“Phony” and “Poshlost”: The Ordinary as Moral Concept in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* and J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*¹

Péter Tamás  
Kodolányi János University, Hungary

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**Abstract.** According to philosopher Stanley Cavell, “what philosophy is dissatisfied with is inherently the everyday” (1988: 171). The everyday is also an ambiguous but central concept in Nabokov’s and Salinger’s most famous novels. Their narrators mock and criticize the vulgarity of whatever they associate with everyday life – clichés, stock ideas, routines. This seemingly harmless mindset has serious ethical consequences: Holden and Humbert start associating the concept of the everyday with moral depravity. They become blind to the redeemable qualities of the ordinary, which leads them to consider the Other merely as a product of clichés. Both Nabokov and Salinger imply that one cannot acknowledge the alterity of the Other without making peace with ordinariness of everyday life. However, there is an important difference between the two novels: while Salinger sets out to depict how the everyday can be reclaimed and the Other acknowledged, *Lolita* employs a narrator who never manages to re-evaluate his approach to the ordinary.

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¹ This paper, a revised and condensed version of the second chapter of my dissertation, is dedicated to the memory of my late supervisor Géza Kállay, who introduced me to Stanley Cavell’s works and shaped the way I think about literature and “everyday life”.

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Introduction

What do we mean by the expression “everyday life”? Put differently, what falls into the category of ordinary phenomena? This question is not as self-explanatory as it might seem. While arguably all human beings have an intuitive understanding of everyday life, everyone would name different things as its exact components. What one considers ordinary and thus an inevitable part of their existence is one’s personal responsibility. Nabokov once made the same point when an interviewer asked him whether he saw “life as a very funny but cruel joke” (1990: 118). Nabokov replied: “Whose life? What life? Life does not exist without a possessive epithet. Lenin’s life differs from, say, James Joyce’s as much as a handful of gravel does from a blue diamond, although both men were exiles in Switzerland and both wrote a vast number of words” (1990: 118-119). Everyday life is a construct, and the way one constructs it has ethical consequences.

Rita Felski explains one of the many aspects of the everyday in the following manner: “For example, everyday life bears a complicated relationship to the distinction between private and public; it includes domestic activities but also routine forms of work, travel, and leisure” (2000: 78). These notions are central to two novels that are rarely discussed side by side: Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita and J. D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye. Both the narrator of Lolita, Humbert Humbert, and that of Catcher, Holden Caulfield, emphasize how different their private world is from public, socially accepted ways of living (of course, the nature of Humbert’s divergence from societal norms is far more unsettling than Holden’s: while the latter rebels against the hypocrisy of adults, the former remains on the margins of society because he is a pedophile). The two narrators believe that their unique worldview is special and more valuable than the widely accepted, ordinary lifestyles. Moreover, they mock what Felski calls “routine forms of […] leisure”, especially the consumption of popular culture (clichéd movies and derivative genre fiction).

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2 The aim of my essay is not to prove that these writers had a direct influence on each other but to demonstrate that they portrayed the everyday similarly. Whether Salinger read anything by Nabokov is unknown. Nabokov, on the other hand, praised Salinger, especially the short story “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” (Nabokov 1990: 57, 125, 313). While there is no direct proof that he read Catcher, he once referred to Salinger as a “novelist” (Nabokov 1959: 28). This suggests that Nabokov was familiar with Catcher, as this is the only novel Salinger published. For further links between Nabokov and Salinger, see Green 1963: 211-229; Hetényi 2015: 747-748.
As we can see, the ordinary is a complex construct in these books: it has an aesthetic element (the condemnation of popular culture) and an interpersonal element (the condemnation of hypocrisy). These two elements are closely related: Holden and Humbert imply that popular culture appeals primarily to hypocrites. Another link between bad art and hypocrisy is that both are ubiquitous: Holden, for instance, keeps running into hypocritical adults and tawdry movies so often that it becomes part of his everyday life. This phenomenon is so central to his thinking that he has a name for it: phoniness. While *Lolita*’s parody of hypocrisy is similar to that of *Catcher*, Humbert does not have a separate word for phoniness. Nabokov does: as we will later see, poshlost, a Russian term Nabokov uses for the behaviour of smug philistines, has a lot in common with Holden’s favourite expression.

But should the reader take at face value the narrators’ sense that the ordinary is such a negative category? Do Nabokov and Salinger identify with their characters, using them as mouthpieces of their own personal opinions? If not, then what does the writers’ employment of unreliable narrators suggest about the dangers of the worldviews held by the narrators?

To answer these questions, it might be useful to read these novels through the lens of Stanley Cavell’s works, since his philosophy not only investigates the ordinary and its discontents but also connects it to an ethical dilemma: whether one is able to accept the alterity of the Other.

**The uncanniness of the ordinary: On Stanley Cavell**

Cavell’s philosophy is based on his observation that “what philosophy is dissatisfied with is inherently the everyday” (1988: 171). He was reacting to opponents of ordinary language philosophy (as practised by J. L. Austin or Ludwig Wittgenstein) who claimed that philosophers should go beyond ordinary language, that everyday speech is too trivial to be the subject of serious thinking. Cavell also detected a more general distrust Western philosophy has of phenomena that are easily accessible. This distrust is referred to in Cavell’s works as Skepticism. Skeptical thinkers like Descartes relied so heavily on the desire to reveal a world behind appearances that they have even questioned whether the outside world exists at all. They also cast doubt on other minds, arguing that one’s methods of getting to know the thoughts of others are inadequate. According to Cavell, such philosophy “falsifies” the problem and offers false explanations. Explaining a passage in Wittgenstein, he observes that when we say we cannot access the mind of others and can “only” know their thoughts through their behaviour,

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3 This essay will follow Cavell’s spelling of the word Skepticism.

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this philosophical use of “only”—that all but unnoticeable word [...]—is not merely a sign that we, say, underestimate the role of the body and its behavior, but that we falsify it, I might even say, falsify the body: in philosophizing we turn the body into as it were an impenetrable integument. It is as though I, in philosophizing, want this metamorphosis, want to place the mind beyond reach, want to get the body inexpressive, and at the same time find that I cannot quite want to, want to without reserve. (1988: 163)

Thus, what is perceived in ordinary life – in Cavell’s example, the body – sneaks back into our thinking, but in a falsified form, which lends an alien, mechanical quality to it. Freud defined the uncanny precisely as the return of the familiar, and for this reason Cavell calls this falsified sense of the everyday “the uncanniness of the ordinary” (1988: 166).

To reclaim the original nearness and intimacy of the everyday, Cavell proposed an alternative to Skepticism’s focus on reason. He contrasted two approaches to the world, knowing and acknowledging. While Skepticism desires to appropriate the world and control other people by knowing everything about them, Cavell instead advocates acknowledging the gap that separates one from the rest of the world. By not trying to acquire a hidden knowledge that is only available to philosophical clairvoyants, one regains the nearness of life and preserves the alterity of others.

Among the many examples Cavell takes to illustrate this point is King Lear and a thought experiment. Starting with the former, Shakespeare’s play stages Skepticism insofar as Lear demands that his daughters tell him how much they love him. When Cordelia responds that she is unable to put her love into words, Lear disowns her. Ironically, of course, it was only Cordelia who loved him; the other two, who insist ever more eloquently how deep their affections are, abandon him once he loses power. Lear, then, misjudges his daughters precisely because he seeks conclusive evidence of their emotions, because he expects them to provide access to their minds. He is so dead set on knowing Cordelia’s feelings that he fails to acknowledge them (Cavell 1976: 267-353).

As for the thought experiment, let us imagine that someone has a toothache (Cavell 1979: 67-85). In this scenario, a Skeptic would search for more and more evidence of that toothache. The person in pain might point to a swollen cheek, start groaning and squirming, or exhibit any other signs of pain, but the Skeptic can always claim that these signs are faked. There is no end to this kind of doubt: nothing can be known with so-called absolute certainty.
If the Skeptic insists on finding more pieces of evidence of the other person’s pain, it might seem like he is striving for certain knowledge, but he is in fact motivated by something else. Within the limits of the criteria for judging whether one is in pain, he did actually know with absolute certainty that the other person had a toothache (Kállay 1998: 530). If the other person deceived him, this does not mean that the Skeptic misinterpreted the signs; the deception could not have been prevented by seeking further criteria. What motivates the Skeptic is not an epistemological but an ontological problem: he is rebelling against the fact that he is separated from the Other, that he can only know the Other through language.

**Phoniness and poshlust**

The narrator of *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert, and that of *The Catcher in The Rye*, Holden Caulfield, both perceive everyday life as vulgar and, consequently, are haunted by the uncanniness of the ordinary. Their rejection of the everyday causes them to sense a mechanical repetition, a derivativeness in the everyday. In an attempt to free themselves of that domain of life, Humbert and Holden both claim to respect aesthetic beauty more than their squalid environment does. This helps them voice similar critiques of the ordinariness of mainstream society’s taste. What makes these critiques so alike is that they do not simply ridicule kitsch; instead, they point out how kitsch can turn into such an integral part of our everyday life that it becomes virtually invisible.

In his monograph on Gogol, Nabokov introduces a Russian term for the normalization of kitsch: “poshlust”. Although the second syllable of this word is spelled with an “o” in Nabokov’s later works, it should be noted that he originally spelled it as poshlust. This spelling, with a pun on the English words posh and lust, indicates that consumerism is one of the many types of poshlust. As John Burt Foster, Jr. argues, “it suggests an overwhelming, even sexualized desire for the posh, which in turn refers to upscale consumer goods that confer a certain prestige on their owners” (1999: 224). But poshlust is a more general phenomenon than the idolization of upscale products. In Nabokov’s words, it occurs

> […] when the sham is *not* obvious and when the values it mimics are considered, rightly or wrongly, to belong to the highest level of art, thought or emotion. […]

> *[P]oshlust* is not only the obviously trashy but also the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive. (1973: 68)
Holden Caulfield refers to the same concept simply as “phoniness.” His description of the musician he sees at a hotel is especially reminiscent of Nabokov’s characterization of poshlost.

Ernie was playing the piano. It was supposed to be something holy, for God’s sake, when he sat down at the piano. Nobody's that good. [...] He was putting all these dumb, show-offy ripples in the high notes, and a lot of other tricky stuff that gives me a pain in the ass. [...] It was very phony [...]. I don't even think he knows any more when he’s playing right or not. (Salinger 2010: 109–110)

Ernie’s audience admires his corny touches to the extent where the lines between good and bad art become blurred, which is precisely what Nabokov observes in his account of poshlust.

Holden’s and Humbert’s list of things they consider phony and poshliy (“poshliy” is the adjective from “poshlost”) are long, but two items stand out as favourite objects of ridicule: cinema and theatre. Films, especially genre films of lower quality, provide a constant frame of reference in both novels. Furthermore, the protagonists even impersonate stock characters from genre films. For instance, after Holden gets punched in the stomach by Maurice, he consoles himself by taking revenge in imagination, a scene informed by film noir and gangster movies:

But I’m crazy. I swear to God I am. About halfway to the bathroom, I sort of started pretending I had a bullet in my guts. Old Maurice had plugged me. [...] I pictured myself coming out of the goddam bathroom, dressed and all, with my automatic in my pocket, and staggering around a little bit. [...] As soon as old Maurice opened the door, he’d see me with the automatic in my hand and he’d start screaming at me, in this very high-pitched, yellow-belly voice, to leave him alone. But I’d plug him anyway. Six shots right through his fat hairy belly. [...] Then I’d crawl back to my room and call up Jane and have her come over and bandage up my guts. I pictured her holding a cigarette for me to smoke while I was bleeding and all.

The goddam movies. They can ruin you. I’m not even kidding. (Salinger 2010: 135–136)

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4 For Lolita, see Appel 1974; Wyllie 2003: 123-172; Wakashima 2007; Wyllie 2015; for Catcher, see Oldsey 1961; Beidler 2011: 30-31, 85, 99-100, 105-106, 122-129, 137-139, 144, 153, 169-172, 184; but see French 1988: 35, who refutes that Holden Caulfield’s name is an allusion to two Hollywood stars.
Holden reverses the power relations: in reality, he was the one whose “voice was shaking like a bastard” and who screamed, “Leave me alone” (134); in his head, he casts Maurice in that role. However, the conventional nature of this revenge fantasy quickly cancels out its escapist potentials. The imaginary scenario cumulates masculine images until they become outright ridiculous, most clearly in the unrealistic image of Jane holding a cigarette to a bleeding Holden. At this point, the narrator abandons the fantasy and states that films compromise his imagination (“[t]hey can ruin you”).

The fact that movie clichés invade Holden’s mind is demonstrated not only by his coming up with this fantasy but also by his repeating certain words. Just as cheap films repeat hackneyed scenes from other movies, Holden falls into battology, starts to echo himself, and always expresses “being shot” by being “plugged” and refers to Maurice’s “belly” after mentioning his “yellow-belly” voice (135–136). Of course, Holden’s battology is part of Salinger’s artistic design. Scholars have suggested various purposes it might serve. For instance, Alan Nadel argued that Salinger signalled Holden’s quest for truth by the narrator’s fixation with the stale cliché “if you really want to hear about it” (Nadel 2008: 56). According to Ian Kinane, Holden’s refusal to grow up is reflected in his language: while adult language prescribes fixed meanings, Holden uses his favourite words very loosely: “old” and “kill” are used in radically different senses in different contexts (2017: 122). The repetition of words also lends a rhythmic pattern to his prose (Rot 1978: 49–54). But going back to the diegetic level, Holden is not aware of such meanings emanating from his word repetitions; he simply blames phony films for the impoverishment of his imagination and his self-expression.

Humbert’s consciousness is also permeated by movies. As Susan Amper notes, his condescending references to movies in the beginning of the book gradually turn into an unconscious immersion in cinematic clichés (1995: 87). In this sense, he is also ruined by the “goddam movies” (Salinger 2010: 136) and is less aware of it than Holden.

At the height of his immersion in cinematic clichés, Humbert tries to enact a movie-inspired revenge fantasy, the execution of Quilty. This proves anticlimactic for him because the killing retains an air of theatricality throughout. When confronted by Humbert, Quilty looks for his pack of cigarettes—the same conventional gesture of nonchalance that Holden had imagined making while bleeding—and points out the corniness of Humbert’s reaction:

“You need not roar at me,’ he [Quilty] complained in his strange feminine manner. “I just wanted a smoke. I’m dying for a smoke.’

“You’re dying anyway.’
‘Oh, chucks,’ he said. ‘You begin to bore me. […]’ (Nabokov 1991: 296)

At gunpoint, Quilty “imitat[es] the underworld numbskull of movies” (297) and seems to be focused on his cigarette almost as much as on Humbert’s threats: unfazed by his lack of matches, he keeps “taking the Drome cigarette apart and munching bits of it” (297). Even when Humbert shoots him, he reacts theatrically:

every time I got him with those slow, clumsy, blind bullets of mine, he would say under his breath, with a phoney British accent—all the while dreadfully twitching, shivering, smirking, but withal talking in a curiously detached and even amiable manner: ‘Ah, that hurts, sir, enough! Ah, that hurts atrociously, my dear fellow. I pray you, desist. Ah—very painful, very painful, indeed… God! Hah! This is abominable, you should really not—’ (Nabokov 1991: 303; ellipsis in the original)

Quilty’s misplaced banalities deflate the gravity of Humbert’s revenge fantasy in a similar way as the excess of movie conventions eventually ruin Holden’s satisfaction in his imaginary execution. Incidentally, Humbert even uses the key word “phoney” in this passage, which reinforces the notion that poshlost and phoniness are indeed closely related concepts.

Another phenomenon that both Holden and Humbert pick out for ridicule is advertising. The first scornful reference to an ad in The Catcher comes as soon as in the second paragraph, where Holden talks about his school:

They advertise in about a thousand magazines, always showing some hotshot guy on a horse jumping over a fence. Like as if all you ever did at Pencey was play polo all the time. I never even once saw a horse anywhere near the place. And underneath the guy on the horse’s picture, it always says: ‘Since 1888 we have been molding boys into splendid, clear-thinking young men.’ Strictly for the birds. They don’t do any damn more molding at Pencey than they do at any other school. And I didn’t know anybody there that was splendid and clear-thinking and all. Maybe two guys. If that many. And they probably came to Pencey that way. (Salinger 2010: 4)

Humbert derides Lolita precisely because she finds ads that are “strictly for the birds” irresistible: “If some café sign proclaimed Icecold Drinks, she was automatically stirred, although all drinks everywhere were ice-cold. She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal
The main difference between the two protagonists’ approaches to advertising is that Holden puts more emphasis on its inauthenticity and insincerity. Humbert’s scorn, on the other hand, is not only aimed at the slogan’s presenting mundane ice-cold drinks as if they were exceptional beverages but also on the consumerist behaviour they inspire in Lolita. In this respect, Humbert follows along the lines of Nabokov’s own lecture on philistinism. In “Philistines and Philistinism,” Nabokov states that the real issue with advertising is not that it exaggerates the product’s qualities but that it urges consumerism:

The rich philistinism emanating from advertisements is due not to their exaggerating (or inventing) the glory of this or that serviceable article but to suggesting that the acme of human happiness is purchasable and that its purchase somehow ennobles the purchaser. Of course, the world they create is pretty harmless in itself because everybody knows that it is made up by the seller with the understanding that the buyer will join in the make-believe. The amusing part is not that it is a world where nothing spiritual remains except the ecstatic smiles of people serving or eating celestial cereals, or a world where the game of senses is played according to bourgeois rules, but that it is a kind of satellite shadow world in the actual existence of which neither sellers nor buyers really believe in their heart of hearts […]. (Nabokov 1981: 313)

Holden is not above consumerist behaviour. This is illustrated by his reflections on the brand of his suitcases: “It isn’t important, I know, but I hate it when somebody has cheap suitcases. It sounds terrible to say it, but I can even get to hate somebody, just looking at them, if they have cheap suitcases with them” (Salinger 2010: 141). However, he does record, in the Nabokovian spirit, how consumerism creates a world in which nobody really believes but which still has great influence on everyone’s life. He recalls a former roommate, Dick Slagle, whose suitcases were significantly cheaper than his and who “used to keep them under the rack, instead of on the rack, so that nobody’d see them standing next to mine” (Salinger 2010: 141).

What I did, I finally put my suitcases under my bed, instead of on the rack, so that old Slagle wouldn’t get a goddam inferiority complex about it. But here’s what he did. The day after I put mine under the bed, he took them out and put them back on the rack. The reason he did it, it took me a while to find out, was because he wanted people to think my bags were his. […] We only roomed together about two months. Then we both asked
to be moved. And the funny thing was, I sort of missed him after we moved, because he had a helluva good sense of humor and we had a lot of fun sometimes. I wouldn’t be surprised if he missed me, too. […] The thing is, it’s really hard to be roommates with people if your suitcases are much better than theirs—if yours are really good ones and theirs aren’t. You think if they’re intelligent and all, the other person, and have a good sense of humor, that they don’t give a damn whose suitcases are better, but they do. They really do. (Salinger 2010: 141-142)

Holden and Slagle both know that material possessions should not matter to them, but they still don’t know how to prevent class difference from affecting their relationship as roommates. Their suitcases create a “satellite shadow world,” which, for all its banality, dominates the dynamics of people who are intelligent enough to recognize the falsity of that world. It should also be noted that this section of the text highlights a fundamental difference between Holden and Humbert: while the latter shows little consideration for the Other, Holden goes out of his way to spare his roommate’s feelings. Holden’s claim that he “can even get to hate somebody” for their suitcase is not only an admission of the power of consumerism but also an extreme form of empathy: Holden is so worried for Slagle that, resorting to a defence mechanism, he reinterprets his distressing concern for him as hatred.

If Holden’s point about suitcases comes close to the argument of Nabokov’s lecture, Humbert’s gibes at consumerism might even seem identical to those of Nabokov. However, there are two important differences between Humbert’s and his creator’s stances. First, while Nabokov suggests that nobody really believes in the promises of ads, Humbert claims that Lolita has an actual unrestrained faith in them: “She believed, with a kind of celestial trust, any advertisements or advice that appeared in Movie Love or Screen Land […]” (148). In Humbert’s presentation, the little girl is more naïve and ignorant than even the worst philistine Nabokov can realistically imagine. Which means that Humbert greatly exaggerates Lolita’s philistinism.

Secondly, Humbert’s implication that the girl is a philistine is, in Nabokovian terms, a misuse of the concept. As Brian Boyd has pointed out, Nabokov’s essay precludes adolescents like Lolita from the definition of philistinism (Boyd 1991: 236):

A philistine is a full-grown person whose interests are of a material and commonplace nature, and whose mentality is formed of the stock ideas and conventional ideals of his

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5 For further commentary on this passage, see Ohmann 1976: 30-31; Freedman 2003: 415-417.
6 I owe this observation to Márta Pellérdi.
or her group and time. I have said ‘full-grown person’ because the child or the adolescent who may look like a small philistine is only a small parrot mimicking the ways of confirmed vulgarians, and it is easier to be a parrot than to be a white heron. (Nabokov 1981: 309)

In Nabokov’s Rousseauian idea, children are exempt from poshlism for the same reason that man in the state of nature is: because they are sincere.

To apply the deadly label of poshlism to something is not only an esthetic judgment but also a moral indictment. The genuine, the guileless, the good is never poshlust. It is possible to maintain that a simple, uncivilized man is seldom if ever a poshlust since poshlism presupposes the veneer of civilization. A peasant has to become a townsman in order to become vulgar. A painted necktie has to hide the honest Adam’s apple in order to produce poshlism. (Nabokov 1981: 313)

In this regard, it is Holden, rather than Humbert, whose set of values correspond to that of Nabokov. Holden draws a very clear line between the world of children and the phony world of adults. He sets a lower age limit for becoming a philistine than Nabokov does (he already speaks of many of his adolescent coevals as full-blown phonies). Still, Holden is like Nabokov in that he exonerates children from the accusation of phoniness on the grounds of their guilelessness. This also explains why he finds it adorable when his ten-year-old sister imitates the clichés of genre fiction:

Something else she does, she writes books all the time. Only, she doesn’t finish them. They’re all about some kid named Hazel Weatherfield—only old Phoebe spells it ‘Hazle.’ Old Hazle Weatherfield is a girl detective. She’s supposed to be an orphan, but her old man keeps showing up. Her old man’s always a ‘tall attractive gentleman about 20 years of age.’ (Salinger 2010: 89)

Phoebe rehashes plot points that Holden would otherwise call phony (the use of an orphaned kid, the protagonist being a detective). In her attempt to sound formal, she not only uses a pedantic expression (“20 years of age”) but also fails to notice her self-contradictions. But since she is a child, Holden does not accuse her of pretentiousness. The influence of popular culture on Phoebe is not seen as a corrupting force but as a window on her emotional
development: the recurrence of a 20-year-old father figure in her writing hints at a dawning interest in the other sex and at a need for her father’s attention (who seems to spend little time at home).

**Ethical consequences of the rejection of the ordinary**

Holden and Humbert are not wrong in denouncing the vulgar items of everyday life discussed earlier. However, it condemns them to a constant dissatisfaction with the ordinary, which, in turn, compromises their perception of everyday life. In *Catcher*, Holden starts to feel that most of the world is dominated and tainted by “phoniness,” which inspires him to divide the world into adult (phony) life and children’s (valuable) way of living. This radical juxtaposition, as Cavell would say, is a false answer to a falsified problem. Holden is warned about the dangers of his dissatisfaction with the ordinary even by his sister Phoebe. She tells him “you don’t like anything that’s happening” (Salinger 2010: 220) and Holden fails to name a single thing that he likes in his present life in order to disprove her sister’s accusation.

In *Lolita*, we see the detrimental effects of the rejection of the mundane world in a less direct way. After Humbert essentially abducts the little girl and sneaks her from one motel to another, he realizes that their unconventional lifestyle does not satisfy her needs:

> Every morning during our yearlong travels I had to devise some expectation, some special point in time and space for her to look forward to, for her to survive till bedtime. Otherwise, deprived of a shaping and sustaining purpose, the skeleton of her day sagged and collapsed. The object in view could be anything—a lighthouse in Virginia, a natural cave converted to a café, a collection of guns and violins somewhere in Oklahoma, […] anything whatsoever—but it had to be there, in front of us, like a fixed star, although as likely as not Lo would feign gagging as soon as we got to it. (Nabokov 1991: 151-152)

This passage makes it clear that Lolita needs the “shaping and sustaining” force of a conventional, ordinary lifestyle, even if Humbert himself does not rely on such a routine to keep the “skeleton of his day” intact. This reading can be bolstered by an observation taken from outside of Nabokov scholarship. According to Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, children’s imagination is “constant[ly] and from the mature point of view radical[ly]” open, but to maintain “this radical openness”, they require “structured, predictable, and reliably nurturing relationships to life and to those others on which it depends” (2007: 53-54). Humbert deprives Lolita’s life precisely of this nurturing predictability. In an attempt to convince her that their
journey is a vacation rather than a kidnapping, he bombards her with stimuli and fails to realize that she needs a structure to her days just as much as the diversion of tourist attractions. In other words, he fails to create an ordinary and safe backdrop to the extraordinary activities he promises her. In the year they move from motel to motel, he draws up a new schedule every day, making her days unpredictable and hindering her in creating routines.

Both novels, then, depict the threats of being obsessed with the vulgar side of ordinariness. As we will see, both Holden and Humbert attempt to remedy these consequences the way Stanley Cavell proposed – by trying to acknowledge instead of attempting to know (and by knowing, possess) the person closest to them. However, there is one conspicuous difference between the two novels. While *Catcher* stages a successful reclamation of the everyday, *Lolita’s* protagonist fails.

At one point Holden gets so fed up with the ordinariness of the world that he resolves to run away, live in total seclusion, and pretend to be a deafmute for the rest of his life: “That way I wouldn’t have to have any goddam stupid useless conversations with anybody” (Salinger 2010: 257). A couple of pages later he encounters this fantasy in a slightly different and discomforting form (or to put it in Cavellian terms, the familiar returns to him, turning what had been ordinary for him into something uncanny). As he is waiting for Phoebe in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, two boys come up to him to ask where the mummies are exhibited. One of them stays silent, prompting Holden to be uncharacteristically crude with him:

‘Can’t your friend talk?’ I said.
‘He ain’t my friend. He’s my brudda.’
‘Can’t he talk?’ I looked at the one that wasn’t doing any talking. ‘Can’t you talk at all?’ I asked him.
‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I don’t feel like it.’ (Salinger 2010: 263)

Holden gets a glimpse of how he would look like if he stuck to his resolution not to speak. His provoking the little boy is a sign that Holden is unsettled by this unflattering, uncanny reflection of his own mindset.

Phoebe’s arrival holds up another mirror to Holden. She shows up carrying Holden’s suitcase and wearing his red hunting cap, presenting the vision of “a smaller version of himself” (Graham 2007: 33). She asks him to let her join him on his escape from society. Holden once
again reacts to seeing his fantasy of hermitage from the outside by lashing out: he orders his sister to go home and tells her to “shut up” (Salinger 2010: 267). Phoebe’s response is to mirror his behaviour, which increases the uncanniness of the return of his fantasy: she says, “I’m not going back to school” and tells him to “shut up” (269). She resolves to stay silent, refusing to talk to Holden even after he apologizes and the two of them start walking to Central Park.

What happens next implies that Holden’s behaviour to the world has profoundly changed. Phoebe gets on the carousel in the park, and as Holden watches her trying to seize a golden ring that comes down on a little chute mid-ride (for which she would be rewarded a free ride – see Beidler 2011: 209-210), the following thought occurs to him:

All the kids kept trying to grab for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe, and I was sort of afraid she’d fall off the goddam horse, but I didn’t say anything or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it’s bad if you say anything to them. (Salinger 2010: 273-274)

It is well-known that Holden’s decision not to prevent Phoebe from falling refers back to his earlier fantasy of catching kids about to fall off a cliff as they emerge from a field of rye (224–225). By not intervening, Holden gives up his role as “the catcher in the rye” and symbolically accepts that Phoebe will grow up (Graham 2007: 87). In Cavellian terms, his approach changes from knowing to acknowledging. He recognizes that his knowledge of the world in general and his sense of the all-encompassing phoniness of adult life in special might be flawed. He stops attempting to imprison Phoebe in an idealistic image of childhood and thus acknowledges her alterity.

Eventually, Humbert also undergoes a profound change and attempts to acknowledge the alterity of Lolita. However, whether he actually manages to do so is debatable. Ethical readings of the novel frequently point out the following passage, where Humbert openly admits that he knows very little about her inner life:

Once, in a sunset-ending street of Beardsley […], my Lolita remarked: ‘You know, what’s so dreadful about dying is that you’re completely on your own’; and it struck me, as my automaton knees went up and down, that I simply did not know a thing about my darling’s mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, a palace gate–dim and adorable regions which
happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me, in my polluted rags and miserable convulsions. (Nabokov 1991: 284)

Here, Humbert seems to relinquish control over the little girl and grant her autonomy by alluding to aspects of her personality that stayed inaccessible to him. However, this confession is still somewhat ambiguous because of its exaggerations. The image of the girl’s soul as a garden, for one thing, is a cliché. Moreover, the contrast between the garden and Humbert in his “polluted rags and miserable convulsions” sounds so extreme that it becomes ridiculous. Humbert depicts himself so pathetically that he discredits what he seems to admit.

Symptomatically, Humbert continues to engage in “mind-reading” despite acknowledging the inaccessibility of the girl’s mind. When he finds the “old”, pregnant Lolita, he accepts her in her present form, even though that form is very different from the idealized image he has of her: “No matter, even if those eyes of hers would fade to myopic fish, and her nipples swell and crack […] even then I would go mad with tenderness at the mere sight of […] my Lolita” (278). This seems like an act of Cavellian acknowledgement. However, Humbert pretends to know what she is thinking, or at least claims to be able to word her unvoiced thoughts. When he asks her about Quilty, he supplies her unuttered answer in imagination: “She groped for words. I supplied them mentally (’He broke my heart. You merely broke my life’)” (279). What this means is that he is still trying to understand her in his own terms instead of fully opening himself up to the girl’s radically different world. This is indicated by how the words Humbert puts in Lolita’s mouth seem to capture Humbert’s emotional state rather than Lolita’s: the parenthetical sentences suggest that her lovesickness for Quilty caused more harm to her than getting raped by Humbert. It is doubtful the girl would state something like that. Consequently, Humbert’s act of acknowledgement stays ambiguous at best.

**Conclusion**

Holden and Humbert both treat the ordinary as morally deplorable; they mock a number of phenomena associated with the ordinary (like movies and advertisements). However, this distrust in the everyday plane of existence cuts them off from the people around them and hinders them in recognizing the alterity of the Other.

In *Catcher*, the protagonist seems to overcome this plight at the end of the book. Holden’s final interactions with his sister suggest that he might be willing to rethink his distinction between the extraordinary, valuable world of children and the ordinary, phony, despicable world of the adults.
If *Catcher* is a tale of a successful attempt at acknowledging the Other, *Lolita* depicts a failed attempt. Albeit Humbert tries to honor Lolita’s alterity, traces of his possessiveness still remain in his behavior. This marks an important difference between Nabokov’s and Salinger’s novels – but it is nevertheless noteworthy that both novels portray what Cavell would call the falsification of thinking about the ordinary.

**Works Cited**


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Péter Tamás is a junior assistant instructor in the Department of English Studies at Kodolányi János University. He received his Ph.D. from Eőtvös Loránd University (Hungary) in 2021. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on “Ethical Readings of Nabokov’s Lolita.” In 2015, he was a Fulbright Visiting Student Researcher at Fordham University (New York, NY). He has published several articles on Nabokov, including one in the Nabokov Online Journal. Email: tamas.peter@kodolanyi.hu