“The Loved One” And “Lolita”: The Theme Of Formation Of A False Reality

“The Loved One” and “Lolita” are novels wherein Evelyn Waugh and Vladimir Nabokov expose the quintessential conflict of humanity. That is whether or not to give into commercialism and the pressures of society, which is promoted by a misleading, fleeting happiness. Evelyn Waugh and Vladimir Nabokov reveal how the glamorization of a harsh commercialized reality is created to comfort those whose values are tarnished by societal influences. “The Loved One” demonstrates how a commercialized lifestyle is appealing to those who feed into the selling of commodities, such as death, created by preposterous ideals that society normalizes. “Lolita” utilizes the growth of consumerism to show the ways in which it can corrupt a person's thinking, leading them to believe it can be comforting, especially in situations in which the person’s morals are already manipulated.

Evelyn Waugh encompasses society’s deliberate effort to smother reality through the commodification of death, ultimately burying the “loved ones” under fakery and comforting the “waiting ones” with distractions. The cemeteries, Whispering Glades and Happier Hunting Grounds, are both commercialized establishments that go beyond the natural process of death. Mr. Schultz runs a prosperous business that allows pet owners to mourn their deceased animals, not because he has reverence for life, but because he has greed for money. The Whispering Glades is merely a symbol of the inability to accept the reality of death of a loved one. Through this embellished, irreverent process, the mourners feel as though they are doing what society deems best for their loved ones, but in reality it is just what the greedy establishment owners make the most money from. Selling this fakery is unethical, but profitable. The owners convince the waiting ones that by “fixing” their loved ones to look “less disfigured” is paying the utmost respect to them. “If there are any special little difficulties in the case you must mention them to our cosmetician you will be seeing one of them before you leave. They have never failed yet” (Waugh 58). The fake smiles, making them look unrecognizable by putting too much makeup on them, and dressing them up to make them look more “alive” is society’s attempt of ignoring the realities of death. This seems like a normal process for the mourners, as they are convinced by these cemetery owners that humans and pets alike should be treated this way after death. Although the grieving process often includes a simple burial for the dead, this mockery of death proves to be the biggest deception for society, as they fall into the trappings that these glamorized commercial establishments blow out of proportion. Whispering Glades and Happier Hunting Grounds are created not to be comforting for the dead, but to be a means for distraction and rejection of the reality of death, entertaining the mourners in the process. Using “the loved ones” to describe the dead is an evasive phrase that eases and conceals what death truly is, symbolizing the false view of death. The owner's effort to make death untroubling is apparent when Dennis says, “well we’re obsessed by Whispering Glades, both of us ‘half in love with easeful death” (Waugh 124). Society’s expectations to buy into a travesty of death in order to prove one’s homage to their loved ones causes people to resort to depending on a deceived form of reality. The premise of society is that in order to show how much one really cared for their loved one, they must spend more money. This causes a dependence on the business owners to make these decisions for the loved ones- not to honor them but to thrive off of them. By being convinced that death should be a commodity, the mourners then turn to the ones who do it best- the cemetery owners. Depending on this false

form of society reveals that although it is comforting momentarily, values are tarnished and people are ultimately taken advantage of.

“The Loved One” also reveals how the dependence on a commercialized society is influenced by encouraging a lifestyle in which one cannot make decisions on their own. This is shown not only when waiting ones are convinced they need someone to help them cope with the death of their loved one through irrational means, but also when Aimee uses the Guru in a newspaper column to guide her life choices. Throughout the novel, Aimee resorts to the Guru’s opinions everytime she needs to make a decision. Though Aimee believes the Guru represents America’s beliefs- in which she puts all of trust- in reality, his name is Mr. Slump- an alcoholic who haphazardly gives advice to the gullible. Commercialism is comforting for the already vulnerable, such as Aimee, and consistently putting her trust into a false sense of reality ultimately leads to her downfall. “But I do not have the same feelings when I am with him as the girls say they have when they are with their boys and what one sees in the movies” (Waugh 87). America’s acknowledgment of perfection is revealed through Aimee’s perseverance of achieving it. Not only were young women affected, but all of society- causing them to rely on the false displays of perfection that America posed upon them. “They sat silent for ten minutes until the raucous system of misinformation gave place to a genter voice advocating a brand of toilet paper” (Waugh 97). This commercialized society is glamorized to conceal the harsh realities of it. This is shown constantly as the helpless Aimee’s reliance on Guru, or Mr. Slump, drove her to make life changing decisions, including ultimately ending her life. Aimee repeatedly shows that she has no true opinion of her own; she puts her trust into what she perceives society is presenting as ideal. Aimee becomes less and less of her own person as she loses her identity to the views of an inconsistent alcoholic. “The figure she saw in the looking-glass seemed less recognizably herself” (Waugh 118). Her dependency on this commercialized society is precisely the result of her lack of self-decision making skills, which society ultimately prevents against. “Aimee spoke the tongue of Los Angeles...She presented herself to the world dressed and scented in obedience to the advertisements; brain and body were scarcely distinguishable from the standard product” (Waugh 116). Constantly being convinced that adhering to society’s ideals will create the perfect scenario is not only false but is demoralizing, as Aimee’s values are shaped by the opinions surrounding her, ultimately driving her to rely on a commercialized reality.

In “Lolita,” the dangerous lure of commodity culture is present in Lolita’s situation, as she is often subject to the notion that commercialism is comforting. Lolita’s surroundings pose as a constant driving force that create a reliance on commercialism, often clouding judgement of the reality of her situation. With the growing presence of consumerism in America, Lolita and Humbert often find themselves invested in the commodities of modern day culture. “She believed, with a kind of celestial trust, any advertisement or advice that appeared in Movie Love or Screen Land” (Nabokov 148). As Lolita began putting her trust into a false reality- in the form of magazines- she felt comfort knowing that she was following the model of a perfect consumer. This was the direct result of the coaxing of Humbert to idolize America. Humbert described Lolita’s body in possessive ways such as calling her his pet and describing her lips as “rubber red” (Nabokov 66), revealing his insatiable desire and tendency to associate Lolita with the American society- innocent, vulgar, and materialistic. Having this pressure constantly put on her, Lolita has no choice but to turn to the distraction of commercialism. Humbert, as well as Lolita’s school, teaches her 'not to spell very well, but to smell very well' (Nabokov 161). This idiom reveals the ways in which this new society was being manipulated, leading to the persuasion of the belief that the perfect person molds from the principles of commercialism.

Social relationships were becoming increasingly defined by cultural practices of consumption, revealed through Lolita and Humberts cross-country road trip. The symbolism of the road trip employs every aspect of the type of consumer that proliferated in this modern society. Lolita was charmed by gift shops, souvenirs, caves that turned into cafes, tissues mimicking flowers, and even toilet signs. Although Lolita perceives these things as novelties, they are ordinary things that society glamorizes. “The words “novelties and souvenirs” simply entranced her by their trochaic lilt….She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster (Nabokov 148). This depraved sense of reality comforts Lolita, as it distracts her from her situation with Humbert. Humbert exploits Lolita’s obesession with commodities by encouraging indulgence in modern consumption. “She constantly received from me all kinds of small presents...although, of course, I might fondly demand an additional kiss, or even a whole collection of assorted caresses, when I knew she coveted very badly some item of juvenile amusement.” (Nabokov 183). By providing an outlet for her infatuation with consumerism, Humbert is effectively able to sexually assault Lolita while simultaneously distracting her. It is situations like these that make consumerism such an effective diversion from the lack of awareness in people’s lives. Lolita’s last name, Haze, signifies the mental obscurity in which Lolita was subject to during her time with Humbert. The rise of consumerism-in the form of department stores and the emergence of shopping as a leisure activity, complicated the conventional notion that a person should have their own identity. This normalization of a lack of distinctiveness made it especially easy to yield to the pitfalls of consumerism. These societal influences act as a prelude to the reliance on a commercialized society in which the realities are glamorized.

“The Loved One” and “Lolita” reveal how the formation of a false reality can be comforting to those whose views on life are influenced by those of society. The lack of self identity as well as awareness are indirectly the cause of the vanquishing of the protagonists' morals in each novel. The absence of these things lead to the vulnerability to the negative impacts of commercialism in modern society. Whether it be the ignorance and mockery of death, lack of individuality and ingenuity, or the compulsion to indulge in consumerism culture, comfort is found in the deceived appearance of commercialism as a solution for a transient happiness.