this chasm has become 'increasingly difficult for ordinary citizens to bridge'.

## ii. Promises of Paradise

Houellebecq employs imagery evoking 'a post-apocalyptic landscape' to enhance his portrayal of the post-war West as a fallen world with little possibility of constructing meaningful relationships (Houellebecq, 2001, 13). The consumerist promises of eternal youth, tenderness and joy are depicted by Houellebecq's narrator as deceptive, solely entrenching humanity in its suffering. The vision of the world in *Atomised* is one where religion, politics or art have little credence, in contrast to the establishment of the consumerist regime of desire as the immediate gratification of individualistic sensual urges. As Louis Betty proposes, Houellebecq's novels appear to be based upon the uncritical acceptance of classical secularisation theory, that religion is no longer a primary meaning-giving framework in people's lives (Betty, 2013, 98). Morrey has argued that Houellebecq's fiction is pervaded with a sense that '*something is missing*' [author's italics] from our societies, following the collapse of unequivocally accepted religious or political totalising world views (Morrey, 2013, 141). As such, the characters in this text are depicted as struggling to find a method of rationalising the pain of death, loneliness and bodily shame, without a recourse to traditional structures of meaning.

The novel's co-protagonist, Michel Djerzinski, is afflicted by his pervasive nostalgia for a world dictated by 'simple moral values'. He believes that the "liberation" of individualistic desires has eroded the only influence that can make society 'happier' – the implementation of Kant's principle that 'perfect morality is unique and universal' (Houellebecq, 2001, 36-37). Michel, coincidentally sharing the same name as Houellebecq, (a device used by the author in his other novels) expresses the view that the consumerist emancipation of desire has led to a sense of emptiness rather than augmenting pleasure (Gantz, 2005, 149). As Wendy Michallat discerns, Michel's faith in 'simple moral values' has been conditioned by his childhood experience of reading *Pif le Chien*,

a comic book that was founded to champion traditional moral tropes, countering the sexualised nature of post-1968 comic books. The 1968 demonstrations are portrayed throughout the novel as a tragic watershed in the establishment of the regime of desire (Michallat, 2007, 315). Pre-1968 moral values are depicted as a lost paradise, conflated with the glorious 'infinity' of Michel's childhood (Houellebecq, 2001, 34). The promises of pleasure offered by mass tourism, women's magazines, advertising and night clubs are portrayed as a large-scale exercise in deception and only appear to intensify the protagonists' misery, because the opportunities they offer cannot compensate for the idealised truths of an earlier era.

An important role in Houellebecq's critique of twentieth-century society is played by his presentation of the *soixant-huitardes*' attempt to create a 'hedonist's paradise' (Houellebecq, 2001, 127), or 'authentic utopia', called the 'Lieu du Changement' (Houellebecq, 2001, 113-114). It will be argued that the 'Lieu' is depicted as a microcosm of consumer society. It seems to be perfect fictional exemplifications of Bauman's characterisation of consumerism as deception: the desire for effortless sensual gratification 'in the 'here and now"' (Houellebecq, 2001, 113), the colonization of private life by market laws (Bauman, 2007, 24), and the commoditization of the consumer, as blurring the line between the consumer as agent and a commodity (Bauman, 2007, 12). Bauman illustrates how consumerist ideology suggests that the individual is free to maximise his bliss through the appropriation of docile objects, delineating the exhilarating freedom of choice experienced during shopping (Bauman, 2007, 15, 33, 84). An equally seductive illusion includes the belief that the subject is free to *become* anything he wants to become. Considering the instability endemic to late capitalist society, no identity is ever given (Bauman, 2007, 110). Identities are carefully selected out of a range of possibilities, depicted as commodities on a shelf. They are chosen spontaneously and arbitrarily, supposedly providing the joy of meaningful experience, while reducing the risk and effort of belonging to a pre-modern collective group, which involves 'the uncomfortably solid, constraining and demanding 'real thing"' (Bauman, 2007, 112). Every identity is expressed in terms of 'pointillist time', Bauman's term for the diagnosis of the consumerist phenomenon that each experience 'is now believed to be pregnant with the chance' of immediate bliss (Bauman, 2007, 32). If it does not bring this immediate self-realisation,

it can be discarded, and substituted by another. This conduct highlights the belief that shopping for identities provides opportunities for the self-sufficient process of 'finding oneself'.

The 'Lieu' is ironically presented as parody of this consumerist ideal of freedom. A sign at its entrance cites Bakunin's idea of freedom, that "*I am properly free when all the men and women about me are equally free*" (Houellebecq, 2001, 114). This putative freedom is manifested through the workshops at the 'Lieu', which offer exotic opportunities for self-realization: 'nebulous mysticism' for the spiritually inclined, 'interest in the esoteric', such as 'astrology, Egyptian tarot' and 'Encounters with the Angel' (Houellebecq, 2001, 126). The passages portraying Bruno's escapades at the 'Lieu' provide some of the most witty and satirical aspects of the novel. Bathos and absurdity characterise the depiction of Bruno's adventures in this false utopia:

'Siberian shamanism made a remarkable debut when, in 1991, during the long initiation in a sweat lodge fired by sacred coals, an initiate died of heart failure.'

(Houellebecq, 2001, 126)

The juxtaposition of the quotidian banality of a 'sweat lodge' with the 'sacred' are characteristic of the novel's style, as any reference to the mythical or exotic is undermined by such references to everyday demythologised objects. This mockery of the 'Lieu' is also particularly acerbic when Bruno arrives and finds at the campsite 'a sort of squaw', clad 'in a mini-skirt of animal pelt' (Houellebecq, 2001, 116). The humorous incongruity of contemporary adults trying out culturally decontextualised roles and experiences ridicules the consumerist ideals of the malleability and unadulterated freedom of identity. Furthermore, Houellebecq outlines how this desire for sampling exciting new identities is an ingenious profit-making venture. Despite the 'Lieu's original utopian aim, it rapidly became a company running business courses by 'the BNP, IBM, the Ministry of Finance, the RATP, Bouygues...' (Houellebecq, 2001, 120). In the end, the New Age workshops only contribute to five per cent of the profits made, highlighting the consumerist symbiosis between Bohemian spirituality and profit-making hedonism outlined by Campbell (Campbell, 2006, 227).

Instead of becoming a 'hedonist's paradise', Houellebecq satirises the 'Lieu', this commercialised vision of an Eden, as 'a place of depression and bitterness' (Houellebecq, 2001, 126). The *Lieu* is populated mainly by middle-aged individuals struggling with their fear of death and alienation. Their involvement in esoteric workshops and self-development programmes is portrayed as a distraction from their fear of death, old age and the loneliness, especially experienced by women, whose value is so greatly attributed to their appearance. The novel provides countless examples of how a seemingly 'enlightened' person involved in the New Age movement cannot reconcile him or herself with death. For instance, despite Janine's attempts to transcend death by the fact she 'converted to Islam, to Sufi mysticism or some such bollocks', her death is presented in all the detail of incipient decay, her skin is 'dark, earth-coloured', she is 'breathing with difficulty', as she lets out a 'throaty howl' (Houellebecq, 2001, 306-7). Regardless of the fact that she bought into various schemes of scam mysticism 'to be young', in her relentless search for 'spiritual awareness', Houellebecq presents death as the inevitable reduction of a human being to a passive animal with which consumerist society has offered no means for reconciliation (Houellebecq, 2001, 308).

This is also highlighted in the passage when Bruno's grandfather dies:

'The cadaver, now decomposed, becomes a host to *Acaridae* which absorb the last traces of residual moisture. Desiccated now and mummified, the corpse still harbours parasites, the larvae of beetles, *Aglossa cuprealis* and *Tineola bisellelia* maggots, which complete the cycle.'

(Houellebecq, 2001, 42-43)

The use of this coldly scientific register, mixed with the repulsive description of a parasite-eaten cadaver, contrasts bluntly with the next passage, which refers to the traditional way of masking death and inscribing it within an order of meaning:

'the beautiful deep black coffin with a silver cross'.

(Houellebecq, 2001, 43)

This juxtaposition of the mythical discourse of religion with the cold brutality of the scientific discourse, emphasises the ineffability of death in its unadorned physiological reality, when it is de-inscribed from any meaningful framework.

Bruno, an archetypal consumer, is immobilised by his fear of death. When he meets Christiane, a woman who offers him the possibility of redemption from his egotistic solipsism, he cannot help feeling contempt towards the fact that her sexual organs are already showing signs of decay. The narrator uses the detached register of scientific 'objectivity' to describe Christiane's reproductive organs:

'Increased collagen bonding and the breakdown of elastin during mitosis in older people means that human tissue gradually loses its suppleness and firmness.'

(Houellebecq, 2001, 168-9)

This echoes the way in which Humbert insistently attributes signifiers of death to adult women. One critic has controversially proposed that the logical outcome of the libidinal economy and the consumerist 'liberation' of bodily desires is pedophilia, as the tabooing and exclusion of any symptom of mortality (Betty, 2013, 107). Whether one accepts this provocative argument, the fact remains that the main characters in all three novels, presented as archetypal consumers, are fixated with the ideal of eternal youth, depicted as the longing for an immortalised paradise in *this* life.

Francesco di Meola, the founder of a 'movement' designed for people searching for 'spiritual values', is presented as refusing to accept the diagnosis of his terminal illness,

'he could not even imagine accepting it. In contemporary Western society, death is like *white noise* to a man in good health; it ill his mind when his dreams and plans fade'

(Houellebecq, 2001, 95).

This description of death as '*white noise*' emphasises its refusal to be inscribed in any system of meaning, therefore marking the failure of liberal consumerist ideology. Di Meola's character supposedly presents the symptomatic representation of the sexual emancipation that characterised the 1960s (Houellebecq, 2001, 93-94). Houellebecq's description of di Meola's commune constitutes an acerbic critique of the abuse of spiritual discourse to serve a hedonistic purpose. This commercialised utopia is depicted as being particularly attractive to 'very young girls' in search of enlightenment. However, the charlatan takes advantage of those attracted by its 'spiritual aura', proceeding to

'fuck them amongst the mandalas and the smell of incense' (Houellebecq, 2001, 93). Moreover, the narrator's free indirect discourse demonstrates how di Meola's is consciously aware of recycling these spiritual signifiers to manipulate the young girls he contemptuously denotes as 'idiots'.

Another aspect of consumerism depicted in *Atomised* is the deep-seated loneliness experienced by the main characters. The novel opens with the assertion that the majority of individuals at the latter end of the twentieth-century were 'often haunted by misery', as they 'lived out their lonely, bitter lives' (Houellebecq, 2001, 3). This alienation is presented as an essential, rather than contingent, property of late consumerist society. It is linked to the erosion of traditional family values, which is ironically contrasted with the promises of romance depicted in the mass media (Houellebecq, 2001, 28, 192, 258). Bruno is depicted as essentially incapable of empathising with others, focusing only on the maximisation of pleasure through using others as dispensable objects. As a teenager, he has a liaison with his female counterpart, Annick, who is described as equally unappealing and socially awkward as himself (Houellebecq, 2001, 181-2). However, Bruno's ego prevents him from pursuing a genuine relationship with her, because he is as ashamed of her flaws as he is of his own incapacities. Desperate, she throws herself out of a window as a reaction to his heartlessness. When Bruno has his first adult relationship with Christiane, he callously neglects her when she is disabled. Following this, Christiane also throws herself out of a window (Houellebecq, 2001, 298). Curiously, when Bruno was at school, 'Jean-Michel Kempf, a nervous, skinny boy' threw 'himself out of the window' because of the routine humiliation by other boys (Houellebecq, 2001, 50). The poignant yet farcical quality of this repetition is exacerbated by the fact that, every time, he is more involved in the other person's life, highlighting his lack of moral agency. This patterning technique points to the presence of some external form-giver: the author. It seems as though Bruno's actions are determined and that he has no way of becoming a morally-responsible subject in light of his ineluctable solipsism. This parallels the feeling of moral apathy as John Self in *Money*, who discusses the affliction of 'seeing the difference between good and bad and choosing bad' regardless of his consciousness of this difference (Amis, 2012, 30).

Bruno is also immobilised by his sense of personal shame, which is described as being his 'first memory' (Houellebecq, 2001, 41). Paralysing shame is linked to man's condition after Fall, as the excessive consciousness of one's body that engenders distance between the self and others. It has been explained, in *Money* and *Lolita*, how the consequence of this paralysing shame is the mythical portrayal of the innocent victim as villain. Bruno similarly projects his sensation of inadequacy onto girls when he is four years old, as highlighted in his perception of their faces as prematurely 'betraying a hint of the dumb resignation of women' (Houellebecq, 2001, 41). Rather than trying to escape from his sense of shame, Bruno makes it his personal fantasy: he indulges in fantasies of masochism and humiliation, whereby a woman catches sight of him masturbating and turns back in revulsion (Houellebecq, 2001, 175). Bruno is so consumed by shame that he does not even try to transcend his fallen condition. He is painfully self-conscious and alienated from his own body. He is fixated on the modest size of his penis and lashes out in anger against a student only because he is black, as he believes the racist stereotype that all black men are well-endowed and therefore attractive to women (Houellebecq, 2001, 230). His shame is thus portrayed as a direct trigger for antisocial violence.

Houellebecq positions this sense of bodily shame as a result of the commodification of the private sphere by the public sphere of the market economy. The fixation with plastic surgery and the silencing of the old in society is portrayed as the inevitable consequence of the consumerist emancipation and reign of sexual desire, where any sign of ageing is associated with undesirability and therefore with shame (Houellebecq, 2001, 96). In the post-war era, Bruno's father, Serge, makes a fortune out of tapping the plastic surgery market, which is portrayed as being stimulated by the promises of eternal youth propagated by the female-oriented mass media (Houellebecq, 2001, 28). Individuals, especially women, are constantly valued and commodified in terms of their erotic capital. This application of the logic of the market to private existence is deemed responsible for intensifying the humiliation experienced by the individual and therefore his loss of moral agency, as violence and guilt are the corollaries of such intense self-loathing.

### iii. The Delusion of Autonomy

Jerry Andrew Varsava has summarised Houellebecq's work as a challenge to the principles of capitalist liberalism: 'free will, self-determination, property rights, the separation of the public and private spheres, tolerance and *laissez-faire* morality' (Varsava, 2005, 146). It will be demonstrated how a reading of *Atomised* can undermine the late capitalist belief that, as political theorist Samuel Freeman postulates, human beings 'are self-sufficient and can control their options and important aspects of their lives' (Freeman, 2001, 127). Houellebecq exposes this model of individual freedom as an illusion, which impairs rather than enables human happiness.

Houellebecq provides a determinist vision of human life, undermining the notion that the individual is the master of his desires. The author makes use of the involutory techniques of patterning to signify the individual's lack of agency, as exemplified already in the case of Bruno's biography being shaped around his encounter of the same kind of suicide three times. He establishes a parallel between the characters' lack of agency due to history and the characters' arbitrary existence at the hands of the author. Such a metafictional claim is entered at the very beginning of the novel, stating that the 'story of a life can be as short or as long as the teller wishes.' (Houellebecq, 2001, 26). The omniscient narrator then delineates how certain individuals, such as Martin Ceccaldi, are merely 'symptomatic' of the historical period in which they are living (Houellebecq, 2001, 26). This is emphasised by the question of whether it is even 'possible to think of Bruno as an individual' (Houellebecq, 2001, 212). Bruno's consumerist 'world view' is described as being 'common to an entire generation', with him being 'passively caught up in the sweep of history'. He is unable to transcend this impersonal force, as his 'values and desires' do not 'distinguish him from his contemporaries in any way' (Houellebecq, 2001, 212).

In terms of the novel's content, Houellebecq frequently stresses the importance of psychological, historic and biological determinism on his characters' lives, over the myth of free will and the subject's supposed self-determination. Michel and Bruno's lack of successful relationships and their humiliation are attributed to the fact that they have been born as 'omega males', and therefore unable to escape their predestined biological



hierarchy (Houellebecq, 2001, 48). Their mother's heartless abandonment of them is presented as an causal explanation for their later inability to form any relationship, a classic example of psychoanalytic determinism. Again, Houellebecq reduces human behaviour to purely biological explanations:

'Male rats deprived of maternal contact during infancy exhibit serious disturbances in sexual behaviour, especially in mating rituals. If his life had depended on it (and, in a very real sense, it did) Michel could not have kissed Annabelle.'

(Houellebecq, 2001, 68)

As such, Michel's character is depicted as being wholly determined by his 'experiences during the formative years of life' (Houellebecq, 2001, 68). Houellebecq's presentation of his characters as being completely determined undermines the notion that human beings are 'self-sufficient' and in control of forging their own happiness without any recourse to an Other, whether this be science, God or history. As shown above, Bruno and Annabelle's attempts to transcend their mortality or alienation through the opportunities offered in a free market society, such as the different sexual activities following the 1970s, only highlight their powerlessness. In result, Houellebecq positions the flawed model of self-determination and individualism in dialectical opposition to genuine bliss.

Michel's observation of the inherent misery caused by this delusion of freedom leads him to 'save' mankind from this suffering and from mortality. As Boileau has noted, Michel is portrayed as a saintlike figure or prophet throughout the novel, which takes the form of a hagiography (Boileau, 2013, 312). His 'salvation' comes through the abolition of human individuality and freedom, the two central tenets of liberal democracy and consumerism. Paradise as unadulterated happiness may only be acquired through the annihilation of individual willing. Michel recognises the fallacy involved in the belief in freedom of action; he states:

'belief in the notions of reason and free will, which are the natural foundations of democracy, probably resulted from a confusion between the concepts of freedom and unpredictability. The turbulence of a river flowing around the supporting pillar of a bridge is structurally unpredictable, but no one would think to describe it as being *free*.'

(Houellebecq, 2001, 270)

This passage suggests that, despite the power an individual may have over the minutiae of daily existence, the general shape of his life is determined by the impersonal forces of an external Other, whether this is God, History or chance.

Michel's scientific revolution creates a race of genetically programmed clones, freeing man from mortality at the cost of individual freedom. All these beings share the same genetic code, thus undermining the concept of uniqueness and human dignity. As Boileau has shown, this establishment of a scientifically-created utopia also helps man to transcend his solitude and incapacity for intersubjective dialogue (Boileau, 2013, 313). It is described as the attainment of 'paradise', a restoration of the unity and deathlessness that characterises prelapsarian bliss (Houellebecq, 2001, 379). The bodies of the asexual clones are covered in 'corpuscles of Krause', the cutaneous receptors that are responsible for sensations of sexual pleasure. As such, the clones are able to feel a complete sense 'of community, of permanence and of the sacred' in this Utopia (Houellebecq, 2001, 376). Houellebecq invokes the powerful image of 'the infinite architecture of cross and spiral' found in the Book of Kells as a metaphor for Michel's utopian scheme. The 'interweavings' that characterise the illustrations in the Book of Kells serve as an emblem of the binding unity that Michel seeks to recover, the restoration of bliss prior to the 'separation' and 'distance' that characterises the fallen condition of late twentieth-century society (Houellebecq, 2001, 362). A return to the paradisaical unity and lack of distinction between Self and Other is therefore depicted as possible through the destruction of the individualisation constituting the liberal notion of 'freedom'. The foreword of the novel is written by this narrator from the future race of clones, which is marked by several indicators of this new world being like an earthly paradise. The narrator mobilises traditional heavenly imagery, such as 'halo of joy' and 'we who live in the light', drawing on standard religious allusions. The reference to 'perpetual afternoon' also highlights the escape from time and death engendered by Michel's breakthrough. The fact that light always 'envelops' the clones' bodies also emphasises the sense of shamelessness and innocence that characterises the new beings' attitudes to their physical self, in direct contrast to the perpetual humiliation experienced by Bruno in his fixation with pornography and prostitution (Houellebecq, 2001, 7). As such, science is portrayed as having enabled man to transcend his 'fallen' condition', leading to a state of

immortal innocence that is impossible in the consumerist regime of desire, which is shown as only extending the fallen attributes of pain and loneliness.

In Houellebecq's novel, the illusion of individual autonomy is displayed as the obstacle to utopian paradise, free from shame, loneliness and death, all of which consumerist discourse promises yet not delivered. As such, it is not so much the seduction or pleasure of consumer objects and discourse that is criticized here, but the arrogant belief that man can become the master of his own future and destiny through money and consumption, to the exclusion of the admission that he is determined by external factors over which he has no control.

## **CONCLUSION: COMPARATIVE OBSERVATIONS**

Nabokov, Amis and Houellebecq's novels offer multifarious perspectives on the nature of consumerism as the economics of 'deception'. They present the seductive nature of the mythological connotations used in advertising to deceive the consumer into thinking that these emotional states of pleasure are intrinsic properties of a commodity. Additionally, they provide distinctive critiques of the way in which consumerist discourse attempts to answer the existential crisis of meaning endemic to late twentieth-century society, while actually having a deleterious effect on individual consciousness. Consumerism is depicted as engendering increasingly insatiable desires and addictions, rather than opportunities for maximising genuine pleasure. This is illustrated through the depiction of characters who are archetypal consumers, controlling and accumulating idealised objects in order to transcend their existential anxiety. They believe that they can obtain paradisaical joy by appropriating fetishised objects of desire, rather than through self-criticism, risk and effort. Consequently, these novelists challenge the 'deceptive' libertarian fallacy of the consumer as the subject who is the master of his own happiness.

### **i. Deception through seductive discourse**

In consumerist discourse, mythical and emotive allusions attached to a marketable product. These connotations are posited as a powerful manipulative tool that invokes associations with security, joy and acceptance, in order to stimulate demand. Humbert's articulate monologue aims to seduce the reader with his romantic allusions that evoke connotations of mystical experiences, ethereal figures and otherworldly bliss. As such, this confessional narrative is analogous to the 'seductive' quality of consumer discourse. Nabokov demonstrates how even the vilest deeds can be mystified through the use of seductive language. In contrast, John Self's voice is characterised by the literary device

of *skaz*, wherein it seems like he is chattily addressing the reader as his equal (Schmid, 2010, 132). Through this 'an illusion of an everyday situation is created'. Self's use of 'trashy' language and slang contrasts with the romanticised eloquence of Humbert's narrative, yet also serves to evoke the reader's empathy. Amis criticizes the deceptive nature of consumer discourse by showing how his protagonist's passive absorption of the vocabulary and discourse of television and advertising is 'cretinizing' him, making him easy to manipulate at the hands of all the other characters in the novel (Amis, 2010, 31).

In opposition to Nabokov and Amis's technique of the first-person narrator's appeals to the reader, Houellebecq's tone is far more impersonal. He creates an unbridgeable sense of distance between the reader and the characters, leading to a more unambiguous critique of consumerist discourse. He demystifies the suggestive and seductive quality of consumerist discourse through polemical satire, constructed through the author's juxtaposition of the dreams proposed in the media with the banality of everyday life. Nonetheless, the frequent mobilisation of free indirect discourse allows the reader to co-experience the characters' perspectives.

As such, all three novels combine a critical and ironic viewpoint with the characters' emotive perspective, albeit in different proportions. This invites the reader to empathise with the character, rather than seeing him as a credulous 'dupe', while maintaining a sense of critical awareness.

These novels portray the use of traditional mythical and cultural allusions as an important means of stimulating desire. In Nabokov's *Lolita*, Humbert's journey throughout America points to this process of decontextualising cultural artefacts in order to provide pleasure and entertainment for the consumer. As such, Nabokov's text can be read as a light-hearted parody of the consumerist manipulation of historical meanings and cultural values. Amis's *Money* and even more, Houellebecq's *Atomised*, may be viewed as an outright and direct satire on the way in which signifiers of religion, literature and culture have been shaped into a patchwork of decontextualised allusions, with no purpose other than to stimulate desire. The cultural critic Bernard Stiegler points out how in consumerist society, cultural particularities have been reduced to objects aimed towards stimulating the 'curiosity of tourists' or have become pragmatic 'symbols of

struggles for so-called “identity” (Stiegler, 2013, 30-31). The novels portray this process of recycling cultural myths to evoke hedonistic promises of pleasure and ecstasy.

## **ii. Promises of Paradise**

All three authors depict the late twentieth-century world as being somehow 'evil' (Nabokov, 2000, 284), like 'hell' (Amis, 2010, 206) or 'fallen' and pervaded with thoughtless cruelty (Houellebecq, 2001, 38). According to the traditional narrative of the Fall, the effects of original sin may be summarised as the ubiquity of death, alienation from other individuals and personal shame. As such, these authors present their characters as struggling to escape the world's 'fallenness' through the consumption of idealised objects of desire. These protagonists believe that they can obtain infinite and absolute bliss through the opportunities offered in consumerism, even if this is momentary. However, this belief is exposed as not only illusive but destructive to the individual's consciousness and to his relationships with others.

Nabokov, Amis and Houellebecq demonstrate how the substitution of other meaning-making discourses with consumerist discourses only leads to shame and frustrated desire in the long-term, in contrast to the traditional purpose of myth of helping people come to terms with the inexplicable aspects of life. It is in the interests of the consumerist economy to keep individuals in an intense state of dissatisfaction and anxiety to engender further spending, therefore deepening the crisis rather than providing a genuine response to the fear of mortality and ageing, loneliness, or shame due to the perpetual cycle of overindulgence and regret.

### **a. Immortality**

Many sociologists and cultural critics have identified the link between the fear of death and the urge to consume. Ernest Becker conceptualised the connection between death anxiety and modern society, whereby the promises of emancipation through science and materialism have unsuccessfully responded to the innate fear of death (Becker, 1997, 7).

Furthermore, Baudrillard shows how the unfavourable reality of pain and death has been tabooed in consumer society, in the mass media and in films, and therefore positioned as 'abnormal' (Baudrillard, 1993, 127). From the sociological perspective, academics such as Kelly M. Nie discerns how in a materialist society, consumption takes on the symbolic function of 'an immortality formula'. Individuals who participated in surveys raising the awareness of death – 'mortality salience' – were more likely to desire commodities that 'convey a sense that the world is meaningful', therefore offering 'symbolic immortality', than those who filled out surveys focused on an entirely different topic (Nie et al., 2010, 7). Tori deAngelis has tried to approach the question of why excessive consumption deepens feelings of insecurity and anxiety from a psychological perspective (deAngelis, 2004, 52). She outlines how many researchers have shown that consumerist cravings are directly proportional to the individual's experience of family breakdown, such as the lack of a nurturing mother or divorce. Inordinate levels of consumption are also linked to the child's early exposure to the reality of death. Coincidentally, the protagonist in each one of these novels is either made a half-orphan at a young age or is heartlessly abandoned by his mother. A detailed illustration of Humbert, Bruno and Michel's untimely confrontation with death is also given a significant place in the novel. As such, excessive materialism seems to be connected on various levels to the anxiety generated by either loneliness, separation or death: all conditions of man's 'fallen' state.

Nabokov's Humbert writes that Lolita is fascinated with the world of Hollywood and celebrity glamour because this is world is completely free from suffering and death. It has been demonstrated how Humbert also mythologises Lolita as a symbol of imminent immortality, which he thinks he can possess to recover youth and deathlessness for himself, an allegory for the seductive deceptiveness and implicit allusiveness of consumerist language. Similarly, in both *Money* and *Atomised*, the characters are portrayed as being desperately obsessed with the need to stave off death, by the symbolic taboo of all signifiers related to decay and ageing. Mass consumerism relies on the use of allusions to Romantic and religious myths that restore meaning to the world. The emotional and connotative power of these allusions subliminally incite desire as well as perpetuating mythological and cultural archetypes. However, despite Humbert's mobilisation of

traditional fragments of myths in his supernatural and mystical portrayal of *Lolita*, and the circular safety of Self's brothels decked with symbols of Arcadian bliss, these consumer mythologies do not offer an authentic form of reconciliation with death but stimulate further desires by intensifying rather than alleviating anxiety.

### **b. Intersubjective Unity**

Bauman demonstrates how the regime of desire in consumer society deprives individuals of the capacity to make long-term 'investments', leading to a general breakdown regarding the establishment of meaningful relationships and intersubjectivity (Bauman, 2007, 22, 24). Despite the seeming imminence of human affection offered on the market for consumption, such as tourism offered for single people, disco clubs or internet dating, these different ways of 'shopping for love' actually deepen the alienation experienced by the modern consumer, rather than fulfilling the desire for recognition (Bauman, 2007, 24). These novels provide poignant exemplifications of the condition of such ubiquitous solipsism that characterises consumer loneliness. The emphasis on the immediate gratification of desire, rather than effort and commitment, mean that consumers expect the instant burst of pleasure and joy from another human being.

In *Lolita*, Humbert objectifies the 'nymphet' into a sublime object of desire, emptied of her own will and personality within his idealised world, inhibiting rather than enabling intersubjective communication. His fixation with acquiring pleasure through nymphets leads him to act in an inhumane and derogatory manner towards every person who gets in the way of his fulfilment of his fantasies. In *Money*, Self is portrayed as only being able to communicate with other people through the mediation of money. When a relationship is based on genuine human interaction, he is both literally and figuratively impotent. In *Atomised*, all the characters are portrayed as being imprisoned within themselves, despite living close to one another and experiencing similar problems. Annabelle's behaviour is conditioned by her uncritical appropriations of mythologised 'love' in the mass media, which blind her to the reality of the intentions of men around her. In Bruno's case, his pathological egotism contributes to his relegation of women to the position of objects created solely for the gratification of his own desires.



Bauman delineates the absence of responsibility for others and alienation that characterises consumer society, referring to how consumerism appears to be based on the ideal model of 'a self well defended against getting hurt' (Bauman, 2007, 49-50). These novels undermine of this ideal of self-sufficiency, the logical and inevitable conclusion of which seems to be insurmountable solipsism.

### **c. Absolving Shame**

Bauman also conceptualises how shame is an inevitable corollary of indulgent consumption. Referring to the example of 'skin trades', such as plastic surgery, he describes the way in which the purchasing of these services acts as a ritual of redemption or cleansing of the shame of 'past feasts', which have left unspeakable and impure residues within the soul and the body (Bauman, 2007, 38). As such, the function of consumerist discourse is to simultaneously stimulate the desire for sensual gratification while promising the redemption from shame engendered by this hedonistic behaviour. The absence of shame is also an intrinsic feature of all narratives of paradise, the Fall being conflated with the instant consciousness of shame more than with anything else. As such, consumerist products offer a return to limitless happiness without shame. In Nabokov's *Lolita*, Humbert objectifies the 'nymphet' into this ideal arbitrator of limitless joy. While providing the endless gratification of his shameful desire through her vulnerability and innocence, which pampers his masculine ego, he simultaneously absolves himself of this shame by invoking mythical allusions to temptresses and demons to idealise these nymphets. In *Money*, Self depicts his girlfriend, Selina Street, in a similar mythologised way. He depicts her as a insouciant little schoolgirl and an experienced prostitute at the same time, which even her name ('Street' being an obvious allusion to women of the night) provokes. Furthermore, Self constantly indulges in junk food and drinking, promising himself that the moment he becomes wealthy, he will go to California to get a new body, delineating the double motion of shame and redemption essential to consumerism. In *Atomised*, Bruno seems like a less articulate version of Humbert – he is also a pedophile who is unable to assert his masculinity in his relations with women, indulging in the inflation of his ego when he thinks about younger girls, while attributing misogyn-

istic epithets to women he meets, blaming them for his selfish desires. This dichotomous co-existence of innocence and fallenness is a symptomatic of the ideal object of desire. It gratifies the consumer's shameful impulses, thus removing the obstacle to pleasure connected with the indulgence in one's physiological desires.

### **iii. Deception through the delusion of freedom**

The characters in these texts are presented as having absorbed the consumerist ideology of freedom and control over themselves and others through the appropriation of objectified people or commodities. Bauman has illustrated how the delusion that the subject is a powerful, all-controlling agent is a fiction that underpins the mechanism of consumerist regime of desires. 'Subjectivity fetishism', the belief in a stable and essential self, is termed as having been 'founded on a lie' (Bauman, 2007, 20). Bauman postulates that the 'society of consumers' promotes a world view that neatly divides existence into things that are *chosen* and people who *choose*, thus sustaining an opposition between the self-sufficient agent and the 'docile, obedient' object. The appropriation of these docile objects then elevates the buyer to 'the noble, flattering and ego-boosting rank of the sovereign subject' (Bauman, 2007, 16). Bauman undermines this idealised view of the consumer as a modern hero, praised for the virtues of 'rationality' and 'capacity for self-definition', which is underpinned by the idea that his will can transform nature, society and other people by bending them to mastery through his putatively 'freely and privately chosen desires' (Bauman, 2007, 11). However, as Bauman points out, these commodified people or objects have their own wills. Like Lolita, people cannot be reduced to passive objects in order to gratify the archetypal consumer's ego.

Although the alternatives to consumerism in Nabokov and Amis's texts are nowhere near as extreme as Houellebecq's 'solution' of a post-human utopia stripped of individuality, they all point to the problematic nature of freedom in consumerist society. Humbert believes that he can recover his childhood paradise through possessing and bribing Lolita. Self's mania with money causes him to believe that he can become the master of those around him and his own life through wealth is seen as driving him deep-

er into an inferno. The belief that pleasure is obtainable through power over commodities is therefore exposed as a fallacy.

It would be naïve to claim that Nabokov, Amis and Houellebecq's novels are 'representative' of the social and cultural ethos of the decades in which they were writing. It nevertheless remains the case that it would have been impossible for a writer like Nabokov, whose impressions were shaped by the experience of post-war American society, to write in the same way as an author of the 1990s, like Houellebecq, whose imagery is significantly more repulsive and graphic. It may be inferred that this significantly more grotesque vision of consumerist society, which emerges from Nabokov's prose to that of Houellebecq, would not be possible without the disillusionment and change that has occurred in people's perception of the supposed emancipation brought about by consumerism, in contradiction to the high hopes of the 1950s era. Despite the critiques of consumerist culture in these novels, none of them can be read as a dogmatic social tract providing an obvious solution to the crisis of meaning engendered by the commodification of values.

I have not aimed to cover all the aspects of Nabokov, Amis and Houellebecq's presentations of consumerism, as this would have been beyond the breadth of this study. However, I have hoped to show how these novels may be read as critiques of the symbolic power of consumerism to evoke promises of happiness. This is particularly relevant in an era that has been described by Slavoj Žižek as 'spiritualised hedonism', whereby the maximisation of pleasure and hedonism is consistently posited as the 'goal of life', yet ironically, 'anxiety and depression are exploding' (Žižek, 'Fat-free chocolate and absolutely no smoking', 2014). The belief in the consumerist promises of wish-fulfilment have been illustrated as intensifying the subject's sense of unfreedom rather than liberation, and to the extension of the subject's alienation from the world.

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