

# VNS

## Aubrey Beardsley and *Lolita*



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His whole conception of writing was that of a game with words; some obsolete game with a quaint name, like that other favourite word of his, “spellicans.”

—Arthur Symons, *Aubrey Beardsley*

Aubrey Beardsley, probably *the* dominant figure in visual arts—and certainly in illustration – in the 1890s, occupies a haunting position throughout the novel *Lolita*. He lingers in the name of Humbert’s imagined arch-nemesis Aubrey McFate; his surname graces the town where Hum and Lo settle down after their first auto-tour of the United States: it is in Beardsley, Pennsylvania that Lolita meets Clare Quilty, rehearsing a role in his play *The Enchanted Hunters*. The presence of Aubrey Beardsley in the novel is noted briefly by Carl Proffer in *Keys to Lolita* and at slightly greater length by Alfred Appel in his annotations. Appel describes him as “the ‘decadent’ Art Nouveau artist (1872-1898) quite out of fashion when *Lolita* was written...”(note to 54/3). (1) Appel also links the character of Gaston Godin with Beardsley’s drawing of Ali Baba, who is portrayed in a sexually ambivalent manner. These overt allusions merit closer scrutiny, and they lead to a group of covert links not just with Beardsley’s visual art but with his writings as well. Previously

unsuspected, these connections help to deepen our understanding of *Lolita*'s relationship to the tradition of love in literature. (2)

There are a few obvious reasons for Nabokov's reference to the fin-de-siècle illustrator, and it is precisely their obviousness that seems to have encouraged scholars to conclude their researches. Beardsley's artistic "decadence" was of the erotic type, and in particular his illustrations for Oscar Wilde's play *Salome* and for Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (and not only these) reveal great, even exaggerated, lascivious content. Nevertheless, prurient content alone seems inadequate to warrant creating both "Aubrey McFate" and the town, school and College of Beardsley: to grant such significance to what would amount only to a symbol of unbridled libidinousness seems out of proper proportion. This kind of multiple encoding by Nabokov typically points toward a stronger link than mere allusiveness, toward either a kinship or a deeper textual connection with broader ramifications. This case is no exception; there are indeed a number of textual links between *Lolita* and Beardsley: particularly, with Beardsley's short novel "The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser," also published as *Under the Hill*, and his poem "The Ballad of a Barber." But before discussing the details of these works and their presence in *Lolita*, I want to map out a brief history of why Nabokov might have come to know Beardsley's work, so "out of fashion" while he worked on his novel.

Beardsley's fame was brief but intense: his first commission was in 1891 for a modern edition of Thomas Mallory's "Morte Darthur," published in 1893-4, igniting a "Beardsley Craze" that soon spread all across Europe. (3) By the time he died of tuberculosis in 1898 at the age of twenty-five, Beardsley had produced a surprisingly large body of work, considering his frequent incapacitation; this had included serving as the art editor of two journals, first *The Yellow Book*, and then *The Savoy*. The erotic character of his work grew more pronounced each year, peaking in the *Lysistrata* drawings and in the short novel about the courtly knight Tannhäuser's visit to the Venusberg. However, Beardsley is known not as a pornographer but as an unsurpassed "master of

the line.” For although the erotic element (especially the sexually ambivalent) may be said to be dominant in his work, his portrayals of sexuality are all either playful or thought-provoking, and never aimed at stimulating carnal desires.

The “Beardsley Craze” even reached Russia: the very first number of *Mir iskusstva* (published in 1899) includes two of his drawings and a biographical note. (4) The journal’s seventh number, published in 1900, includes fourteen reproductions of Beardsley works, along with an article by O. McCall [sic], specially commissioned and translated for the journal, that stretches across 34 pages. (5)



Fig. 1-3. Beardsley drawings from *Mir iskusstva* Vol 1. No. 7.

Still more Beardsley images appeared there in 1902 (nine) and 1903 (one). Following upon this auspicious introduction, Beardsley became almost a cottage industry in Russia for more than a decade. The novella *Under the Hill*, in its highly censored form, was published in translation in *Vesy* in November 1905. In 1907 a limited-release, less heavily censored English version was available in England and in Russia, and this fuller version was translated by M. Likiardopulo. This

translation was published, again in chastened form, in 1912 along with many drawings, poems, letters, and aphorisms by Beardsley in a volume that also included translated biographies by Robert Ross, Arthur Symons, Vittorio Pica, and one anonymous biographer. (6) To this burst of interest we may add Russian commentary, ranging from articles by Sergei Makovsky (before 1909) and Nikolai Evreinov (1912) to a monograph by Aleksei Sidorov (1917). (7) It would not be an exaggeration to say that Beardsley was in the air throughout Nabokov's childhood; he was even in Vladimir Dmitrievich's library, in bookcase number ten. (8) It even seem likely that Nabokov would have seen, as a child, the edition of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* with Beardsley's drawings, given his family's anglophilia.

Although the craze seems to have died down with the onset of the first world war, it is hard to establish precisely when Beardsley went "out of fashion," as Appel puts it. In England, collections of his drawings and writings were published throughout the '20s; (9) early critical studies were reprinted in the 1920s, and new ones were published as late as 1928. (10) After that follows a relative quiescence, briefly interrupted in 1948-9 and in 1959, that lasted until about 1966. That year marked the beginning of the "new" Beardsley craze, or at least the entry of Beardsley into the mainstream of modern critical discourse. Since then, there has been a steady flow of monographs, articles, and picture albums, accompanied by exhibitions in London, New York, Tokyo, Munich, Milan and Rome. (11) In a 1967 edition of *Venus and Tannhauser*, Paul J. Gillette stated that "the young artist has now come again into his own, and this time with more popularity than ever attended him during his life." (12)

Thus there are two particularly likely reasons why Nabokov would have wanted to weave Beardsley into *Lolita*: the erotic focus of his art, and his visible presence throughout Nabokov's childhood. Beardsley might be seen as an emblem of lost childhood, Nabokov's own and Dolly Haze's, appropriate enough in a novel about lost childhood. However, we can be even more precise. In his 1896 poem "Ballad of a Barber," which was published in Russia in the 1912

collection as “Ballada o tsiriul’nike” in a translation by Mikhail Kuzmin, Beardsley wrote aesopically about a forty-ish barber of “Meridian Street,” named Carousel. (13)



Fig. 4. “The Coiffing,” illustration for “The Ballad of a Barber,” *The Savoy* No. 3, p. 90.

The poem describes how the barber, while coiffing a thirteen-year-old princess, is overcome by a paroxysm of passion and rapes her, for which he is hung. (14) An addition to the list of the novel’s allusions to adult-child relations, the poem does not seem to offer much more by way of coincidence or inspiration for Nabokov’s work, except perhaps for the parallel comparisons of child-rape with murder: the barber figuratively stabs his victim with a broken perfume bottle; Humbert drives away from the Enchanted Hunters as if “with the small ghost of somebody I had just killed” (*AnL* 142). Nevertheless, Beardsley’s presence on this list moves him out of the “erotic curiosity” category, where Appel had placed him, making him instead a part of the novel’s

interaction with its literary prehistory: that of the aspect of human erotic existence that sits at the novel's very center.

Given the striking literary significance of Beardsley's poem for *Lolita*, it is not surprising that Nabokov's engagement with Beardsley's world is deeper still. Looking for traces of Beardsley in the novel is a lot like Humbert's "cryptogrammatic paper chase," and indeed one sometimes finds oneself "groping in a border-land mist with verbal phantoms" (*AnL* 253). However, since "Aubrey Beardsley, Quelquepart Island" appears in the middle of the chase, one feels emboldened to take a few risks. Fortunately, Beardsley wrote fairly little, and his unfinished *Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* (15)—his only lengthy prose narrative—yields several elements that find a definite response in Nabokov's novel, and for very logical reasons. In referring to Beardsley's poem and story, Nabokov invokes one of the traditions at the core of his novel: writing euphemistically and inexplicitly about sexual matters. In Beardsley the sexual act is never named—that is to say, while various peripheral activities are described, coition itself is not. The same is essentially true of Humbert's relations with Dolly Haze.

Since Venus is the goddess of love, she makes for a good starting point in the search for euphemisms. Alfred Appel devotes several of his annotations to the novel's "Venus" theme, even suggesting that Humbert equates Lolita with Venus/Aphrodite, so it is natural that, in addition to the Venus di Milo, other works celebrating the goddess should be present (*AnL* 379). Beardsley's story falls into a tradition, based upon legend, addressing the conflict between Christian and more ancient conceptions of love and eros, Venus representing purely carnal eroticism. At this juncture, it is probably worthwhile to summarize Beardsley's version of the Tannhäuser story; it can be told in just a few words.

Tannhäuser, a knight, comes to the Hill of Venus (Horselberg or Venusberg), a place of open and nearly constant licentiousness, where he is welcomed by the goddess and her retinue and joins them in their merriment and debauchery. He dines, caresses, is caressed, consorts with Venus at

night, exhausts himself, sleeps, frolics some more in the morning, does some sightseeing... and the unfinished story breaks off. Nearly every conceivable variation on erotic play (excluding, it appears, sadomasochism) is described in the course of the story; Beardsley exhibits a certain tendency toward the encyclopedic. In the legend on which the story is based, Tannhäuser then leaves Venus and goes to Rome, asking the pope's pardon for his transgressions; the pope refuses, suggesting that Tannhäuser is as likely to be forgiven as the Papal staff is to sprout leaves. Tannhäuser returns to Venus, but a few days later the staff indeed sprouts, and the pope sends messengers, to no avail.

There is probably no way to know whether Nabokov saw the unexpurgated version of Beardsley's *Story of Venus and Tannhauser* (it was published only in a few hundred copies before 1959), but the point of the novella is clear enough even in the excised versions, if only thanks to the abrupt interruptions and gaps in the action. As Beardsley's work is one of erotic excess and lust fulfilled, it appropriately makes its most vigorous appearance in *Lolita's* two most erotically charged scenes: during the Sunday-morning "couch" scene; and throughout the action surrounding Humbert and Lolita's first intimacy at the Enchanted Hunters. In fact, Beardsley is invoked by name in close proximity to both events: Humbert mentions "(Aubrey) McFate" immediately before each incident; and Charlotte names "Beardsley College" shortly before her death and the consequent trip to the Enchanted Hunters.

Always in the back of Humbert's mind, Venus makes her first formal appearance in the novel during the famous Sunday-morning scene on the davenport sofa. On the couch, apple-eating Lo shows Humbert a magazine add depicting a surrealist painter and the Venus di Milo in the sand, as if to set the mood. Lolita is dressed in pink, recalling the *roches roses* (pink rocks) of Humbert's youthful seaside romance, but also the "bodyguard of roses" in her class list. Likewise, roses are everywhere at Venusberg: the knight catches his ruff in a rose as he prepares to enter the "loving mountain"; his bedroom is full of roses and rose images, and he meditates upon the cultural history

of roses when he awakes in the morning; (16) he mentions the *Romaunt de la Rose* and Saint Rose, whose image Beardsley included in the story's first publication). (17)



Fig. 5. Intended frontispiece for *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*. Source: *The Later Work of Aubrey Beardsley* (London: John Lane, 1901).



Fig. 6. “The Fruitbearers” from *Under the Hill* in *The Savoy*, No. 1, p. 167.



Fig. 7. “St. Rose of Lima,” *The Savoy* No. 4, p. 193.

At the peak of Humbert’s ecstasy, he describes Lolita as “rosy, gold-dusted, beyond the veil of my controlled delight” (*AnL* 62). That gold-dusting recalls “gold lace trimmings” on Venus’s manicurist Priapusa, while the veil echos the “spotted veils” worn by her retinue” (*Under* 37). The bruise on Lolita’s thigh that attracts Humbert’s hand (*AnL* 62) points toward “black silhouettes painted upon the legs [...] which showed through a white silk stocking like a sumptuous bruise” (*Under* 38). When Hum and Lo become “monogrammic” (*AnL* 60), they embody yet another of the Venusberg’s body paintings: “a drunken dwarf, or, simply, some initials” (*Under* 38) (which had been “*monogramma*” in Likiardopulo’s Russian version). Slippers, of all things, figure significantly in both works: as they sing “Carmen” and Humbert strategically shifts his lap for maximum effect, Lolita loses a slipper and then begins rubbing “the heel of her slipperless foot [...] against the pile of old magazines,” unwittingly (so Humbert thinks) enhancing his pleasure (*AnL* 61); as Venus completes her dressing-room ritual, one of her slippers is stolen off a tray, becoming an erotic

accessory for one of her attendants (*Under* 30-1). When Humbert has completed his ecstasy and Lolita talks on the telephone, she “kept tapping the edge of the table with the slipper she held in her hand” (*AnL* 63). It makes sense that most of these images, from a scene that is in many ways preparatory for Humbert’s later debauching of Dolores, hark back to the scene of Venus’s own preparations for her encounter with Tannhäuser.

The scene at the Enchanted Hunters points toward Beardsley’s novella still more emphatically. It should be recalled that from the outset, the “Hunters” is envisioned as a locus for romantic fulfillment, praised by Charlotte as a place where “nobody bothers anybody” (*AnL* 95). When Humbert and Lo arrive, this idyll is marred somewhat by the fact that “a religious convention [...] had clashed with a flower show in Briceland,” and the place overflows with priests and old women. Waiting as Humbert negotiates about the room and cot, Lolita caresses a dog belonging to an “ancient lady in violet veils”: veils and eroticized dogs—the dog “swooning [...] under her hand” (*AnL* 119)—both find precursors in *Venus and Tannhäuser*. (18) Perhaps coincidentally, Humbert wonders about an “enchanted mist,” just as Tannhäuser reflects upon the “mists and shadows” of the “enchanted woods” on the first page of his adventure, so full of amorous anticipation. The rose motif, already prominent, reaches its own peak at the hotel: when the pair reach room 342, they find a bed covered with a Tuscan rose bedspread (*AnL* 121); a moment later Lolita fills a mirror “with her own rosy sunshine.” After dinner, they share the elevator with two more “withered women, experts in roses,” who look at Humbert’s “rosedarling.” (18) To complete the scene, there is also “rose sherbet,” “rosy lamplight” and Quilty’s Persian aphorism, “sleep is a rose.” (20) This is probably one of the most rose-laden scenes in literature. Meanwhile, in Humbert’s imagination, Lolita clutches her velvet hairpiece (*AnL* 127), like the velvet necklace Priapusa wears during Venus’s toilette (*Under* 28).

Most compelling of all are the parallel scenes of Knight and Enchanted Hunter standing outside their respective nests of pleasure. Tannhäuser contemplates the grandiose entry: “huge moths, so richly winged they must have banqueted upon tapestries and royal stuffs, ... on the pillars that flanked either side of the gateway, and the eyes of the moths remained open and were burning and bursting with a mesh of veins” (*Under* 22). (21) Then some music emerges from the mountain entrance, the knight joins in on his lute, and “the song floated and wreathed itself about the subtle columns, till the moths were touched with passion and moved quaintly in their sleep.”

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Fig. 8. Tannhäuser before the Venusberg. Source: *The Later Work of Aubrey Beardsley*.

Humbert, having left Dolores to succumb ever deeper to the effects of the purple “sleeping” pills, goes out to the hotel’s pillared front porch and watches “the hundreds of powdered bugs wheeling around the lamps in the soggy black night, full of ripple and stir” (*AnL* 128). After his bizarre conversation with Quilty, Humbert, in his yearning to go to their room and furtively caress unconscious Lolita, compares himself to a violin string: “If a violin string can ache, then I was that string” (*AnL* 129)—recalling Tannhäuser’s lute at the gates of Venusberg, and more importantly, his behavior toward Venus after the dinner: “he [...] did a thousand gracious things, tuning her body as a violinist tunes his instrument before playing upon it” (*Under* 42).

These major moments are supported by a host of minor correspondences; a few examples will suffice. While Venus is dressed, we learn her leg measurements, hip to knee and knee to heel (each twenty-two inches)(*Under* 29-30); Humbert finds and recounts All of Lolita’s measurements, reported on a medical form from her annual checkup (*AnL* 109). While Humbert wanders around the lobby, he is approached concerning a “Ms. Beard,” causing him to exclaim, “what a name for a woman” (*AnL* 128); in Beardsley’s novella, “some [women] wore great white beards” (*Under* 38). As he describes his paper-chase, Humbert notes that he had visited about 342 hotels and motels, including several between “Chestnut and Beardsley”; but in his Russian translation, Nabokov

makes it between “Kasbeam and Beardsley”—increasing the emphasis on the Kasbeam Barber (whom Nabokov also singles out in “On a book entitled *Lolita*,” *AnL* 318), and thereby also on Beardsley’s “Ballad of a Barber.” The poignancy of Beardsley’s short life is also touched upon here in this scene that recalls the barber’s son, a man who died too young. And finally, there is the menu from the Venusberg dinner, where we find among the offerings “*queues d’agneau au clair de lune*” and “*charlotte de pommes à la Lucy Waters*” (*Under* 39). (22)

This essay does not exhaust the topic of Beardsley and Nabokov. (23) By now it is fairly clear, thanks to the work of many scholars, that when Nabokov incorporates a predecessor’s art into the significant patterns of his work, he does so in a meaningful way. Beardsley fit the purpose exceptionally well: his alleged decadence was a perfect mode for illuminating Humbert’s neurotic excesses and his atypical sexual preference. Ever interested in exploring the humorous and hedonistic side of sexuality, Beardsley was also sensitive to the nature of a male-dominated sexual culture and the violence and repression it sometimes entailed. (24) His *Venus* to a great extent upends this tradition (Tannhäuser is emphatically *not* indefatigable). His “Ballad of a Barber,” likewise, points to the dangers of masculine sexuality in a repressive society. If in fact Beardsley and his many roses also help Nabokov to point obliquely toward Guillaume De Lorris’s *Romance of the Rose*, then we have yet another model for the novel’s action: that romance’s hero, the Lover, is also a kind of enchanted hunter, allegorically seeking communion with the rose-bud he beheld when shot by the love-god’s arrow. At the end of Humbert’s story, he too decides that it was love that he had been seeking all along.

## Notes

(1) Alfred Appel, Jr., Ed. *The Annotated Lolita*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1970), 360; hereafter cited in text as *AnL*.

- (2) Curiously, John Glassco reports on a surprising early appraisal of Beardsley the writer by “Edmund Wilson who, in the journal *Dial* as early as 1923, wrote ‘I can think of only two writers of that period [the nineties] who escaped the moral confusion of the reaction against respectability: Aubrey Beardsley and Paul Verlaine.’” Quoted in John Glassco, “Introduction,” in Aubrey Beardsley, *Under the Hill* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 12.
- (3) Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur* (London: Dent [1893-4], 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1909). Holbrook Jackson wrote that “The appearance of Aubrey Beardsley in 1893 was the most extraordinary event in English art since the appearance of William Blake.” In *The Eighteen Nineties*, (New York: Capricorn, 1966 [1913]), 91; quoted in Chris Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), 3.
- (4) *Mir iskusstva* vol. 1 (1899): 16. It is especially curious that immediately after this note there follows a short article on “Sirens and Sirins” by G. Yasnisky (*ibid.*, 17-19).
- (5) This essay was published in English as D. S. MacColl, “Aubrey Beardsley,” in *A Beardsley Miscellany*, R. A. Walker, ed. (London: Bodley Head, 1949), 17-32. The early Russian interest in Beardsley is noted by Walker in the introduction.
- (6) Published as Obri Berdslei, *Risunki, povest’, stikhi, aforizmy, pis’ma, monografii i stat’i o Berdslee* (Moscow: Scorpion, 1912).
- (7) T.E. Shirma, ed. *Obri Berdslei. Risunki. Proza. Stikhi. Aforizmy. Pis’ma. vospominaniia i stat’i o Berdslee* (Moscow: Igra-tekhnik, 1992), 281. All of the mentioned works are published or excerpted in this volume.
- (8) For a discussion of young Nabokov’s contact with the World of Art movement, see Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, “Nabokov: the World of Art and the Ballets Russes,” *Nabokov’s World*, Jane Grayson, Arnold McMillin, and Priscilla Meyer, eds. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 73-95.

- (9) R.A. Walker, *Some Unknown Drawings of Aubrey Beardsley* (Bedford Park: R.A. Walker, 1923); Aubrey Beardsley, *The Uncollected Work of Aubrey Beardsley* with an introduction by C. Lewis Hind (John Lane, 1925).
- (10) Ross's and Symons's monographs were reprinted in 1921 and 1925, respectively; new works were: A.W. King, *An Aubrey Beardsley Lecture* (R.A. Walker, 1924) and Haldane MacFall, *Aubrey Beardsley: The Man and his Work* (John Lane, 1928).
- (11) Stephen Calloway, *Aubrey Beardsley* (London: V&A Publications, 1998), 221-222.
- (12) "Introduction," in Aubrey Beardsley, *The Story of Venus and Tannhauser* (New York: Award Books, 1967), 57.
- (13) First printed, with two illustrations, in *The Savoy* 3 (July 1896): 90-3.
- (14) The draft versions of the poem make the sexual content much more explicit; see Walker, *A Beardsley Miscellany*.
- (15) The Tannhäuser myth had been dramatized already twice in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Swinburne's poem "Laus Veneris" and in Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser*.
- (16) Aubrey Beardsley, *Under the Hill*, John Glassco, introd. and ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1959): 58-9; hereafter *Under*.
- (17) The *Romance of the Rose*, a medieval epic, is an allegorical treatment of love and eros; the abundance of roses in Nabokov's novel suggests that he, too, perhaps through Beardsley, is bringing forth the *Rose* as part of the tradition he adds to here. The *Rose*'s first part was written by Guillaume de Lorris; the second, by Jean de Muin.
- (18) The dog motif and the swine motif may connect both Nabokov and Beardsley to the erotic art of Félicien Rops. The monkey/ape motif also relates to this question. See Linda Gertner Zatlín, *Aubrey Beardsley and Victorian Sexual Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 176, 180-183.

(19) Another Beardsley hint occurs in the dining room, where Quilty dines in “loud checks,” an image reminiscent of the black-and-white checks worn by a clownish masker in Beardsley’s drawing “The Scarlet Pastorale.”

(20) The reference to Robert Browning (*AnL* 119) also includes a rose (cited in *AnL*, 373).

(21) Even the first sentence seems to tease the would-be interpreter: “The Chevalier Tannhäuser, having lighted off his horse, stood doubtfully for a moment beneath the *ombre* gateway of the mysterious Hill...” (*Story* 21).

(22) Humbert calls Quilty “Laqueue” as he prepares to murder him (*AnL* 292); Lolita is Charlotte’s “apple” (and sometime Eve’s), Charlotte is closely associated with water (Hourglass Lake) and the word “waterproof”; *agneau* (lamb) recalls Humbert’s “between the mutton and rose sherbet” (*AnL* 26).

(23) Other parallels worthy of discussion include: the narrow-hipped, boy-like nymphs and feminine fauns in Beardsley’s drawings (mentioned also by Sergei Makovskii (Shirma 251)), and his theme of ambivalent gender, which is echoed in Lolita’s pre-pubescent qualities, such as her “beautiful boy-knees” (*AnL* 122). Tannhäuser “caressed her eyelids softly with his finger tips,” and Humbert caresses Lo’s eyeball with his tongue (tongue-caresses are also common in the Venusberg). In an early “piazza” scene Humbert calls himself “Humbert le bel” and invokes a Priap (thinking in English, dreaming in Russian: *snilos*’) while Lo talks to Rose Carmine; Tannhäuser invokes the *beaux* who would dream before Venus’s palace, shortly before catching his coat in the rose bush. Humbert’s several references to Priap, which look like playful erudition, also invoke Venus’s manicurist and intimate, the—Hermaphroditic?—Priapusa (called Mrs. Marsuple in some editions). The two works also share a swine motif (perhaps indicating Swinburne, author of another Tannhäuser narrative, “Laus Veneris”). And after their amours, Venus and the knight are called “children” and are led to their “little cots” (55)—anticipating the cot that “Swine” never brings to room 342.

(24) See Zatlin, *Aubrey Beardsley and Victorian Sexual Politics*, for an extensive discussion of Beardsley's engagement with the sexual mores of his day.

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