

Meet Miss Phalen in *Lolita*  
A Convoluted Conversation

by James H. Buckingham

Hello, meet Miss Phalen.



She's one of three sisters, the one on the right.



Miss P. has feathery appendages.

Something happened to Miss P.



*Snip.*





Did you ever see her eye(s)?  
Not shiny.



Maybe too much of this . . .



OK, that's the wrong caterpillar.

Wait! Do you even know what kind of car she drives?



Or at least this vintage. But definitely this make.

And when Miss Phalen sleeps, or not,  
she is this . . .



While the novel *Lolita* names Miss Phalen as Miss Euphemia Phalen, who has a sister, that hardly tells the whole story. That's her novel *new* name. Then what might be her other name, her *real* name?

Of course you do know that Phalen is quite close to the French word, Phalène, *n'est-ce pas*? And a Phalène is altogether something else.

There are very many many Phalènes, too many to name. Lots undiscovered. So we will stick to this particular Phalène. She comes from a BIG family who had some troubles early on. Physically they were of a certain size.



If not Giants, then at least supersized, according to the norm. Okay, I couldn't find the right frieze, but the guy on the left was one of them. Had enough? All right.

Time to get down to normal size and let's go through what is in the *Lolita* text.

How queer life is! We hasten to alienate the very fates [sic – Fates] we intended to woo. Before my actual arrival, my landlady had planned to have an old spinster, a Miss Phalen, . . . come to stay in the house with Lolita and me, . . . (56)<sup>1</sup>

The Fates are a definite trio, sometimes also known as the Moirai or Moirae. Miss Phalen is referred to as a “spinster,” an unmarried woman. Yet the word spinster's original meaning is: *a female spinner of thread*,<sup>2</sup> *a woman engaged in spinning*.<sup>3</sup> The spinner of the Fates is Klotho (Clotho), who spins out the thread of one's life.

the unloved ugly little daughter firmly supervised by Miss Phalen who had already once had my Lo under her buzzard wing . . . (56)

Miss Phalen has a buzzard wing. And then something happened . . .

But a not too complicated event interfered with that program. Miss Phalen broke her hip in Savannah, Ga., on the very day I arrived in Ramsdale (56).

Poor Phalen. You fell? Or did you fall? Miss are you fallen? Miss Phalen has fallen. Miss Phalen has misfallen. Miss Phalen IS Miss Fallen. Did you fall badly? How unfortunate! I never saw that coming. Unless I never had read the prior two pages:

Unfortunately, the rest of it was frankly eclectic. (54)

I was right behind her when I had the unfortunate idea of blustering a trifle . . . (55)

Yes, unfortunate, but planted two pages ahead. Now if only your two feet were as firmly planted. But how did you fall? Which phalanges failed you, Miss Phalen? Feet or toes? Did Phalen's



phalanges fail? Were they the proximate proximals, the middling middles or the distant distals? Did you hurt your coccyx too? How cuckoo! What part of your hip, which *os coxa*, broke? [that *sounded* Humbertian!] Your iliac crest? Both? By-iliac,<sup>4</sup> by gum, that wouldn't be good.

But what we don't know, besides the break, was how the fall fell? Did you turn around, and coil up, wrapped in morning-glory or bindweed vines, roll together and tumble? Did someone think you had a stroke when they saw you lying on the ground, tangled in the pain of a broken hip, not far from your Volvo car? Asked you how you *warr* (had an Appalachian *accent*). “*Witch* one of *da* cars in *da* parking lot in *dis* park is *your 'n*?” All you had to say was, “I roll.”<sup>5</sup>

Things were never the same after that. The second Miss Phalen let Humbert know. We should *speak well* of Euphemia, because . . .

I think it was exactly a week after our last swim that the noon mail brought a reply from the second Miss Phalen, The lady wrote she had just returned to St. Algebra from her sister's funeral. “Euphemia had never been the same after breaking that hip.” (93)

What Hubert didn't know was the third sister (Atropos, Aisa) had gone *Snip!* after the second sister (Lakthesis, Lachesis) had measured MisFallen Miss Phalen's thread of life out. Such is fate. Or technically, the three together are the Fates. Even though Miss Phalen would roll or tumble, Atropos could not be turned. She's *just so* inflexible! Nor could a prayer to Saint Algebra,<sup>6</sup> even in Arabic, reunify Miss Phalen's broken parts. Her integers remained ÷d.

Perhaps Miss Phalen wasn't seeing well (even if she could almost *speak well*) that day. Was a little tipsy maybe from tipping back too many tumblers that led to that fateful tumbler.

A few years before, she [Lolita] had spent a rainy summer under Miss Phalen's bleary eye in a dilapidated Appalachian farmhouse that had belonged to some gnarled Haze or other in the dead past. (148)



[Humbert to Lolita] A nice grim matron of the Miss Phalen type, but more rigid and not a drinking woman, will take away your lipstick and fancy clothes.” (151)

So now you think you know everything there is to know about Miss Phalen? Isn't she quite a minor character in *Lolita*? You do? And you know/remember what Phalen Phalène means?

### Meet Miss Phalen in *Lolita* —



**The Convolvulus Hawk-moth *Agrius convolvuli***

(Classified by Linnaeus in 1758)

And now you have met Miss Phalen, a Phalène, a moth. Getta a look at that snout, her proboscis. One can imagine that Miss Phalen would be rather nosy. Humbert had cause to worry. “Under her buzzard wing.” The buzzard-moth is a kind of sphinx or hawk-moth in the Sphingidae family. What fits Miss Phalen most—considering what happened to her—is her mothballed name:

Agrius convolvuli (plural) or Agrius convolvulus (singular). Oh yeah, she's single. She is a large hawk-moth that is called the Convolvulus hawk-moth.

What of her genus name, Agrius? That's where the Fates come in. Agrius (Agrios in Greek) means *wild* or *savage*. He was a Giant, killed by the Fates (the Moirai) in the War of the Giants (Pseudo-Apollodorus, Bibliotheca 1. 38). And so too was Miss Phalen, killed by Fate. Her species name convolvuli (the plural) wraps around her equally.

A little Latin music, please, to set the mood.

Convolvuli – Is the Plural of

Convolvulus in the Singular, which comes from

Convolvo + ulus (a diminutive), which comes from

Con (with or together) + Volvo, which comes from

*Volvo*, (First Person Present Singular Verb in the III conjugation) which means:

*I roll, I tumble.*

This Phalen-er-moth, uh-caterpillar actually, feeds off of the leaves of the *wild* Convolvulus flowering plants that have vines that *coil* or *wrap* or *revolve* (*convolvulus*). Flowering plants, such as the morning-glory or the bindweed. Most are considered invasive weeds. Similar to how Humbert would feel about Miss Phalen being around the house and invading his space, taking over and taking charge. Invading and defeating his calculated, algebraic plans for Lolita.

This particular moth would be on the large size, with a wingspan of 4 to 5 inches. Sometimes mistaken for a hummingbird, since they can hover while feeding on the nectar. But what distinguishes them most is a long tongue. A giant in comparison to her/its body. Her tongue is longer than her body. Miss Phalen Phalène would be very talkative even as a bleary, blurry-

eyed drunk. Such extremely BIG eyes would SEE to the two, too much. The nectar Miss Phalen seeks is her alcohol. Surprisingly, or *not* so surprisingly, *Convolvulus* is also attracted to alcohol and tobacco plants. Where does the moth begin and the Phalen end and vice versa? Rest assured for both, alcohol and cigarettes are the besties of friends.

Common in Europe, this hawk-moth migrates in the late summer and early autumn to Britain, where enthusiasts would set up traps to attract them using wine ropes, where ropes are soaked in wine, beer, syrup or sugar to attract those flying snouts.

Well, I have trapped a lot here. One pic though has gone unexplained. The beautiful German word (yes, that does sound oxymoronic, sorry Germans) for this hawk-moth Phalène: *Windenschwärmer*. *Winden* + *Schwärmer* = *To Wind, to turn* + *Dreamer* = What?

Here's where I fudge a little with wind/turn and wind/blow, those twisty wispy English homonym sisters. I did say a *beautiful* German word. So I've Englishized the German — to match the Dream Catcher pic on page 4 versus one of a fantasizing cuckoo-clock winder.

### *WindDreamer*

Perhaps a wordy lepidopterist would approve after all. Do I hear a *buzzzzzzz* of wings?

*Finis by the Lion of Lucernity*

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Sharon, WI USA

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<sup>1</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Annotated Lolita*. Ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. Vintage, 1991.

All *Lolita* quotes are from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=spinster>

<sup>3</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. Oxford University Press, 1966.

<sup>4</sup> Phalanges, coccyx, iliac crest and bi-iliac were all used by Nabokov in *Lolita* referencing the various parts of anatomy, respectively on pages 274, 65, 65 and 175.

<sup>5</sup> Volvo, the Swedish auto brand's name comes from the Latin word, *volvo*, meaning *I roll*.

<https://www.volvocars.com/au/about/australia/i-roll-eneewsletter>

<sup>6</sup> From the Arabic *al jabr* (in vulgar pronunciation, al-jebr" [Klein]), being a "reunion of broken parts" in reducing fractions to integers in computation.

<https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=algebra>