

1) Word Play **Miss Phalen and Misfallen**

Ph is an F sound. Miss Falen = Miss Fallen = **Misfallen**. Considering that Miss Phalen had broken her hip, she had misfallen indeed. An unfortunate fall for Miss Phalen, as foreshadowed by the word, *unfortunate*, on pages 54 and 55.

2) Minimal Pair **Phalen and Phalène, Almost a Homonym**

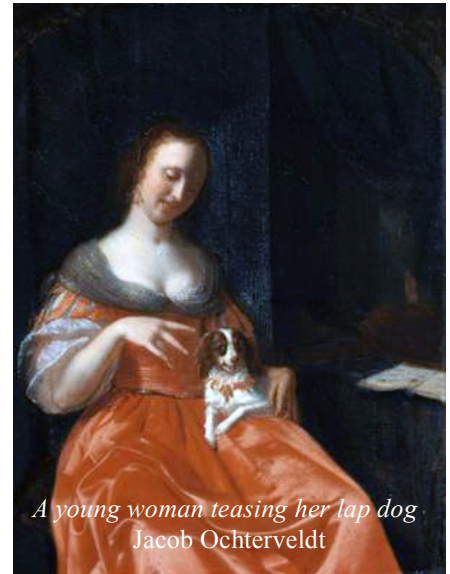
A pair of words or phrases that differ by only 1 sound. Phalen with a short e sounds like Fa-len vs. Phalen with a long e sounds like Fa-lene. In French, this is spelled **Phalène** (with the long e accented).

3) Dog **The Phalène Royal Breed**

A small toy dog that looks like a miniature spaniel, also known as the Continental Spaniel. This breed dates back to the 1500's in Western Europe. Originally a lap dog and a rat catcher for cold castles. Despite their small size, Phalène's are considered watchdogs due to their loyal, protective nature and their propensity to bark.

The drop-eared (moth-eared) Phalène was the original version of the dog, later a variation became more popular, known as the erect-eared (butterfly-eared or prick-eared) and called the Papillon. The breed names are sometimes interchanged, since the only difference between them is their ears.

Favored in France by the royalty as a ladies' companion or lap dog. Phalènes are depicted in many paintings and also in royal portraits with their owners. Humbert, as well, equates himself with French royalty by calling himself, *Humbert le Bel* (41) / *Humbert the Handsome*, after King Charles the IV. Another famous royal, Marie Antoinette, favored her pet Phalènes, Coco and Thysbée. Marie too had experienced a Miss Fallen. Hip, head, they all fall down.



A young woman teasing her lap dog
Jacob Ochterveldt

4) Moth **Phalène, an Uncommon Word**

Phalène is not the commonly used word for 'moth' in French. The normally used French phrase is *Papillon de nuit*, *Butterfly of Night* or *Night Butterfly*. As a lifelong lepidopterist, pursuing the study of moths and butterflies, Nabokov of course would have been fully aware of the difference.

Properties: Moths are positively phototaxis, being attracted to light.

"Lolita, light of my life, . . ." (9).

5) Moth **Idiom**

"Like a moth to a flame" dovetails nicely with "fire of my loins" (9).

"Thus hath the candle singed the moth." *The Merchant in Venice* 2.9

6) Phalène **Sexual Etymology?**

Whereas the word, *phallic*, relating to *phallus* (the Greek word *phallos*, for *penis*) is as to the male gender, the female equivalent word would be *yonic*. However, *yonic* (Sanskrit) hardly seems a sensual word. Rather would it not be best to take the word *phallic* and add a French feminine ending to it: *-ene*? Thereby, the more common word for the male, *phallus*, is connected to its female version, *phalène*. Freud would agree, in spite of Nabokov's protests. Perfume is sex.

6) *Phalène* (Cont'd)**Sexual Etymology?**

[Lest one think that this is all pure pretty much—*she is*—pure speculation, in Greek the masculine *-os* ending (*phallos/φαλλός*) has its feminine counterpart by adding an *-ania* ending to the stem word (*phállaina, phálaina/φάλλαινα, φάλαινα*).

In Modern Greek, *phálaina* means *whale*, or derogatively, a *fat woman* (its French counterpart is *baleine* and in English, *baleen*). One of Humbert Humbert's favorite female pejoratives is *fat*: “fat, powdered Mrs. Leigh” (12), “the bunched tips of her fat fingers [Mlle Edith]” (23), “my fat Valeria” (27) and “—but fat Haze” (43) —a tail end of a joke! Then again, if Melville asked, is not **Humpbert Humpbert**, “a Whale of a Tale?”

So what the hell, if anything, does *phallus* and *baleen* have anything to do with each other? In the murky world of words, their common origin may go back to the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) root word of *bhel-*, meaning *to blow* or *swell*. For *Moby Dick*, baleen makes all the sense in the world when considering this long etymological side trip. Maybe he was just trying to whistle. “You know how to whistle, don't you, Steve? You just put your lips together and . . . blow.” Moby's girlfriend, Slim, called him Steve, even though that wasn't his name.

Etymology is the Genealogy of Words. With various avenues, one-ways, wrong ways, dead-ends, side trips and branches *watch out, duck!* to bend down and hold on for the oscillating ups and downs for any roller coaster lover of words. The Bobs. Ok, for *Lolita*, that amusement ride would be The Chucks.]

7) Perfume

***La Phalène*, the Perfume Ad**

Humbert is associated with his Uncle's perfume business in America and this is one pretext for his emigration from France (10, 32, 35, 50). *La Phalène* was a French perfume under the brand name Parfums D'Héraud, founded by Delphin D'Héraud in Paris (1913-1926). Bottled by Lalique, *La Phalène* was a luxury brand. “In New York I eagerly accepted the soft job fate offered me: it consisted mainly of thinking up and editing perfume ads” (32).

***La Phalène*, the Perfume Bottle**

If one has any doubt as to the pertinence of this connection, then look at the Art Deco, stylized, sensual perfume bottle for *Phalène*:

New Paris Scents**Phalène—by D'Héraud**

A winged perfume, soft as the breath of night, shadowy as the silver wings of the night-moth whose name it bears. Its crystal bottle has the shape of outspread moth-wings, after the French fashion of completing imagery. \$7.50 the bottle.

Face Powder of the same odor, by the same perfumer, \$1 the box. c1922 ad.



Imaged by Heritage Auctions, HA.com

7) Perfume (Cont'd)

Look too at Charlotte's words to Humbert: "would I please come too because I have such a wonderful taste in textures and perfumes. 'Choose your favorite seduction,' she purred. What could Humbert, being in the perfume business, do?" (50). Well Charlotte, thanks for asking, but Humbert already chose his seduction, "Humbert's Choice" (51): Lolita.

Context

Miss Phalen, Charlotte's loyal lap dog, would surely have been an alert watchdog and prevented any intentions of Humbert for Lolita from ever materializing. Yet McFate had intervened and Miss Phalen had fallen in Savannah, just as surely as Savannah fell in the Civil War.

So now who is who? [Forget about the who is *whom* stuff.] A moth or a butterfly? Who is the *Phalène* and who is the *Papillon de nuit*? Well, just go out on your porch (*piazza*, 39) on any summer night and look up at the porch light and your answer. The moth is attracted to the nymphet(s) (56, 56, 56), like "a moth to the flame." Humbert is the Moth and Lolita the Flame.

Related Reading "The Death of the Moth" Essay by Virginia Woolf (1942)

Nabokov was known to have said that he read Woolf in the 1930s. Despite his negative view of women writers, Woolf's writing mirrors a theme found in Nabokov's works: Art as Experience thus transcends time.