

Careless Objectification: A Cautionary Tale

Honourable Mention, Humanities

Author: Alison Rudy

Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel *Lolita* is troubling because it deals with the incendiary social problem of pedophilia in a cryptic and manipulative manner which has led many readers to condone, rather than condemn, the damaging sexual disorder. The novel is made up of the persuasive first-person narration of a middle-aged man named Humbert Humbert, who kidnaps and sexually abuses his twelve-year-old step-daughter Dolores Haze. In his narrative, Humbert portrays Dolores in a way which selectively focuses on the aspects of her character which are desirable to him: namely her physical attributes. In this way he reduces the little girl to a single-dimensional object for his gratification whom he refers to as "Lolita."

It is disturbing that many reviewers of the novel have displayed aspects of Humbert's misogynistic framing of Dolores and have failed to condemn his crimes. In light of the prevalence of the sexual abuse of children, and therefore the implications such misreadings may have, I reject a simplistic reading of the novel as amoral art and instead urge an informed, critical, and empathetic approach which may allow more facets of Dolores' character to come to light.

It is necessary to understand and take into account the context in which this novel exists and is read. The appetites of the fictional protagonist parallel those of real-life individuals, and it is the expression of those appetites which makes the sexual abuse of children (CSA) a devastating social problem. As Christine Clegg points out, "Nabokov's literary sexual encounters between adult men and girl children cannot be disconnected from the expression and criminal enactment of such desires in society" (Clegg 103-4).

There is considerable variation in estimates of the prevalence of CSA; however, credible sources place rates of victimization at roughly 20% of women and between 5 and 10% of men ("The World Health Organization Fact Sheet on Child Maltreatment"). Moreover, the impacts of these crimes remain with the victims and the experience of CSA has been implicated as a risk factor for a variety of serious problems in adulthood, such as high-risk sexual behaviours, substance abuse problems, mental health issues, psychiatric disorders, and suicide (Dube *et al.* 430-1).

The text of Nabokov's novel presents Humbert's self-serving view, but even so Dolores makes her voice heard: for example, "[y]ou revolting creature. I was a daisy-fresh girl, and look what you've done to me. I

ought to call the police and tell them you raped me. Oh, you dirty, dirty old man" (Nabokov 1955, 141). While it has been argued that Nabokov intends to undermine Humbert's beliefs and cause the reader to see through the gaps to empathize with Dolores, "the way Nabokov deconstructs Humbert's myths about Lolita's perversity eluded... reviewers, who ultimately adopted, rather than condemned, Humbert's views of Lolita" (Goldman 88). Given the gravity and scope of CSA it is deeply troubling that, by presenting "arguments similar to those used by convicted rapists in order to view themselves as non-rapists, reviewers depicted Dolores Haze as both morally unworthy and at least partly responsible for her own victimization" (Todd Bayma and Gary Fine, in Goldman 87-8). So what permits such a stark misreading of little Dolores' plight?

Clearly Nabokov did not admire the character Humbert, whom he described as "a vain and cruel wretch who manages to appear 'touching'" (Richard Rorty in Clegg 97). However, the failure to interrogate Humbert's view of Dolores is clearly visible even before one opens the novel or reads a review: the first quote gracing the back cover of the novel, a review by *Vanity Fair* magazine, pronounces *Lolita* to be the "only convincing love story of our century." Also significant is the fact that "Lolita is often figured in the popular imagination as a temptress" (Rabinowitz 2), which is how Humbert frames her, even though she is a child and he a full grown adult.

Nabokov makes no explicit mention of the character or morality of his protagonist in the afterword of his novel. Instead he deals with what he labels the "theme" of the novel, although he fails to define what specifically he means by this; is he referring to rape, to incest, or to sexual relationships which span a large age differential? In discussion of this subject Nabokov makes clear his well-known belief that uninhibited art is an end unto itself, and that "no writer in a free country should be expected to bother about the exact demarcation between the sensuous and the sensual; this is preposterous" (Nabokov 1955,314).

This may strike the feminist critic as a careless attitude, bordering on negligence, given the severity of the actual problem the author addresses. In the Afterword, Nabokov admits he is aware that many elements of the text would be passed over or missed entirely by his readers (Nabokov 1955,316), which makes this carelessness all the more blameworthy.

As Christine Clegg asserts, "the narrative of *Lolita* continues to be problematic because it seems to offer no ethical direction for readers" (Clegg 101). Furthermore, the novel deliberately tricks the reader through obfuscatory devices, such as the contradictions about whether the novel has a moral message which are made in the Foreword and Afterword to the book. Nabokov, under the pseudonym John Ray, writes that the book has an "ethical impact," a "general lesson," and a warning (Nabokov 1955, 7); thereafter, writing under his own name in the Afterword, he states that "despite John Ray's assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow" (Nabokov 1955, 316).

Nabokov explains in the Afterword that he is "neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction" (Nabokov 1955,315), but instead he aims to create art which evokes "curiosity, tenderness, kindness [and] ecstasy" (Nabokov 1955,315). Nabokov repeats that it is not his intention to convey a moral message through his work in his essay entitled "Good Readers and Good Writers." Rather, his definition of great fiction involves the ability of the author to fulfill three roles; those of "storyteller, teacher [and] enchanter—[and] it is the enchanter in him that predominates and makes him a major writer" (Nabokov 1980, 5).

Humbert uses his narration to attempt to justify his actions, and this has a powerful effect on the reader, for Dolores' "lifestory has a narrator with an agenda and his account is correspondingly light on facts, heavy on textures, echoes, fantasies, fateful coincidences, and self-serving, passionate lies." (Vickers 6). As Eric Goldman points out, "from Humbert's perspective... it is essential to establish Lolita's experiences as utterly perverse so that he can feel exonerated from the charge of perverting her; consequently, he uses [the] account of her juvenile sex life to justify his own innocence" (Goldman 94). To this end, Humbert argues that he is blameless, because Dolores has already been "debauched" by a 13-year-old named Charlie. According to Goldman, Humbert is evoking a problematic and long-standing myth of "sudden 'falls' into womanhood and instantaneous 'loss of innocence'" (Goldman 95-6).

Humbert tells the reader that Dolores seduced him and he characterizes her as "utterly and hopelessly depraved" (Nabokov 1955,135). However, he also goes to great length to describe how he drugs the child and is "firmly resolved to pursue my policy of sparing her purity by operating only in the stealth of night, only upon a completely anaesthetized little nude" (Nabokov 1955, 126-36). Whether any of this can be counted on to accurately represent the events is unknown, but it must be kept in mind that we have no reason to believe Humbert to be an unbiased or trustworthy narrator. In fact the opening pages of the Foreword inform the reader that he has died while in prison awaiting trial, and his case will be studied as a "classic in psychiatric circles"(Nabokov 1955, 6-7).

Regardless of whether there is any truth to Humbert's version of events, what needs to be made explicit here are the flaws in the argument put forward. Dolores' choice to have sex with another young person is very different from being coerced into having sex with a man, many times her age, who is in a position of authority as her sole provider and guardian. While Dolores was pressured by a older girl at summer camp into "trying out" sex with Charlie (Nabokov 1955, 139), the questions of power differential and lack of consent are infinitely more troubling in the sexual contact she has with Humbert (Nabokov 1955, 134-6). In the latter situation, Dolores is an orphan, completely at Humbert's mercy, and is unlikely to be able to turn down the advances of her step-father even if she is conscious at the time and fully aware of them.

It is deeply disturbing that rather than entirely condemning Humbert's treatment of Dolores, many critics appear to sympathize with the protagonist and see the young girl in negative terms: as in some way complicit in her abuse, or as impure and therefore receiving what she deserves. The majority of

these critics are male, and as Peter Rabinowitz points out, "one can easily speculate on the psychological and ideological reasons why they might find their readings to be self-affirming" (Rabinowitz 3).

Three of the many reviews which demonstrate such victim-blaming attitudes can be used to demonstrate the extent to which these men fail to challenge the immoral actions of a pedophile and are, in fact, able to disregard Dolores' suffering. Extrapolating from these disturbing misreadings, and the popular view of "Lolita" as a "temptress," it becomes clear that Nabokov is "playing with fire" through his ambiguous treatment of the sexual abuse of a child.

Lionel Trilling provides a perfect example of the adoption of Humbert's view of Dolores; he appears to endorse the myth of the instantaneous loss of innocence which Humbert holds up as his initial justification for having sex with Little Miss Haze. Mr. Trilling found Humbert's treatment of the character he also refers to as "Lolita" less blameworthy, given the fact that she was "not innocent," and he supposed that "we *naturally* incline to be lenient towards a rapist ...who eventually feels a deathless devotion to his victim!" (Trilling in Clegg 106). So, what is of significance to Mr. Trilling are the feelings and experience of a man he knows to be a rapist: Humbert's actions are excusable due to the guilt-laden devotion and pity he eventually feels for his victim, Dolores.

Another critic, John Hollander, described the heroine as "completely corrupt," the predatory relationship as "an affair," and Humbert and Dolores as "lovers" ("The Perilous Magic of Nymphets," *Partisan Review*, 1956, 558 as cited in Rabinowitz 3). Similarly, Brian Boyd makes the chilling pronouncement: "we know that [Humbert] did not rape Lolita in any ordinary sense [and]...handing down to himself a sentence for rape, Humbert seems far more self-accusatory than the case warrants" (quoted in Rabinowitz 3). So even when the protagonist explicitly declares his own feelings of remorse and guilt over his actions, Mr. Boyd is able to excuse the crime of raping a 12-year-old.

Esthetic beauty provides a strong theme in this novel. Nabokov defended the academic tradition of "art for art's sake" as something intrinsically valuable: an end in itself and occupying a separate sphere from morality. The esthetic dimension also strongly colours Humbert's fantasy world, and it is his preferred method for expressing and legitimizing his erotic passion for young girls. Humbert, like his creator, holds up art as supreme. However, unlike the author, the protagonist specifically tries to convince the reader that art can be a perfect end, justifying cruel means. For Humbert, perfect esthetic bliss involves erotic enjoyment of girls between the ages of 9 and 14 by a man many times their senior; for Nabokov, it involves creating enchanting works of art. Nabokov brought Humbert Humbert into the world as an act of creation which, for him, involved the experience of esthetic bliss (which is how he defines the purpose of a work of fiction; Nabokov 1955, 315). The reader is left with Humbert's bliss, which certainly does not produce bliss of any type in my mind.

When discussing the possibility of creating a film version of *Lolita*, Nabokov said, "It was perfectly alright for me to imagine a twelve-year-old Lolita...She existed only in my head. But to make a real twelve-year-old play such a part would be sinful and immoral, and I would never consent to it" (Vickers 131). However, Nabokov *did* allow the portrayal of his novel in movie form. In fact, he helped write the script for the parts, and when assisting the director to select an actress to play the part, he used the term "nymphet" to describe the one of the possible candidates (Vickers 131).

As Anika Quayle theorizes, Humbert's bliss is induced by the physical aspects of Dolores in exclusion of all other aspects of her character. When you reduce a being to an entity solely to be viewed or utilized for the ends of another, you degrade that being to the status of a thing, an object. The sexual objectification of women is a major problem that feminists take issue with, and it is employed by Humbert against Dolores. Objectification is a running theme in this novel. While Nabokov may mean it to be condemned along with the crimes which Humbert carries out against the little heroine, this is not made clear, and the high regard which the author holds for "esthetic bliss" makes this theme very troubling.

Peter Rabinowitz argues that readings which reduce Lolita to an object are enabled by what he terms "the comforting shield of abstract thematizing," which is encouraged by the decision to read the novel as "high art" (Rabinowitz 13). He argues that this is made possible, and encouraged, by the prevalent and learned tendency to read art in metaphorical terms, as opposed to viewing the characters in the narrative as real people, and events of the plot as having a causal base and connections to other events (Rabinowitz 10). Prompting such a reading, of course, is the reiterated value placed on the purely esthetic by both author and narrator, as well as the powerful and persuasive narrative. Mr. Rabinowitz points out that this misreading causes many critics to "[re-enact one of] Humbert's [crimes by silencing] Lolita just as Humbert does, by refusing to take her seriously as a concrete person on the narrative level" (Rabinowitz 11-2).

Such a re-enactment is clearly visible in the review written by Thomas Molnar, in which he inquires as to whether his readers pity the heroine, a sentiment he rejects, saying that she is "a self-offered target for lechers... throughout... an object perhaps even to herself" (Clegg 106). Molnar not only condones Humbert's reduction of Dolores to a single-dimensional object, he goes so far as to suggest the heroine may also view herself in these terms. Rather than falling into this trap, Rabinowitz urges us to engage more fully on the narrative level with the experience of the little girl (Rabinowitz 12).

Anika Quayle also challenges the objectification found in Humbert's narrative and sees reviewers' misreadings as problematic. She takes issue with the common thesis that the moral message in the novel relates to the danger inherent in failing to "see" the little girl, therefore allowing one's desire for esthetic perfection to take precedence over compassion (Quayle 3). Rather, she argues, "it is necessary to recognize that Humbert's primary crime in the novel is not that he allows his imagination to replace reality, but rather that he deliberately rapes Lolita" (Quayle 21). So while it is significant that Humbert

represents Dolores in a way which is self-serving and incorrect, this does not in any way lessen the immorality of the actions which are his main wrongdoing.

Humbert's obsession with Dolores' body, which constitutes objectification, and his desire to use her for his sexual purposes, prompt him to overlook her pain, although he does perceive it (Quayle 16). There are numerous glimpses in the novel of Dolores' pain, such as her "sobs in the night" (Nabokov 1955,176). So rather than experiencing "blindness" to the child's feelings, Humbert simply indulges self-serving disinterest. With his own desires and motives front and centre he can pass over whatever autonomous humanity he happens to glimpse in his captive. His selfish desires enable him to override human compassion and remorse (Quayle 7).

Anika Quayle does not hold Nabokov complicit, but argues that he "cleverly and subtly show[s]... the pain and harm that Humbert's actions have caused" (Quayle 22), such as through the glimpses we see of the heroine's experiences and feelings. Therefore Quayle views the novel as having a "highly socially relevant ethical stance with regard to the 'objectification' of women...[and] to this extent critics are perhaps correct in reading *Lolita* as Nabokov's lament for the lack of 'curiosity, tenderness, kindness, [and] ecstasy' in art" (Nabokov, quoted in Quayle 23).

Following along similar lines, Richard Rorty discusses Nabokov's portrayal of his protagonist's complete lack of curiosity regarding everything which does not directly impact him. Like Anika Quayle, Rorty holds that Nabokov intended such incuriosity to be read as abject cruelty, and therefore condemned (Rorty quoted in Clegg 98). Nabokov "creates characters who are both ecstatic and cruel, noticing and heartless, poets who are selectively curious, obsessives who are as sensitive as they are callous" (Rorty quoted in Clegg 99). This is illustrated by the cruel incuriosity of Humbert's complete disinterest in the suffering of others, such as the Kasbeam barber's grief over his dead son, Dolores' loss of her dead baby brother, as well as Humbert's complete and carefully maintained ignorance to anything about Lolita which does not help him attain the desired result of his gratification (Rorty quoted in Clegg 99-100).

So, while this novel may have no easy moral message, a feminist critique brings to light the importance of engaging with *Lolita* as a whole, multidimensional character. While Nabokov's intentions will never be known, the severity and scope of CSA and the methodology which the author uses to address this tale have a tendency to encourage dangerous misreadings. Therefore caution is advised and readers must struggle to reject the comforting shield of metaphorical interpretation which results in distancing oneself from Dolores' suffering. Rather than falling into the pits of objectification and incuriosity, it is vital that the reader cultivate rigorous empathetic engagement.

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