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AESTHETIC EXCUSES AND MORAL CRIMES:  
THE CONVERGENCE OF MORALITY AND AESTHETICS IN NABOKOV'S  
*LOLITA*

by

JENNIFER ELIZABETH GREEN

Under the Direction of Paul Schmidt

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the debate between morality and aesthetics that is outlined by Nabokov in *Lolita*'s afterword. Incorporating a discussion of *Lolita*'s critical history in order to reveal how critics have chosen a single, limited side of the debate, either the moral or aesthetic, this thesis seeks to expose the complexities of the novel where morality and aesthetics intersect. First, the general moral and aesthetic features of *Lolita* are discussed. Finally, I address the two together, illustrating how *Lolita* cannot be categorized as immoral, amoral, or didactic. Instead, it is through the juxtaposition of form and content, parody and reality, that the intersection of aesthetics and morality appears, subverting and repudiating the voice of its own narrator and protagonist, evoking sympathy for an appropriated and abused child, and challenging readers to evaluate their own ethical boundaries.

INDEX WORDS: Nabokov, *Lolita*, Morality, Aesthetics, Ethics, Parody, Appropriation, Solipsism, Abuse, Criticism, Exploitation, Pedophilia, Genre, Convention, Allusion, Romance, Love story, Doppelganger, Detective, Confession, Folklore

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2006

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## Introduction

In a BBC television interview, Vladimir Nabokov explained the composition of his work in terms of games and problems: “I’ve no general ideas to exploit, I just like composing riddles with elegant solutions” (SO 16). Nabokov’s novel *Lolita* is no exception. Allusive, deceptive, and complex in design, structure, and narrative, frequently *Lolita* is read by critics in terms of its aesthetic riddles. Yet, another riddle, one that frames the body of the text and is introduced by John Ray Jr. in the foreword, implicates more than the complex aesthetic features of the novel by introducing the question of ethical importance from the outset as Ray emphasizes the moral implications of Humbert Humbert’s “*Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male*.” Ray hails the manuscript as a work detailing the “moral apotheosis” of a murderer and a pedophile, a man he calls “horrible,” “abject,” and “a shining example of moral leprosy” (5). Still, within Humbert’s crimes and through Humbert’s words, Ray discovers something more: a deep sense of underlying morality in the form of:

a general lesson; the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac – these are not only vivid characters in a unique story; they warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils. ‘Lolita’ should make all of us—parents, social workers, educators – apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world. (5-6)

Nabokov cements the riddle surrounding the text in his afterword, countering Ray by writing, “I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and, despite John Ray’s

assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow” (314). Thus, Humbert’s “confession” is framed in a riddle, one which has never ceased in dividing *Lolita*’s critics into two distinct camps: those who focus their attention, as Nabokov instructs, on the aesthetic dimensions of the novel,<sup>1</sup> and those who cannot resist discovering specific moral, or immoral, implications in the text.<sup>2</sup> The problem appears to contain a simple solution: as critics and even as first-time readers, we are much more inclined to side with the artist, especially when the artist, from his own authorial and authoritative voice, tells us that *Lolita* is purely aesthetic and amoral. Furthermore, as we read and reread *Lolita*, we quickly discover that Ray is simply another device used by Nabokov’s authorial hand, another parody, another act of deception by the author. As Linda Kauffman points out “The choice between Ray’s foreword (literature as a vehicle for social change) and Nabokov’s afterword (literature as self-referential artifice) involve seemingly irreconcilable differences, and, since Ray is the butt of parody, readers seem willing to go to any length to avoid being identified with him” (153). Clearly, we should not simply dismiss Nabokov and believe John Ray and

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<sup>1</sup> For general aesthetic treatment of *Lolita* and Nabokov, see Andrew’s *Aestheticism, Nabokov, and Lolita*; Seidel’s “Nabokov and the Aesthetics of American Exile;” and Stegner’s *Escape into Aesthetics*. For theoretical treatments, see Emarth’s “Conspicuous Construction; or Kriestva, Nabokov and the Anti-Realistic Critique;” Arora’s “Cinematographic Narrative and Postmodern Fiction;” Booker’s neo-Marxist critique, “Adorno, Althusser, and Humbert Humbert;” Giblett’s “Writing Sexuality, Reading Pleasure;” Packman’s *Vladimir Nabokov: The Structure of Literary Desire*; and Simonton’s Bakhtinian approach, “From Solipsism to Dialogue.” For genre studies, see “Parody and Authenticity in *Lolita*” by Frosch; Haegert’s “The Americanization of Humbert Humbert;” Jones’s “Folk Characterization in *Lolita*;” LaFontaine’s “Variations on the Detective Novel;” Burch’s “Nabokov and the Detective;” and Shilston’s “The Courtly Misogynist.”

<sup>2</sup> Recent studies examining the moral implications of *Lolita* include Olsen’s *Lolita: A Janus Text*; Kauffman’s “Framing Lolita: Is there a Woman in the Text;” Alexandrov’s “*Lolita*;” Clifton’s “Humbert Humbert and the Limits of Artistic License;” Moore’s “Seeing Through Humbert;” Rampton’s “The Morality of the Aesthete;” Patnoe’s “Discourse, Ideology, and Hegemony;” and Dipple’s *The Unresolvable Plot*.



his own projected and didactic sense of morality. Yet, should we repudiate all ethical implications based on authorial instruction?

Over the past 50 years, *Lolita* has brought about an expansive body of criticism as various in scope as Nabokov's text. But, as critics, we often rely on the language of historical convention, theoretical movement, and genre convention. Through this language, we hold the instruments to categorize, simplify, and magnify aspects of a novel that will serve our own particular purpose. Much of the criticism on *Lolita*, as with most other widely read, widely discussed texts, categorizes the novel by positioning it within the modernist or postmodernist movement, detective, romantic, or confessional genre. Nabokov's brilliance, though, the reason behind such a large body of criticism, is that he ultimately resists simple categorization through the fusion of multiple forms and conventions. *Lolita* is not just modernist, postmodernist, or romantic. *Lolita* is not simply a detective novel, a romance, or a confession. *Lolita* encompasses each genre, each theoretical movement, yet is easily encapsulated by none.

The question now becomes, how can a novelist who actively resists the constraints of genre, the constraints of historical and theoretical convention, fall so easily into the constraints of philosophical aestheticism or art-for-art's-sake? It is my contention that Nabokov is not an art-for-art's-sake aesthete and that his work does not have to be reduced to such simplification. When questioned about his aesthetic sensibility in interviews, Nabokov refused to align himself with aesthetes such as Wilde and Pater; and, although he stood fast behind his claim of never writing didactic fiction, never weaving into his fiction a strong and singular social message, he spoke of his own art in a

manner that blurs the line between the aesthetic and the moral. Immediately after asserting the lack of moral meaning in *Lolita*, Nabokov explains, “For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall now bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (314-315). Complementing his vision of art posited in *Lolita*’s afterword, in his essay “Good Writers and Good Readers” Nabokov writes “great novels are great fairy tales” and that “there are three points of view from which a writer can be considered: he may be considered as a storyteller, as a teacher, and as an enchanter. A major writer combines these three—storyteller, teacher, enchanter—but it is the enchanter in him that predominates and makes him a major writer” (*LL* 2, 5). Accompanying the importance of aesthetic skill necessary in crafting great stories or enchanting an audience, each of Nabokov’s descriptions of art and artistic value carries an innate moral sensibility: tenderness, kindness, instruction, and the always-present and traditional moral of the fairy tale.

In this essay, I will examine the general moral and aesthetic features of *Lolita*, and finally address the two together, illustrating how *Lolita* is neither immoral, nor amoral, nor didactic. It is not the work of ethical fiction bearing a significant and tangible social message that John Ray asserts. It is not the disgusting tale of a pedophile and criminal, couched on poisoning the minds of contemporary youth. As Tony Moore aptly explains, “It is not defiantly callous in promoting a flippant, joking response to these serious and intractable matters. It is not an attempt to justify the unjustifiable by an increasingly desperate narrator whose reductively narrow sexual self-absorption obliterates the

interests and feelings of a young American girl” (92). Neither is *Lolita* the total of its aesthetic elements: parody, allusion, romance, love story, doppelgänger, detective, confession, and folklore. *Lolita* is a work that merges the “beastly and beautiful,” the aesthetic and moral, giving both significant weight and import (135). It is through the juxtaposition of form and content, parody and reality, that the intersection of aesthetics and morality appears, subverting and repudiating the voice of its own narrator, protagonist, and anti-hero, evoking sympathy for an appropriated, damaged, and abused child, and challenging readers to evaluate and recognize their own sense of ethics.

## Morality and *Lolita*

The trend of Nabokov scholars and critics toward focusing on the aesthetic elements of *Lolita* is influenced not only by the richness and complexity of the text, offering expansive critical possibilities, but also by Nabokov's frequent discussion of his art in lectures, interviews, and the novels themselves. Critics addressing the problem of morality and aesthetics in *Lolita* often cite Nabokov's disdain for didactic literature and his warnings against reading a social or general moral into his text: "I have no social purpose, no moral message" (*SO* 16). Yet, just as Nabokov's blatant rejection and criticism of Freudian theory seem to beg many critics for a psychoanalytic reading of the text, so too does the rejection of artistic morality.<sup>3</sup> Thus, despite Nabokov's repeated repudiation of a general or moral message, several critics suggest otherwise, asserting that *Lolita* is a deeply moral novel that introduces and examines the ethical issues of criminality, social taboo, incest, child abuse, possession, solipsism, victimization, and moral awakening.

Upon its initial publication by Olympia Press in 1955, *Lolita* met with critical praise accompanying charges of obscenity, immorality, and pornography.<sup>4</sup> Before finding a temporary home with the Parisian publishing house, Nabokov's text was rejected by four American publishers "based not on my treatment of the theme but on the theme itself

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<sup>3</sup> Recent psychoanalytic readings of *Lolita* include Alan C. Elms's "Nabokov contra Freud;" Jeffrey Berman's "Nabokov and the Viennese Witch Doctor;" Brandon Centerwall's "Hiding in Plain Sight: Nabokov and Pedophilia;" J.P. Shute's "Nabokov and Freud: The Play of Power."

<sup>4</sup> Olympia Press, run, at the time of *Lolita*'s publication, by Maurice Girodias, was known for printing erotic novels, among them the erotic and widely banned Travelers Companion series, *The Sexual Life of Robinson Crusoe*, *White Thighs*, and *Until She Screams*. As Andrew Field explains, *Lolita* was "probably the most chaste book ever printed by Olympia" (336). Yet, it should be recognized that Olympia was also responsible for publishing work by such reputable authors as Beckett and Genet.

[...] Publisher Z said if he printed *Lolita*, he and I would go to jail” (314). Given that *Lolita* tells the story of a murderer and pedophile, and touches on the issue of incest, it is no surprise that in the 1950s, a decade notorious for a sharp return to morality and family values, the publication of the novel “clearly struck a nerve in our society by violating a number of its strongest taboos,” and even resulted in a short-lived banning of *Lolita* in England (Olsen 30). Furthermore, Olympia Press’s reputation for printing erotic novels did not help quell the controversy. What is surprising is that half a century and nearly a thousand critical articles later, *Lolita* remains banned from many high schools and “has developed in our culture’s consciousness into the icon for the idea of transgression” (Olsen 30).

Despite the novel’s subject matter, its publication by Olympia Press, or the original title’s, “*Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male*,” mirroring that of such 18<sup>th</sup> century erotic fiction as *Fanny Hill, or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, as John Ray Jr. announces in the foreword, “not a single obscene term is to be found in the whole work” (4). *Lolita* is not an erotic novel, nor does it treat the issues of pedophilia or incest in an erotic manner. In fact, *Lolita* will utterly disappoint those seeking the sexual between its covers. As Lance Olsen notes in *Lolita: A Janus Text*, “*Lolita* fails to deliver on its promise. The first 13 chapters of the text, culminating with the oft-cited scene of Lo unwittingly stretching her legs across Humbert’s excited lap [...] are the only chapters suggestive of the erotic”; and by the time Humbert and Lolita reach the Enchanted Hunters, “he slows the momentum of his story to a crawl. Meticulous scene replaces speedy summary” (30-31). Slowing the story through detailed description teases the

reader searching for the sexual by heightening the tension and anticipation for the inevitable scene to come. Humbert recreates the mundane details of the night: parking the car, checking in, dressing for dinner, eating dinner, teasing Lolita with a sleeping pill, dropping her off in the room, encountering Quilty, arriving back in the room, listening to the noises of the hotel, capturing the movement in the bedroom, “the tremors and gropings of that distant night;” yet, his descriptiveness falls away and is replaced by summary as he describes the events of the morning: “by six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers” (131, 132). The changes in the pace of the novel and the juxtaposition between description and summary in certain key moments reiterate the fact that *Lolita* does not follow the form or contain the content of an erotic novel and that Humbert, as he mentions, is “not concerned with so-called ‘sex’ at all” (134).

Although Humbert does not concern himself with the portrayal of explicit sexual details in erotic scenes and Nabokov’s text does not contain a single obscene word, the novel centers around the story of a pedophile, rapist, and murderer, a man not only guilty of multiple crimes and violating social taboos, but a man who contradicts social stereotypes of a criminal. Eloquent, cultured, and humorous, Humbert challenges our acceptance of strict taboos by becoming the likable protagonist of his “confession.” Although Humbert repeatedly warns us against his own words, calling himself a liar, taking vast liberties with the recreation of events and correspondence, and proving himself skilled at the art of intellectual manipulation, we often discover ourselves being swept away by his elegant and stunning prose, and taking pity on a deplorable man as he begs readers to feel and even participate in his enslavement to a torturous, foul-mouthed,

and greedy child. We are moved by the shaky justification for his crimes consisting of cultural difference and the comparison of himself to artists such as Poe, Dante, and Petrarch, thereby constructing the claim that as an émigré artist, a debatable title in itself, he exists in a realm outside of social and American mores.

The impact of Humbert's eloquence on readers becomes most clear when surveying the scholarship it has driven over the past 50 years. At the time of *Lolita*'s publication, many critics rushed to Nabokov's side to defend the novel against the undue charges of immorality and obscenity, and, in so doing, illustrated how easy it is to defend a man of eloquence and education and twist the story in such a way to make it more socially acceptable, more comfortable for the average reader. In her article "Sex—Without the Asterisks," Dorothy Parker lightly describes the novel as "the engrossing, anguished story of a man, a man of taste and culture, who can love only little girls" (9). In contrast to Humbert's "taste and culture," she depicts Lolita as "a dreadful little creature, selfish, hard, vulgar, and foul-tempered" who "leaves him, of course, for a creature even worse than she is" (10). In a similar portrayal of the novel, Robertson Davies writes that Nabokov's theme is "not the corruption of an innocent child by a cunning adult, but the exploitation of a weak adult by a corrupt child" (qtd in Boyd 230). While it is tempting to align these critics with those who simply fall victim to Humbert's eloquence, this is unlikely. Appearing immediately after the publication of *Lolita*, Parker and Davies's assessments of the novel most likely represent the rallying of artists and critics around one of their own in an attempt to defend the novel against a societal uproar of immorality charges and possible censorship. Yet, through their biased defenses of the

text, they blatantly ignore the crimes of the adult and place emphasis on the corruption and seductiveness of a 12-year-old girl.

A similar impression of Nabokov's novel continues to exist in contemporary society. The term "Lolita" has come to represent something beyond a "girl's name" or "a character in Vladimir Nabokov's novel." According to *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, the word Lolita means "a precociously seductive girl." And, in pop and news culture, we witness this terminology being used to describe troubled young women who engage in relationships with older men. Amy Fisher became known as the "Long Island" or "Lethal" Lolita when, at the age of 17, she entered a relationship with an older man and attempted to murder his wife. Our culture, therefore has appropriated the name, but, ultimately, has misconstrued the content of Nabokov's novel as well as the characterization of Lolita. In our current definition of the word, as in Parker and Davies's assessments of the novel, all emphasis is taken off the man attracted to the child, and placed upon the seductive nature of the child.

Thus, as formerly noted, there are two distinct camps in the criticism of Nabokov's novel which mimic the puzzle already set forth in the novel's foreword and afterword: those who attack the text for its lack of morals, and those, in the aesthetic camp, who defend the novel against these charges by overlooking the moral implications of the text. The problem is that critics often either wholly condemn the novel for exposing that which is only discussed behind closed doors or altogether ignored, thereby equating literary excellence with thematic morality, or misrepresent it by transforming



the novel into the portrayal of something much more socially acceptable: a seductive young girl willingly entering a sexual relationship with an older man.

While Nabokov also defended his novel against immorality charges, he did not simply dismiss Humbert's crimes. In an interview, appearing in the *Paris Review*, 1967, Nabokov responds to George Plimpton's claim that "Humbert, while comic, retains a touching and insistent quality—that of the spoiled artist," writing "I would put it differently: Humbert is a vain and cruel wretch who manages to appear 'touching.' That epithet, in its true, tear-iridized sense, can only apply to my poor little girl" (*SO* 94). He further describes *Lolita* in a letter to Edmund Wilson as "a pure and austere work" as well as "a highly moral affair" (*DB* 330, 331). Reading carefully though Nabokov's text, we discover an underlying sense of morality through the tenderness with which Lolita's carefully crafted voice quietly permeates the text, and as the nature and impact of Humbert's crimes are subtly integrated into his confession and never overlooked, ignored, or validated by Nabokov.

Although Humbert may be eloquent, cultured, and educated, Nabokov refuses to equate these qualities with goodness, morality, or truth. For the critics, like Robertson Davies, who claim that Nabokov's theme is "the exploitation of a weak adult by a corrupt child" or that Humbert's relationship with Lolita is a metaphor for young America's corruption of the Old World, Nabokov assures that readers recognize the full extent of Humbert's obsession. Long before setting foot on American soil or eyes on Lolita, Humbert steals surreptitious glances at young girls from park benches, wanders European streets seeking out nymphet-like prostitutes, and marries Valeria, not only "for safety,"

but for “the imitation she gave of a little girl” (24, 25). Humbert also demonstrates his awareness of the strict social taboo surrounding his obsession: “While my body knew what it craved for, my mind rejected my body’s every plea. One moment I was ashamed and frightened, another recklessly optimistic. Taboos strangled me. Psychoanalysts wooed me with pseudoliberations of pseudolibideos” (18). Humbert is not an innocent victim to the wiles of cunning nymphets. Struggling between the constraints of body and mind, society and self, superego and id, Humbert recognizes the discrepancy between his desires and those deemed appropriate by both European and American society.

Our glimpse of Humbert’s pre-Lolita life also reveals his propensity toward cruelty, violence, and solipsism. In his relationship with Valeria, one he has formed for “safety” and thus one he considers an act or a play, he silences her, forcing Valeria into the mold of wife; yet, when she deviates from his limited perception, showing herself to be an individual, he claims that she fails to keep “with the stock character she was supposed to impersonate” (27). Upon discovering Valeria’s affair, he commends his own “superhuman self-control” for not beating her in the street, wonders if she is even “worth shooting, strangling, or drowning,” and instead strikes her on the knee in the taxicab and commits simply to “hurting her very horribly as soon as we were alone” (27, 29). In one of many stays in a sanatorium, Humbert discovers an “endless source of robust enjoyment in trifling with psychiatrists,” bribing nurses, and applauding his own intellectual ability and cunning (34). In his short-lived marriage to Charlotte, a marriage formed as a means of remaining close to her young daughter, Humbert rummages through old pictures, seeking the likeness of Lolita in Charlotte in order to “evoke the

child while caressing the mother” (76). And when Humbert discovers Charlotte’s intention of sending Lolita straight from camp to boarding school, he dreams of the perfect murder: “tread[ing] his wife underfoot” in Hourglass Lake (86).

The difference between Humbert’s character before and after entering a relationship with Lolita is not the sudden corruption of a weak man by a child, but Humbert’s sudden accessibility to a child on whom he can bring his fantasies to fruition. With Valeria and Charlotte, Humbert’s fantasies about control and violence rarely come to pass; but with Lolita kidnapped and removed from society, he is able to enact his fantasies of pedophilia, solipsism, cruelty, violence, and intellectual manipulation on a single, nearly silent individual. Through Humbert’s eyes, Lolita is not a person, but an object, both sexual and aesthetic. The opening and closing lines of the novel express ownership over a child who has been renamed and claimed by her author. In the beginning she is the “Light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul” and, despite his moral apotheosis, Humbert closes the novel with the words “my Lolita,” indicating his refusal to release her from his grasp (9, 309). Humbert categorizes Lolita as a “nymphet:” a “little deadly demon” with “fantastic power” (17). By assigning to Lolita that which is otherworldly and demonic, Humbert thereby strips her of her humanity and childhood and attempts to make his pedophilia more morally and socially acceptable. Humbert further objectifies Lolita through his refusal to represent her as a fully formed individual, and instead relegates his description of her to that of the fragmented body. When first encountering Lolita, he takes inventory of her features, noticing “frail, honey-hued shoulders,” “supple bare back,” “juvenile breasts,” and “puerile hips” (39). Two years

later, he still views her as a fragmented object with “apricot colored limbs,” “pristine armpits,” “burnished arm,” “gleaming teeth” (230,231). He judges her as a critic would evaluate a work of art, calling her tennis game “an absolutely perfect imitation of absolutely top-notch tennis” (231).

Humbert’s description of Lolita in terms of ownership, aesthetics, and the fragmented body performs a dual function in the text; while it points to his representation of Lolita as an object, it also undermines his ability to control and allows Lolita to enter the text as an autonomous individual. A significant theme of Nabokov’s novel is possession: Humbert’s striving to capture and contain that which is living, breathing, thinking, and feeling. We see this theme not just in his relationship with Lolita, but in his other relationships: Valeria did not conform to her “stock character” set forth by Humbert; and Charlotte’s will was “unthinkable” and “frightening” to Humbert (83). As Humbert attempts to control and hold on to Lolita in life, he repeatedly reveals frustration with his failure. Although Humbert isolates Lolita from the world, manipulates her with false promises, and devours her sexually, he is unable to devour all of her: “My only grudge against nature was that I could not turn my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys” (165). Pieces of Humbert’s child are left unknown, untraversed, and guarded. As Jen Shelton notes, “Humbert reveals that although he possesses the child physically—an ownership he originally thought would satisfy him—he still does not have her in the way that matters most. That is, he still cannot control her will, her desire or her speech” (281). Humbert realizes 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, and a palace gate—dim and adorable region which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me, in my polluted rags and miserable convulsions” (284).

Humbert's inability to know and hold Lolita in life gives way to other attempts at confinement. Humbert laments the fact that he did not film her, and trap her figure and movement in technology. Finally turning to language as his only means of freezing her, “fix[ing] once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets,” Humbert again fails as the actions and voice of the child continue to penetrate the text, emphasize her suffering, contradict Humbert's words, and reveal the impossibility of imprisoning individuality in language (134). Lolita is never “safely solipsized” as Humbert pronounces (60). From the moment she jumps off Humbert's lap on the Davenport, “and blinked, cheeks aflame, hair awry,” to her own Independence Day when she abandons Humbert with Quilty, Nabokov emphasizes Lolita's acute awareness of the crimes being committed against her (61). In the car on the way to the Enchanted Hunters, Lolita announces “wouldn't Mother be absolutely mad if she found out we were lovers?” and proceeds to call Humbert a “dirty old man” (114, 115). Inside the motel room, before their first sexual encounter, Lolita anticipates and names Humbert's intentions, interrupting his mumbled justification for sharing a room by revealing, “The word is incest” (119).

Lolita's words leading up to the evening illustrate a child strattling the adolescent and adult worlds. She recognizes and plays up to Humbert's obsession because of her newfound entrance into sexual experimentation. As Tony Moore relates,

She is troubled by ambivalent and conflicting feelings resulting from her first penetrative sexual experiences with Charlie Holmes at the camp and, unable to make much sense of the turbulent mixture of furtive excitement, pride, enjoyment, curiosity, and guilt stimulated by her initiation into this part of the adult's forbidden world, she looks repeatedly for adult guidance. (98)

But, do her teasing and flirting words reveal compliance with Humbert's criminal actions? Humbert complicates this question by placing Lolita in the role of the seductress, claiming, "it was she who seduced me" (132). These are possibly the most controversial and contested words in the novel. While many critics stake their argument for Lolita's seductive and corruptive powers on this statement, others blatantly reject Humbert's words. In her monograph *Escape into Aesthetics*, Page Stegner defends Humbert, writing, "While Humbert is a sexual pervert and a murderer, he is not a rapist; not a seducer of adolescent girls in dark alleys [...] Judging from the come-on that Lolita gives him while he is a boarder in her mother's house, his statement that it is she who seduced him seems very possibly true" (109). Though Stegner espouses a common argument, many contemporary critics passionately disagree with her. In her widely reprinted article "Framing Lolita: Is there a Woman in the Text?," Linda Kauffman dismisses Humbert's words, writing "In view of his unreliability, it is doubtful his claim that Lolita seduced him is true; more important, it is unverifiable" (154). Elizabeth Patnoe, in her work "The Double Dramas in and Around *Lolita*," goes to great length to disassemble Humbert's justification, writing "the collective effects of Lolita's perspective and Humbert's

commentary suggests that her lesson, her goal, her game, her ‘stark act’ is not to have intercourse, but only to kiss and perhaps fondle” (123).

Even if we discount the validity of these latter critics and believe Humbert in spite of his ultimately unreliable narrative, we must also pay close attention to his recognition that “While eager to impress me with the world of tough kids, she was not quite prepared for certain discrepancies between a kid’s life and mine” (134). Lolita’s entrance into a sexual relationship with Humbert marks her pre-mature entrance into Humbert’s adult world, an entrance she is neither physically nor mentally prepared to make. Thus, despite Lolita’s possible, though questionable, seduction of Humbert, her physical and mental suffering, alienation, and resistance quickly replace her complacency in fulfilling Humbert’s sexual desires. Yet, as Humbert is such an impressive wielder of words, the damage Lolita suffers in his hands often is shrouded in poetic language or turned against her, thereby forming and reiterating the false impression of Lolita as a brat, a conventional and unintelligent American child, and Humbert as a suffering and exploited adult.

The description of their first sexual act is one such moment. Kauffman notes, “The first act of coitus is rendered so poetically as to camouflage what is being described” (160). Humbert paints the scene as he would a work of art, explaining:

There would have been a sultan, his face expressing great agony (belied, as it were, by his molding caress), helping a callipygean slave child to clime a column of onyx. There would have been those luminous globules of gonadal glow that travel up the opalescent sides of juke boxes. There

would have been all kinds of camp activities on the part of the intermediate group, Canoeing, Coranting, Combing Curls in the lakeside sun. There would have been poplars, apples, a suburban Sunday. There would have been a fire opal dissolving within a ripple-ringed pool, a last throb, a last dab of color, stinging red, smarting pink, a sigh, a wincing child. (134-35)

Clouding the scene with aesthetic, natural, and fragmented images, Humbert distances us from Lolita's pain, her enslavement, bleeding, and wincing (Kauffman 160). Her pain is reiterated twice more immediately following the scene. Leaving the Enchanted Hunters, Humbert notices "in the act of getting back into the car, an expression of pain flitted across Lo's face. It flitted again, more meaningfully, as she settled down beside me" (140). And as they stop "in the gay town of Lepingville," Humbert buys Lolita "four books of comics, a box of candy, a box of sanitary pads, two cokes, [and] a manicure set" to assuage his own guilt for breaking a child whose fate has just been cemented through the discovery that her mother is dead, that she will never return to her friends or an adolescent life, and that she has "nowhere else to go" (141, 142). However, by concealing Lolita's pain in a lengthy list of gifts, Humbert diverts our attention from her physical and emotional suffering to his own generosity.

Although Nabokov hints at the isolation and pain Lolita suffers in Humbert's hands, it is not until Part Two that the full extent of his abuse or the damage Lolita incurs is revealed, despite Humbert's effort to portray himself as the victim. The major shift that occurs between the first and second part of the novel is a shift in Humbert's role to both



lover and father; and, by taking on the role of father, Humbert's impression of Lolita also changes from that of "enchanted nymphet" to "exasperating brat" and "disgustingly conventional little girl" (148). But, the transition in Humbert's attitude toward Lolita is one that readers should traverse carefully, for we have seen a similar shift before. Lolita is a conventional child, but one who is denied the benefits and pleasures of a conventional childhood. She finds enjoyment where she can; and, because she finds no outlet in friends or family, she escapes the reality of her life by dreaming of a better life through the images on movie theater screens and photographs of brides in the local paper. However, Lolita's fascination with pop or low culture is one that Humbert was already aware of: in Ramsdale he took note of her dashing out of his room to examine the "dead something" discovered in the basement, and her affinity for ripping out magazine ads and tacking them to her walls (49).

The transition in Humbert's impression of Lolita arises, not from her enjoyment of advertisements or movies, pop and low culture, but from his newfound inability to control her. Similar to Humbert's frustration in Valeria's ceasing to impersonate her stock character, Lolita stops fulfilling the role of willing nymphet, shrilly telling Humbert to "Drive on" rather than stop for sex on the side of the road, and "sob[bing] in the night—every night, every night—the moment [he] feigned sleep" (141, 176). Humbert therefore resorts to bribery, manipulation, and force for sexual fulfillment. He brings Lolita coffee only to deny it "until she had done her morning duty," threatens her with reform school and the Department of Public Welfare, revokes promises made "in a moment of blind passion," and raises her weekly allowance before searching her room

and stealing it back (165, 169). While Lolita falls victim to Humbert's false promises and bribery, she also rages against his unwanted advances and unsuccessfully attempts to fight him off. Her victimization appears in the marks of resistance and rape carried by Humbert's body, wounds that others mistake as cat scratches. Their sex becomes forced and "violent," as Humbert relates the disturbing image of a father traversing the boundary between familial and sexual love: "thrusting my fatherly fingers deep into Lo's hair from behind, and then gently but firmly clasping them around the nape of her neck, I would lead my reluctant pet to our small home for a quick connection before dinner" (160, 164).

Although Lolita is unable to overcome the physical strength of an adult man, and her verbal threats of going to the police with rape charges fall flat against Humbert's threats of the Department of Public Welfare, her observant eye grants her a power unmatched by Humbert's solipsism. For two years, Lolita watches Humbert's strategic shape shifting as he transforms himself for various audiences, moving between the roles of adoring husband, grieving widower, intellectual aesthete, concerned parent, and jealous lover. Lolita observes and learns Humbert's tactics of deceit, manipulation, and role-playing while forming an understanding of the power she holds as the object of desire. Through this newly discovered sense of empowerment, Lolita enters Humbert's game and finds the ultimate resistance as she begins to reverse the system of give and take. Because she cannot fight him off physically, she begins to make deals of her own, bargaining for increases in her allowance and freedoms appropriate for a child of her age. Playing on Humbert's insatiable desire, she also withholds sexual favors in return for

adolescent rights: “she proved to be a cruel negotiator whenever it was in her power to deny me certain life-wrecking, strange, slow paradisaal philters without which I could not live more than a few days in a row” (184).

While Humbert recognizes Lolita’s newfound manipulative abilities, equating her actions with a “definite drop in Lolita’s morals,” his unwillingness to view her as a thinking, intelligent individual causes him to underestimate her capabilities (183). Fearing that she “with a mere fifty dollars in her purse,” might run away from him, he steals her hoarded allowance money (185). Yet, Humbert focuses his fear in the wrong place. Through her “cruel” negotiations, Humbert provides her outlets, allowing her to form friendships and participate in school activities, believing only that, through these friendships, she could share his secret and “ruin” him. Humbert, solitary and arrogant, repeatedly ignores the strength of human relationships and the great length people go to in times of desperation, thereby blinding himself to Lolita’s lies about strange phone calls, letters, and her absence from piano lessons, and falling victim to Lolita’s own role-playing when, after a violent fight, she returns to his arms feeling “romantic” and carefully crafts their next cross-country road trip and Humbert’s eventual defeat. Thus, it is Humbert’s solipsism, that in which he once found strength and justification for his crimes against Lolita, and that through which he turned Dolores Haze into “my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own,” that ruins him (62). It is his refusal to see beyond his own desire and view

her as an individual that equips Lolita with the ability to escape, and in his flaws, arrogance, and weakness that Lolita finds strength.

Therefore, it is not until Humbert releases his solipsistic vision of the world that he is able to view himself, Lolita, and his crimes clearly. As Olsen notes, “Increasingly clear is that Humbert gradually comes to understand what he has done to Lolita, to know that it is wrong, and to feel genuine remorse for it” (56). The unique aspect of Humbert’s narrative voice is that it is confessional; he must recreate his actions, thoughts, and crimes long after their actual occurrence. While he attempts to reproduce his state of mind, he often interrupts the narrative with his current voice, a voice that is jailed, alone, and remorseful. In the scene in the Enchanted Hunters, key dangling between his fingers, staring at the door of the hotel room, Humbert writes, “my only regret today is that I did not quietly deposit key ‘342’ at the office, and leave the town, the country, the continent, the hemisphere,—indeed, the globe—that very same night” (123). Looking back on their first cross-country journey, Humbert recognizes in stark honesty “We had really seen nothing. And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs” (175-76).

Humbert’s retrospective and remorseful voice surfaces most clearly and powerfully in the final pages of the novel: the pages on which John Ray Jr. concentrates and discovers Humbert’s “moral apotheosis.” Separated by several years, Humbert finds Lolita, pregnant, poverty-stricken, old beyond her 17 years, no longer a nymphet, and is

forced to see her for the woman she has become. Gazing at her he writes, “I insist the world know how much I loved my Lolita, *this* Lolita, pale and polluted, and big with another’s child, but still gray-eyed, still sooty-lashed, still auburn and almond, still Carmencita, still mine” (278). This passage is problematic because Humbert appears to recognize Lolita as an individual separate from himself, calling her “*this*” Lolita—as he does earlier in the novel when he picks her up from camp—yet, he immediately sees within her the Lolita he knew, loved, abused, and created for himself, countering her individuality with the possessive word “mine.” Therefore, while his moral awakening may begin with this moment, it is not until Humbert suffers his final rejection and leaves Lolita forever that he truly comes to realize the impact and brutality of his crimes, and the wrongful abuse Lolita suffered in his hands.

Traveling back to Ramsdale in an effort to locate Quilty, Humbert begins to conjure up short, fragmented moments with Lolita which force him to look, not at himself or his relationship with Lolita, but at Lolita the individual and the sadness she was forced to carry. He recalls Lolita turning to her friend Eva Rosen in the midst of a lighthearted and adolescent conversation, saying “You know, what’s so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own” (284). In remembering this moment, Humbert realizes his failure in never attempting to know the child behind his nymphet creation. He also recalls watching Lolita’s smile slowly disappear as she gazed upon her friend Avis embracing her father, noting that “even the most miserable of family lives was better than the parody of incest, which, in the long run, was the best I could offer the waif” (287). Furthermore, in the same scene, Humbert turns his gaze inward, calling himself a

“pentapod monster,” “despicable and brutal, and turpid, ” and juxtaposing this judgment against his vision of Lolita: “my poor, bruised child,” “Lolita girl, brave Dolly Schiller” (284, 285).

Through these passages, we can begin to trace a slow but distinct transformation in Humbert’s vision of the world, of himself, and of Lolita: first by interjecting on his own narrative and contrasting his perception of his actions at the time with his current remorse, by feeling and expressing a deep love for Lolita beyond sexual pedophilia, and then by acknowledging moments which reveal the stark contrast between the Lolita he created and the individual will and life that he repeatedly refused to recognize. Finally, after murdering Quilty, defeating his double, bringing to a close his enchanted hunt, and awaiting his fate in the hands of the police, Humbert stands on the side of the highway and recalls a moment after Lolita abandoned him for Quilty when he heard:

a melodious unity of sounds rising like vapor from a small mining town that lay at my feet, in a fold of the valley[...] What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and so limpid was the air that within this vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic—one could hear now and then, as if released, an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter [...] and then I knew the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord. (307-8)

In his annotated edition of Nabokov’s text, Appel notes, “with these words, it is clear that H.H. has transcended his solipsism” (451). For the first time, Humbert places Lolita’s life

above his own happiness, realizing that through his desire and flawed perception he stripped Lolita of her childhood.

By the end of the novel, Humbert condemns himself for his crimes against Lolita, writing, “Had I come before myself, I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years for rape, and dismissed the rest of the charges” (308). Yet, despite the slow progression toward a moment of moral clarity and his outright condemnation of himself, many critics contest Humbert’s moral awakening, claiming that these moments in the novel simply add another dimension to an already unreliable narrative, that Humbert’s sense of morality remains unchanged, and that Dolly Schiller remains forever frozen and solipsized in the pages of a text, “only exist[ing] insofar as she can reflect him, magnify his stature” (Kauffman 164). Alfred Appel reflects this problem in his own criticism of the text, writing in an annotation that Humbert transcends solipsism, but also noting in his introduction to the text that “If one responds to the author’s ‘false scents’ and ‘specious lines of play’ [...] and believes, say, that Humbert’s confession is ‘sincere’ and that he exorcises his guilt, [...] then one not only has lost the game to the author but most likely is not fairing too well in the ‘game of worlds,’ one’s own unscrambling of pictures” (xxi). Thus, as reflected in the multi-faceted criticism on the text, there is little left to the readers of *Lolita* in terms of morality alone beyond interpretation. What is clear, as Olsen states, is that “While Humbert longs to immortalize his love for Dolly in language, the language he sculpts also happens to immortalize his crimes, his rampant immorality, even his ability to jest at the most somber and inappropriate moments, thereby throwing his definition of love, not to mention the seriousness of his objectives, into question” (87).

Therefore, because Nabokov's text deals with moral issues, but posits no singular and overt moral, readers face the task of addressing their own moral boundaries as they negotiate between the contradictory forces of judgment and sympathy, love and violence, and comedy in the midst of tragedy, thereby transforming Humbert's moral struggle into one which transcends the pages of the novel.



## **The Intersection of Morality and Aesthetics**

The moral and ethical implications of *Lolita* surface in the plotline of the text, and in the actions, thoughts, and intentions of characters who struggle against themselves, each other, and the constraints of society. Nabokov renders the inner psyche of Humbert's mind with such consistency and detail, and paints such a stunningly realistic portrait of the 1950's American culture and landscape, that we often discover ourselves, as readers, responding to the text and characters, cringing at Humbert's actions and thoughts while sympathizing with his rejection, and arguing with ourselves as we attempt to resist the artful rhetoric of a pedophile. Yet, although Humbert appears to have full control over his and Lolita's story with a voice that urges readers to participate, respond, resist, and judge his behavior, we cannot forget that it is Nabokov, rather than Humbert, who weaves the complex, multi-layered novel and exerts full narrative control over the text. By examining the novel through a realistic perspective, we gain an understanding of the moral issues that drive the characters' actions and thoughts, but, at the same time, we also achieve only a limited vision of the novel as a whole. Thus, we must look at the aesthetic features of the text in order to attain a deeper appreciation for the narrative, the characters, as well as the craft within which Nabokov constructs the action and characters.

Whether through the anagram of his own name in the character Vivian Darkbloom, the allusions to his other fictional works, or the numerous references to his lifetime passion lepidoptera, Nabokov never allows us to forget that we are witnessing a "conjurers show:" a work of fiction constructed by a gifted author rather than the true

confession of Humbert Humbert (Olsen 90). Yet, if we fail to read carefully, it is easy to overlook many of the aesthetic elements that Nabokov incorporates into the text. Unlike morality, appearing in the surface drama, aesthetic importance falls into a much deeper, and, as Nabokov would say, “difficult” realm: in the narrative design, structure, and metaliterary and self-referential artifice of the novel.

Based on his discussion of art in lectures and interviews, Nabokov leaves little doubt about the value he placed on aesthetic beauty, complexity, and achievement over and strong and singular social message. In an interview conducted for BBC-2 by Nicholas Garnham, Nabokov wrote in response to Garnham’s question about the function of Nabokov’s novels, “I have no purpose at all when composing my stuff except to compose it. I work hard, I work long, on a body of words until it grants me complete possession and pleasure. If the reader has to work hard in his turn—so much the better. Art is difficult” (SO 115). *Lolita* is no exception. Falling in line with allusive modernist artists such as Joyce, Nabokov keeps even the most highly educated readers working to achieve meaning while navigating layer upon layer of allusion, verbal texture, and the evocation of literary history and tradition through the use of aesthetic convention. Given Nabokov’s repeated statements concerning the importance of aesthetic value, and the aesthetic richness of the novel itself, it is no surprise, as Appel states in the preface to *Lolita*, that “Many readers are more troubled by Humbert Humbert’s use of language and lore than by his abuse of Lolita and the law,” and that the implications of the story itself and Humbert’s crimes against Nabokov’s poor little girl often get lost in the attention that readers must devote to Nabokov’s use of language (xi). Thus, 50 years after its initial

publication, and the first annotated edition of a modern text ever crafted and published within the lifetime of its author, *Lolita* continues to draw a seemingly endless stream of criticism dealing exclusively with the aesthetic elements of the text ranging from the discussion and discovery of allusion to the use of novelistic convention and the connection of the text to various theoretical and historical movements.

The problem with such an expansive body of exclusively aesthetic criticism is that the critics often cast a blind eye over the larger moral implications of Nabokov's deliberate aesthetic choices. Just as the bulk of the criticism arguing the morality or immorality of *Lolita* often leaves behind the important aesthetic choices made by Nabokov in the composition of the text, thereby substituting and sometimes abandoning close textual analysis for theoretical claims that rest their arguments on trauma theory, incest theory, psychoanalysis, feminist tenants, and personal experiences of child abuse, those arguing aesthetic claims often choose to ignore, dismiss, or overlook the moral complexities of the text, thereby achieving only a limited vision of the novel as a whole.<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly, each type of scholarly analysis is valuable, contributes to the diversity of

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<sup>5</sup> In Elizabeth Patnoe's "*Lolita* Misrepresented, *Lolita* Reclaimed: Disclosing the Doubles," the author discusses the reaction of abused women and incest victims to *Lolita*, writing that "While many of us celebrate the personal nature of literature, criticism has historically denied the subjective. For a long time women's voices in general, but especially women's voice of anger and pain, have not be sounded or heard [...] For many people [*Lolita*] represents some aspect of their reality, what has happened to them or their loved ones—or what they fear might happen [...] While a few critics have expressed charged sympathy for *Lolita*'s trauma, most neglect to confront the trauma Humbert inflicts on *Lolita*, and none contend with the trauma the book inflicts on readers" (116). Linda Kauffman takes a materialist feminist approach to the novel, discussing the incest narrative and how "the inscription of the father's body in the text obliterates the daughter's" (152). Jen Shelton examines how Humbert's narrative encourages "critics to overlook the incest in the text as the ally themselves with the clever, sophisticated author against the forces of the simplistic moralism which Ray represents" (273). Elizabeth Dipple argues for a distinct moral in *Lolita*, claiming that "In the late 1980s when the misuse of children is so much before us, the plot of *Lolita* causes uneasiness and many readers stubbornly deny its higher forum of aesthetic excellence. In other words, Nabokov should perhaps, at least on one level, have a more exacting moral in tow" (74).

scholarship on *Lolita*, and reflects the impossibility of covering the entirety of such a complex text in a single article or monograph. Yet, just as I remain unconvinced by both the extremes of John Ray's "unswerving" didacticism and Nabokov's supposed aestheticism, I remain unconvinced by the oppositional camps that dominate the criticism of the text and choose to side either with the moralist or with the aesthete. By examining the juxtaposition of form and content, parody and reality, we discover that moral values are not incompatible with those associated with art. In fact, it is through these holes and contradictions, the gap between Humbert's aesthetic line of defense and that which is left unsaid but understood, that the intersection of morality and aesthetics is found. Humbert's text betrays its own author by highlighting the contrived artificiality of his justification and folding in upon itself to reiterate the side of the story that is not told, and the voice of an appropriated and abused child that is not heard.

In the introduction to the annotated edition, Appel describes *Lolita* as "surely the most allusive and linguistically playful novel in English since *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939)" (xi). As the novel contains both subtle and overt references to over 60 writers, allusion hunting and explication has become a favorite pastime of *Lolita*'s critics<sup>6</sup> (Olsen 94). Yet there is no singular reason for Nabokov's wide use of references in the text. As Olsen explains, besides keeping readers busy, alert, and intellectually stimulated, Nabokov's intent with allusion was "to create complex juxtapositions between the original subject and the allusion to it, ironic dismantlings,

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<sup>6</sup> My discussion of Nabokov's use of allusion does not pretend to exhaust the critical possibilities or offer an extensive examination of allusions incorporated into the text. Instead, my intention is to touch on the major patterns of allusion and highlight the most oft-cited critical arguments dealing exclusively with Nabokov's allusive strategies. For thorough discussions and annotations to allusions in *Lolita*, see Appel's *Annotated Lolita* and Proffer's *Keys to Lolita*.

serious tributes, multiple perspectives, playful parodies, and interesting expansions with which to view *Lolita*'s characters, plot, setting, and themes" (95). Although many allusions within the text simply reflect and expand upon Humbert's learning, others bring Humbert's credibility as a narrator directly into question by revealing his desperate attempts to construct a tenable defense for his relationship with Lolita.

Given Humbert's repeated tactic of audience address, Humbert defines his work as a defense for his upcoming murder trial. In the opening chapter of the novel, Humbert addresses his readers as "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," and continues to use such terminology, calling his readers "winged gentlemen of the jury" and "Frigid gentlewomen of the jury" (4, 125, 132). As Appel explains, Humbert "addresses the reader directly no less than twenty-nine times," either as a jury member or as a reader (lvii). Furthermore, Humbert ends his manuscript by explaining, "When I started, fifty-six days ago, to write *Lolita*, first in the psychopathic ward for observation, and then in this well-heated, albeit tombal seclusion, I thought I would use these notes in toto at my trial, to save not my head, of course, but my soul" (308). Thus, as Humbert situates his text as a legal defense and caters to a specific audience for a specific purpose, that of defending his "inner essential innocence," Humbert comes to readers with a personal, high-stakes agenda (300). Humbert therefore appears as an artist in search of a literary form strong enough to sustain his defense, and as a man trying on defensive strategies and voices through aesthetic means in an attempt to justify his moral crimes.

A repeated method of defense utilized by Humbert is his appropriation of "expert" testimony through allusion. As Humbert represents himself as "an artist and a madman"

he takes on the voices of other artists in order to defend his own innocence (17). Among the most oft-cited references in the novel are those to Edgar Allan Poe, who is both explicitly named and alluded to more than 20 times throughout the course of the novel. Fragments of Poe's poem "Annibel Lee" appear frequently in *Lolita*, beginning with the opening lines of the novel: "light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul" (4) which echo the final stanza of Poe's poem: "my darling, my darling, my life, and my bride" (39). Furthermore, Humbert repeatedly refers to Lolita as "my darling," calls the jurors "winged gentlemen of the jury" (125), playing on Poe's "winged seraphs of Heaven" (11), and recalls loving a young girl "in a principedom by the sea" (9). The most obvious references to Poe's poem are the name of Humbert's childhood love, and the relationship between Poe's life and the content of his poem to the content of Nabokov's novel. As Carl Proffer notes in *Keys to Lolita*, "One of the reasons why it is entirely apposite for Humbert to employ citations from 'Annibel Lee' relates to the biography of the poem's author: Poe married his cousin Virginia Clem when she was only thirteen years old" (37). Thus, for Humbert, Poe's relationship with Virginia, coupled with the relationships of Dante and Beatrice and Petrarch and Laura, becomes an example of socially accepted sexual deviance comparable to Humbert's own obsession with young girls. Humbert repeatedly draws parallels between his own life and the lives of these artists, writing "Oh Lolita, you are my girl, as Vee was Poe's and Bea Dante's" (107). Through these allusions, Humbert attempts to represent his relationship with Lolita as a long-standing and formerly appropriate type of relationship for an older man and artist to have with a young woman. Yet, as he enters the Enchanted Hunters with Lolita and signs the hotel

registry, “in the slow clear hand of crime [...] Dr. Edgar H. Humbert and daughter,” he acknowledges his criminal intentions, thereby directly contradicting and undermining his aesthetic defense by revealing his clear understanding of right and wrong and the difference between his and Lolita’s relationship and that of Poe and Virginia (118).

A further problem of Humbert’s repeated use of allusion is that it calls his narrative credibility into question. Appropriating Poe’s biography and his marriage to 13-year-old Virginia Clemm as a method of defending his passion for Lolita, Humbert posits that in other eras, a relationship between a grown man and a young girl was not frowned upon. Humbert integrates lines from Poe’s “Annibel Lee” into the text and names his own first love “Annibel Leigh” in order to emphasize the moment of childhood trauma, the death of a young girl, that later resurfaces and results in his life as pedophilia. As Appel points out, Humbert “immediately undercuts the persuasiveness of his own specific ‘trauma’ by projecting it in fragments of another man’s verse; literary allusions, after all, point away from the unique, inviolable, formative ‘inner reality of a neurotic or psychotic consciousness’” (333-34). Annabel Lee is a figure who does not exist beyond the realm of the literary. Therefore, Humbert’s use of the name and the poem to represent a real, emotional, and traumatic event in his own life, distances readers from the actual experience that he is attempting to portray, and forces readers to question his intentions, sincerity, and reliability.

Just as Humbert emulates the voices of other artists in order to formulate a tenable, albeit aesthetic defense for his moral crimes, he also plays with the aesthetics of literary convention through his integration of multiple forms and genres within the text.

Because it includes such widely varied forms, *Lolita* breaks the silent pact between reader and writer as conventions, normally providing a sense of stability and security for the reader, appear and disintegrate in Nabokov's hands. As Olsen explains "*Lolita* is a veritable Mulligan stew of allusive genres. It shape-shifts as it proceeds, calling forth a wealth of fictional forms, sometimes for the brief space of a sentence or three, sometimes for chapters on end" (100). Yet as none of these literary forms is sustained throughout the entire novel, and as none is able to excuse his victimization of a child, all disintegrate into parody, thereby subverting Humbert's narrative and reiterating his criminal culpability.

The first major genre we encounter, or anticipate encountering, in the novel is the confession.<sup>7</sup> This association immediately is drawn in the opening line of the novel as John Ray reveals the manuscript's full and original title: "*Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male*," thereby conjuring a connection to other works within this tradition including Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, Rousseau's eighteenth century *Confessions*, and Thomas DeQuincey's Romantic "Confessions of an English Opium Eater." The confessional genre is a mode that addresses and intellectualizes the personal and private life of the author. Tied directly to the confessional genre are those of autobiography and memoir which differ in that the autobiography, like the confession, places some stress on introspection whereas the memoir incorporates the public persona of the author and handles public events and prominent individuals other than the author. While *Lolita* contains elements of each genre, the novel aligns more closely with the autobiography and confession than with the memoir.

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<sup>7</sup> For critical discussions of *Lolita* as a confession, autobiography, or memoir, see Bergenholtz's "Nabokov's *Lolita*;" and Olsen's *Lolita: A Janus Text*.



Undoubtedly, Humbert's story is both highly personal and intellectualized as it not only examines Humbert's private life, his candid crimes against a child, and breaks the silence of social taboo, but it does so while maintaining an interest in the ideological realm through discussions of art and culture. Humbert's voice, although often arrogant, exaggerated, and agenda-ridden, exhibits moments of introspection as it folds in upon itself, interrupting memory, questioning motive and action, and revealing the movement and irrationality of a troubled inner psyche.

Yet, though the confessional genre initially appears to be the prominent genre of Humbert's story, Nabokov repeatedly complicates and contradicts the conventions of the genre because of the unreliable narrative voice through which we receive the confession. In a confession, readers should not be forced to sift through the real and the fabricated. Although he attempts to defend the accuracy of his diary by informing readers that he has a "photographic memory," he contradicts himself, admitting that what he is presenting to readers is not a faithful representation, that he has forgotten "unimportant" details, and that he has "amended" many sections of the diary (40,42). Even a discerning eye may not catch Humbert's manipulation and falsification of facts throughout the novel in an attempt to justify his crimes. For instance, his use of Dante and Beatrice, Petrarch and "Laureen" as relationships comparable to his own with Lolita is misleading. The age of Petrarch's Laura cannot be identified as historical documents about her do not exist; and Dante was nine when he met the eight-year-old Beatrice. Furthermore, their relationship was never romantic or sexual. Given the vast liberties that Humbert takes with the portrayal of events and the recreation of documents, cemented by his own condemnation

of himself as a liar, Nabokov not only calls into question the validity of Humbert's confession, but, as Olsen posits, "problematizes the very notion of autobiography, the capacity to honestly and accurately record one's life in words. At the same time he reminds us of the fictional dimension to all history—including the local history of the self" (101). Thus, through the use, or misuse, of the genre, Nabokov questions whether it is ever possible for anyone to record the events, memories, and dialogue of one's life in a manner that is honest and without a specific intent that would cause falsification, justification, omission, and exaggeration. Through the construction of the text, Nabokov also asks if it is ever possible to discover and express a singular, well-defined identity given the limitations of language.

The conventions of the confessional genre are also called into question through Humbert's loose use of the term "confession" throughout the novel. As he recounts Charlotte's love letter, he mocks her choice of words, placing quotations around her use of the word "confession." After marrying Charlotte, Humbert claims,

Never in my life had I confessed so much or received so many confessions. The sincerity and artlessness with which she discussed what she called her 'love-life,' from first necking to connubial catch-as-catch-can, were, ethically, in striking contrast with my glib compositions, but technically the two sets were congeneric since both were affected by the same stuff (soap operas, psychoanalysis and cheap novelettes) upon which I drew for my characters and she for her mode of expression. (80)

Here, Humbert uses the word confession to depict lies plucked from popular culture that are presented to Charlotte as undeniable truth. Humbert's actions, therefore, should make readers question the validity and sincerity of "*the Confession of a White Widowed Male*." Armed with the knowledge of his false confessions to Charlotte, why should we believe the confession Humbert puts forth in print?

A further dimension of Humbert's narrative is its affinity with the spiritual autobiography or religious confession. Because Humbert's initial purpose in constructing a confession is to present it at trial for his own defense, the act of having to relive his actions through language and the mind, and sharing those actions with readers or jurors for the purpose of judgment and forgiveness creates the connection of Humbert's written confession to that of a religious confession or cathartic act, reiterated through his supposed movement from solipsism to recognition, immorality to morality. In the tradition of such works as Saint Augustine's *Confessions* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the most significant episode in the spiritual autobiography or religious confession, as Rita Bergenholtz notes, "is the religious awakening that, presumably, results in a 'conversion' or 'change of heart'" (232). For years, critics have debated the question of Humbert's supposed moral apotheosis. As most choose to believe Humbert's change of heart, they essentially dismiss moral issues, claiming that because Humbert is repentant for his crimes, the moral problems of the novel are reconciled. Yet, as previously noted, we should all question Humbert's repentant voice for reasons beyond the fact that throughout the novel he is an unreliable narrator.

When critics discuss Humbert's moral change, they highlight one of two moments in the novel. The first appears when Humbert visits Lolita in Coalmont, finds her "pale and polluted, and big with another's child," but continues to announce, "I insist the world know how much I loved my Lolita, *this* Lolita" (278). The other appears in the novel when, after murdering Quilty, Humbert remembers a time soon following Lolita's disappearance that he heard children playing and announces "and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord" (308). As I stated in the previous chapter, one reason why we should question the sincerity of Humbert's moral transformation is that he ends the novel with the words "my Lolita," thereby extending his failure to view Lolita as an individual and continuing to solipsize the child. A further reason why Humbert's moral apotheosis starkly contrasts that of a religious confession or spiritual autobiography is that these two incidents to which critics gravitate occur prior to Quilty's murder. Thus, according to the logic of many critics, Humbert commits murder after he transforms himself into a morally reputable man. Clearly, there is a problem here. The act of murder directly contradicts the idea that Humbert is a changed man and that he has undergone a conversion from immorality to morality.

Humbert also attempts to justify his murder of Quilty by framing the events in two different storytelling modes: the detective novel and the doppelgänger.<sup>8</sup> Yet, both

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<sup>8</sup> For critical commentary on *Lolita*'s participation in the detective genre, see Boyd's *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*; Burch's "Nabokov and the Detective;" LaFontaine's "Variations on the Detective Story;" Packman's *Vladimir Nabokov: The Structure of Literary Desire*: 23-45; and Williams's "Maps, Chronologies, and Identities in Three Novels of Vladimir Nabokov."

For commentary on *Lolita*'s participation in the doppelgänger, see Dale's "The Double in Three Twentieth-Century Novels;" Olsen's *Lolita: A Janus Text*: 75-78.

sets of conventions turn against Humbert and, rather than attesting to his innocence, condemn his failing morality. In the tradition of such works as Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," or Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes*, the conventional detective story unravels the mysteries surrounding a crime as a detective follows logical clues to track and unveil the identity of the criminal. In this sense, both Humbert and the reader take on the role of the detective throughout the course of the novel. Gathering information from such a limited and unreliable first-person source as Humbert, readers participate with Humbert in his cryptogrammic paper chase as he attempts to assemble the clues left behind in motel registries by Quilty. Yet, unlike the typically astute sleuth of detective stories, Humbert fails to put the pieces together, identifying Quilty as the kidnapper only after Lolita utters his name three years later.

While Humbert plays the role of the detective in Quilty's game of words, readers are forced to take on the role of the detective in unraveling Nabokov's layered word games to discover both the identities of Humbert's victim and Lolita's lover. Although Nabokov plants many clues highlighting Quilty's identity, most readers remain as clueless as Humbert in an initial reading of the novel. Among the clues provided by Nabokov is Humbert's recording of an entire page of *Who's Who in the Limelight* that includes the entry:

Quilty, Clare, American dramatist. Born in Ocean City, N.J., 1911.

Educated at Columbia University. Started on a commercial career but turned to playwriting. Author of *The Little Nymph*, *The Lady Who Loved Lightning* (in collaboration with Vivian Darkbloom), *Dark Age*, *The*

*Strange Mushroom, Fatherly Love*, and others. His many plays for children are notable. *Little Nymph* (1940) traveled 14,000 miles and played 280 performances on the road during the winter before ending in New York. Hobbies: fast cars, photography, pets. (31)

Nabokov fills this entry with telling information that readers are expected to retain in order to put a name on Humbert's double. Here, the titles *The Little Nymph, Fatherly Love*, and *Dark Age* reference pedophilia. *The Lady Who Loved Lightning* refers to Humbert's mother who "died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning)" years earlier (10). The name Vivian Darkbloom is an anagram of Vladimir Nabokov. And the references to Quilty's hobbies point to the fast red convertible sports car first spotted in the parking lot of the Enchanted Hunters that proceeds to trail Humbert and Lolita through much of the second half of the novel. Furthermore, the entry that follows Quilty's is that of a female playwright sharing Lolita's first name, Dolores, and author of such plays as *Never Talk to Strangers* and *The Murdered Playwright*.

Adding another dimension to his textual game, as Olsen explains, Nabokov integrates "a staple of the detective story, the red herring or false clue," thereby leading readers down false paths in the struggle to uncover the identity of Humbert's victim (103). For instance, both Appel and Proffer have pointed out that the numerous allusions to Merimee's novella *Carmen*, especially those that equate Lolita with the character Carmen "serve as a trap for the sophisticated reader who is led into believing that H.H., like Jose, will murder his treacherous Carmen" (Appel 358). Besides the many fantasies Humbert envisions and considers about murdering Charlotte in order to gain access to

Lolita, Humbert also allows readers to continue following their false hunches that Humbert's victim is either Lolita or her husband almost until the end of the novel. Humbert teases readers in the scenes leading up to his final meeting with Lolita: toting a gun in his pocket, rehearsing "Mr. Richard F. Schiller's violent death," stopping by "10 Killer Street" in his search for the Schillers, and finally explaining how, pulling up to the house, "My pulse was 40 one minute and 100 the next [...] My gun had migrated to my right trouser pocket" (267, 268, 269). However, Humbert identifies and even mocks the reader's building anticipation as he teases, "Then I pulled out my automatic—I mean, this is the kind of fool thing a reader might suppose I did. It never even occurred to me to do it" (280).

While Nabokov participates heavily in the detective genre by working criminal acts including murder into the plotline, following alongside a detective-figure as he attempts to piece together the disappearance of his daughter/lover, teasing the reader with false clues, and adding further complexity to the genre by placing the reader in the position of a textual detective, Nabokov diverges from the conventions of the genre by naming the murderer on the opening page of the novel. What this means in terms of our reading of the novel is that we know, from the outset, that Humbert is the bad guy. Rather than being preoccupied with witnessing the immoral act in the beginning and then trying to track down the killer, our attention shifts from the identity of the man to the moral core of the man and the numerous licentious acts that lead up to his final immoral act of murder. Thus, this inversion of the detective genre turns on Humbert as the emphasis is placed on his repeated moral failures as an individual.

Nabokov also integrates the conventions of the doppelgänger, or double tale into the novel in order to reveal Humbert's attempts to justify the murder of Quilty, thereby turning a literal murder into a metaphorical murder. In the tradition of Poe's "William Wilson," and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Humbert is haunted by the image of a mysterious double throughout the novel. Quilty is a shadow through much of the text, an elusive representation of Humbert's sinister self who Humbert often refers to as his "shadow," "brother," or "double" (215, 247, 236). In the standard doppelgänger tale, the shadow self is the evil, perverse, or enemy self that must be exorcised through a literal or metaphoric death. Yet, Nabokov fails to fulfill the conventions of the genre as Humbert and Quilty parallel one another more often than they stand in opposition to one another. Besides Humbert's references to Quilty as his brother or "another Humbert," they are both figured (or want to be figured) as "artists" in some sense of the word (217). Humbert calls himself an artist throughout the novel and Quilty is an established playwright. Both are aesthetes with a propensity for word games and the creation of complex allusions; they are portrayed as possessing similar features, similar tastes and wardrobes, as well as the same sexual perversion for nymphets. Furthermore, in the murder scene where Humbert finally discovers, confronts, and attempts to purge himself essentially of himself, the entanglement of the two characters during their struggle becomes an entanglement in print as their identities are merged into a single self: "We fell into wrestling again. We rolled all over the floor, in each other's arms, like two huge helpless children. He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us" (298-



299). Thus, through his complex treatment of the two characters and their interaction with one another, Nabokov resists the simple binaries of good and evil, right and wrong that appear so frequently in the doppelgänger. Similar to the inversion of detective novel conventions, traditional doppelgänger conventions fail in *Lolita* because Quilty is not the immoral or demonic double of Humbert. Instead, they stand side-by-side in terms of criminal culpability. The use of the doppelgänger convention, therefore, condemns Humbert's actions rather than succeeding in justifying Quilty's murder.

Turning away from Humbert's failed aesthetic attempts to justify his crimes against Quilty, Humbert also employs aesthetic means to condone his relationship with Lolita, calling forth the conventions of the love story, romance, and fairy tale. Yet, as with the integration of the confession, detective novel, and doppelgänger, Humbert merely succeeds in undermining his own narration by pointing up the gaping disparity between his representation and the actual events, thereby reiterating the moral issues that lie at the heart of the novel.

Although few critics attempt to tackle *Lolita*'s affinity with the traditional love story in depth, many claim, in passing, that the novel is a great love story. Lionel Trilling, for instance, explains, "*Lolita* is about love [...] not about sex, but about love. Almost every page sets forth some explicit erotic emotion or some overt erotic action and still it is not about sex. It is about love. This makes it unique in my experience of contemporary novels" (19). Even my 1997 Second International Vintage Edition of the novel lures readers in with a quote from *Vanity Fair* on the cover claiming that *Lolita* is "The only convincing love story of our century." Although Humbert may love Lolita, unlike the

traditional love story, it is an unrequited love. Humbert's story, therefore, resembles that of a violent obsession more closely than a love story as readers are granted passing and often obscured glimpses of Lolita's "sobs in the night—every night" and her attempts to forcibly remove Humbert from her body and her life by clawing at his face and chest (176). Furthermore, Lolita's direct rejection of Humbert at the end of the novel as she admits that she "would sooner go back to Cue," the man who "was all drink and drugs" and who wanted to film her participating in "weird, filthy, fancy things," reveals the degree to which Humbert permanently damaged her life (279, 276). Therefore, by calling *Lolita* a love story, critics fail to acknowledge important aspects of the novel including the emotional and sexual abuse inflicted on a child.

In addition to Trilling's early claim of *Lolita*'s connection to the conventions of the love story, in his 1958 review of *Lolita*, "The Last Lover," Trilling was among the first critics to explore Nabokov's integration of romance and medieval romance conventions.<sup>9</sup> Many contemporary critics have used Trilling's argument as a stepping-stone for developing their own theses concerning Nabokov's ties to the genre. Summing up the parallels between *Lolita*'s plot and the conventions of romance, Thomas Frosch explains: "The plot itself is composed of a series of typical romance structures, each one a version of the quest or hunt and each one an embodiment of a specific type of suspense or anxiety" (39). In Humbert's depiction, Lolita takes on the role of the elusive and ultimately unattainable object of Humbert's desire. In his quest to possess Lolita, "we

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<sup>9</sup> For discussions of *Lolita* as a romance or love story, see Trilling's "The Last Lover;" Walter's "Romantic Parody and the Ironic Muse in *Lolita*;" Josipovici's "*Lolita*: Parody and the Pursuit of Beauty;" Hollander's "The Perilous Magic of Nymphets;" Masinton's "What *Lolita* is Really About;" and Frosch's "Parody and Authenticity in *Lolita*."

have a story of jealousy and possessiveness, and Humbert is beset by fears of rivals and by Lolita's own resistance" (Frosch 39). Furthermore, after Lolita abandons Humbert for Quilty, a second hunt begins, one in which Quilty becomes the object of Humbert's obsession and desire for revenge.

A further convention of romance, as expressed by Northrop Frye in his work *Anatomy of Criticism*, is that the romance is situated in a position between myth and mimesis. Thus, the characters in romance possess powers greater than men but lesser than gods. Because Humbert categorizes Lolita as a "nymphet," he places her in a position that is otherworldly and demonic. Even the word nymphet is suggestive of a status that falls just short of the gods. Thus, in Humbert's portrayal, Lolita exerts a "fantastic power over nympholepts such as Humbert (17). At the same time, Humbert's depiction of himself as a nympholept fulfills the same purpose as assigning to Lolita otherworldly characteristics. Because he is a nympholept, "an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy," Humbert, unlike normal men, is able "to discern at once, by ineffable signs—the slightly feline outline of a cheekbone, the slenderness of a downy limb, and other indices which despair and shame and tears of tenderness forbid me to tabulate—the deadly little demon among the wholesome children" (17).

A final way in which *Lolita* employs the romance genre as a literary mode is through the elevation of the ordinary to the extraordinary. Clearly, men, women, and children are bestowed powers and strengths beyond the ordinary or everyday. Yet, a mythic status is also granted to inanimate objects, places, actions, and events. By infusing

the text with elements of myth, mystery, and suspense, even a standard American roadside motel takes on a supernatural quality:

The Park was as black as the sins it concealed—but soon after falling under the smooth spell of a nicely graded curve, the travelers became aware of a diamond glow through the mist, then a gleam of lakewater appeared—and there it was, marvelously and inexorably, under spectral trees, at the top of a graveled drive—the pale palace of The Enchanted Hunters. (117)

Saturating the entire text with such loaded and elevated language, Nabokov reveals Humbert's attempt to obscure reality by transforming the story of a depraved adult's obsession with and crimes against a conventional American adolescent girl into one which fuses the mundane with the exotic, heroic, and passionate.

Complementing the conventions of romance, Nabokov introduces fairy tale and mythical elements into the text.<sup>10</sup> Most easily identifiable are the numerous direct allusions to notable fairy tales including *The Little Mermaid*, *Bluebeard*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, and *Beauty and the Beast*. Yet Nabokov integrates more subtle references to myth, fantasy, and fairy tales through the incorporation and repetition of such words as “nymphet,” referencing the immortal Greek and Roman nymphs, and “Elphinstone” and “Pisky,” playing on the words “elf” and “pixie.” Furthermore, Humbert repeatedly refers to Lolita as an enchantress and a demon,

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<sup>10</sup> For discussions of Nabokov's use of fairy tale and myth conventions, see Steven Swann Jones's “Folk Characterization in *Lolita*,” and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney's “‘Ballet Attitudes’: Nabokov's *Lolita* and Petipa's *The Sleeping Beauty*.”

and therefore justifies his attraction to her through references to spells, magic, and the supernatural.

As Appel explains, Nabokov also introduces aspects of fantasy and fairy tales into the plot of the novel, writing “The simplicity of *Lolita*’s ‘story,’ [...] and the themes of deception, enchantment, and metamorphosis are akin to the fairy tale; while the recurrence of places and motifs and the presence of three principal characters recall the formalistic design and symmetry of those archetypal tales” (346). In his article “Folk Characterization in *Lolita*,” Steven Swann Jones presents a compelling and thorough expansion of Appel’s argument, discussing in detail the parallels between Nabokov’s novel and European fairy tales. Prominent in his discussion is Nabokov’s use of stock characters including “the jealous mother, the fairy princess, the prince charming, the ogre father, and the hunter” (68).

Charlotte Haze takes on the role of the “jealous mother (or stepmother) who is so frequently the villain in folktales such as ‘Cinderella,’ ‘Cap o’Rushes,’ ‘One Eyes, Two Eyes, Three Eyes,’ and ‘Snow White’ (Jones 69). Emphasizing Charlotte’s jealousy of her daughter, Humbert writes in his journal, “I was aware that mother Haze hated my darling for her being sweet on me” (54). Charlotte is repeatedly referred to as the “obstacle” of Humbert’s intentions, an obstacle that he fantasizes about violently and permanently removing from his life (71). Casting Charlotte in the role of the villain, Humbert obscures any real, loving, mother-daughter interaction that Charlotte may have with Lolita. Readers can assume that Charlotte wishes to protect both herself and her daughter from Humbert after finding his diary, discovering his true intentions, and

confronting him as she exclaims, “You’re a monster. You’re a detestable, abominable, criminal fraud. If you come near—I’ll scream out the window” (96). Yet, because of Humbert’s biased portrayal, we catch only sidelong glimpses of a woman with moral principles. Lolita is cast by Humbert as the fairy princess, an enchantress, a nymph, and an elf. She is the fairy princess, abandoned in the wilderness (Camp Q) by her jealous and wicked mother. Depicted throughout the novel as a “nymphet” living in an “enchanted island of time,” Lolita possesses a power that Humbert categorizes as “demonic” to bewitch and enchant. Finally, Lolita is also the reincarnation of Annabel, the “initial fateful elf” (18). Unlike Charlotte and Lolita, Humbert plays contradictory roles throughout the course of the novel. In his incestuous desire to marry his daughter, and his fantasies about conceiving a litter of Lolitas so that he will always have a young girl at his disposal, Humbert takes on the form of the ogre father. As Humbert attempts to send Lolita into a deep sleep by drugging her at the Enchanted Hunters, he displaces Charlotte by playing the role of the wicked stepmother. In his pursuit of both Lolita and Quilty, he transforms into the enchanted hunter. Finally, when he meets Lolita for the last time, he appeals to her:

Lolita [...] this may be neither here nor there but I have to say it. Life is very short. From here to that old car you know so well there is a stretch of twenty, twenty-five paces. It is a very short walk. Make those twenty-five steps. Now. Right now. Come just as you are. And we shall live happily ever after. (278)

Here, Humbert uses the conventional fairy tale ending in his attempt to represent his role as Prince Charming, coming to the rescue of a princess.

Yet, despite Humbert's efforts to mythologize and romanticize his love affair with Lolita, a thin artistic façade cannot disguise that which lies beneath it. When we lift the veil off of Humbert's elegant and elaborate depiction of individuals and events, what we discover is a far cry from a romance or fairy tale. Instead, it is the story of a conventional American girl's victimization and tragedy. Beneath Humbert's fantasies of Lolita as a princess and enchantress lies a "conventional little girl" who speaks in such crude adolescent phrases as "'revolting,' 'super,' 'luscious,' 'goon,' 'drip' (148, 65). As Humbert's relationship with Lolita ages, he occasionally sees through his own romantic construction to the normal child standing before him:

Her complexion was now that of any vulgar untidy highschool girl who applies shared cosmetics with grubby fingers to an unwashed face and does not mind what soiled texture, what pustulate epidermis comes in contact with her skin. Its smooth tender bloom had been so lovely in former days, so bright with tears, when I used to roll, in play, her tousled head on my knee. A coarse flush had now replaced that innocent fluorescence. (204)

The fact that Humbert represents himself in such contradictory terms as the ogre and Prince Charming immediately undercuts the world of fantasy that he is attempting to weave with words. Humbert often describes himself as physically resembling a Prince Charming figure: "I was, and still am [...] an exceptionally handsome male; slow-

moving, tall, with soft dark hair and a gloomy but all the more seductive cast of demeanor” (25). Upon meeting Lolita, Humbert reemphasizes his physical features, claiming “I have all the characteristics which, according to writers on the sex interests of children, start the responses stirring in a little girl: clean-cut jaw, muscular hand, deep sonorous voice, broad shoulder” (43). Yet, in contrast to Humbert’s depiction of himself as handsome and charming, he also refers to himself as “a brute,” and “a pentapod monster,” (193, 284). In his relationship with Lolita, Humbert clearly fails as a Prince Charming. Rather than rescuing Lolita and living “happily ever after” once her rival, her jealous mother, is killed, Humbert instead begins “terrorizing” the child through isolation and abuse (151).

Moreover, the traditional fairy tale ending is undercut by tragedy. If *Lolita* were truly a fairy tale, Dick Schiller, rather than Humbert, would play the role of Prince Charming as he has rescued Lolita from Humbert (and Quilty) and has helped her make a normal life for herself, complete with the prospect of motherhood. Yet, even Lolita’s would-be Prince Charming cannot help her live “happily ever after.” Though Dick Schiller is initially described handsomely, with “Arctic eyes, black hair, ruddy cheeks, unshaven chin,” upon closer inspection Humbert notes the “blackheads on the wings of his perspiring nose,” his “large and hairy” Adam’s apple, his “black and broken” fingernails, and his “lumbering” walk (274, 273). Furthermore, as we discover in John Ray’s foreword, “Mrs. ‘Richard F. Schiller’ died in childbed, giving birth to a stillborn girl, on Christmas Day 1952 in Gray Star, a settlement in the remotest Northwest” (4). As Jones notes, the ending of Lolita’s life “is an ironic reversal of the Christian myth of the



Nativity. The bright and guiding star of Bethlehem has become the cold, gray half-light of the modern world, and the symbolic day of rebirth and regeneration has instead produced two deaths” (73). Yet, Lolita’s death, coupled with the death of her daughter provides fitting closure to the real story beneath Humbert’s romanticized version, reiterating the tragic, mortal side of her life and undercutting Humbert’s attempts to justify his abuse. Lolita’s death, such a blatant inversion of the fairy tale genre, serves many purposes in the novel. Because readers learn of her death not just in the novel, but in the foreword, before the novel even begins, Lolita’s mortality undermines Humbert’s final words as he expresses his intent to immortalize her enchanting youth through art. The death of Lolita’s daughter represents the end of nymphet enchantment for Humbert, bringing Humbert’s fantasies of a “Lolita the Second” to a close (174). Finally, Lolita’s death in childbirth reiterates the moral issue of abuse that lies at the center of the novel. Not only did Humbert, as he readily admits, “break [her] life” and steal her childhood, he also broke her body through years of sexual abuse (279).

## Conclusion

Picking up a copy of Nabokov's American masterpiece, readers face many challenges. We must abandon our pre-conceived notions of the meaning of "Lolita" handed down to us by pop culture and PAX TV reruns of *The Long Island Lolita* starring Alyssa Milano as the seductive, lethal, and vengeful 17-year-old Amy Fisher. We must see through our contemporary cultural constructions to the Lolita, both the novel and the character that Nabokov intended for us to see. We must negotiate through layer upon layer of verbal play, allusion, genre shifting, and the evocation of literary history through the complex use and parody of convention. Furthermore, as patterns and puzzles of textual complexity emerge through a veritable chorus of voices and the repeated appearance and subversion of numerous genres and conventions, responsible readers must begin to ask why, thereby opening the door to the exploration of the seemingly irreconcilable puzzle in which Nabokov deliberately chose to frame his text.

Nabokov opens Humbert's narration with the famous lines "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta" (9). Readers are immediately thrust into a novel that hypnotizes and seduces through language. Even John Ray, the unswerving moralist praises Humbert's ability to manipulate words, writing "But how magically his singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author" (5). Humbert is a narrator with an aesthetic obsession: the desire to lock an individual life within the artifice of language. Yet, the same opening lines that introduce Humbert's linguistic and

aesthetic obsession also introduce a physical, sexual, and emotional obsession with a young, flesh and blood girl who refuses to be held within the confines of a text. Thus, while Nabokov provides readers with a seemingly unlimited supply of aesthetic riddles, like Humbert's dueling obsessions, there exists a further dimension to the novel that needs to be acknowledged. What this means is that through an analysis of the text that goes beyond a simple recognition of the various aesthetic puzzles, an analysis that asks why, and an analysis that looks toward addressing the achieved and combined effect of Nabokov's aesthetic choices, we must be prepared to direct our attention to both aspects of Humbert's obsession and locate the intersection of aesthetics and morality.

Throughout the past 50 years, critics have gone to great lengths to disassemble the intricacies of morality, aesthetic convention, and parody in *Lolita*, often focusing their attention on one rather than all of these elements. Yet, the true intricacy of Nabokov's novel lies in the way in which he interweaves all three elements and achieves what Humbert strives to accomplish through his narration. Weaving the beauty of aesthetic richness with the brutality of Humbert's behavior, Nabokov locates the borderline of "The beastly and beautiful" (135). Nabokov's integration of aesthetic games fulfills a particular moral purpose in the novel. Because Nabokov conjures a wealth of artistic voices and conventions, yet sustains none throughout the entirety of the novel, all become parodies of voices and conventions. Furthermore, as Nabokov hands the narrative over to Humbert, and presents the novel through his perspective, parody undermines Humbert's narration through its mocking quality and thereby reiterates the moral issues lying at the center of the novel. Humbert is searching for a form in which he can justify his actions.

Trying on the hats of allusion and convention, Humbert attempts to obscure the truth by burying the literal in the metaphorical and by shrouding Lolita's tears, unhappiness, and victimization with an artistic façade. Yet, each time Humbert discards one form or voice and replaces it with another, Nabokov exposes the contrived artificiality of Humbert's narration and reminds readers that no aesthetic tricks can possibly erase the reality of abuse inflicted upon Lolita.

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