

Save a Cow, Eat a Pedophile: Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

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## Save a Cow, Eat a Pedophile: Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

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### Abstract

Many who read Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* express negative reactions at its conclusion, such as revulsion, anger, and outright dismissal of its highly controversial plot. However, the contents of this story constitute only half of its importance. The other half is the hypnotic and *slippery* mode in which it is told. The dual configuration of the narrator as the protagonist allows the main character to craft his own version of the events that have taken place in his life through a demented, artistic frame.

This essay argues for the interpretation of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* as a dark fairy tale. My argument draws from the fairy-tale references made in the text itself, the "othering" done by the main character to classify his sexual prey as a mythical creature, the mirroring of the two main characters, and the unreliability of the manipulative, delusional narrator. I postulate that the same distortion that makes this a fairy tale also causes the audience to sympathize with the main character despite his crimes and conclude that novels such as this are dangerous in their seductive, fantastical characteristics.

*Keywords:* Lolita, fairytale, myth, Nabokov, moral

Vladimir Nabokov's controversial and frequently banned 1955 novel *Lolita* explores themes such as pedophilia, impotence, and lust disguised as love (or vice versa). These topics are viewed and presented through the eyes of a first-person narrator, which grants the novel's protagonist, Humbert Humbert, absolute control over the novel's narrative. The novel has Humbert use this power to its fullest potential. Most names, for instance, including his own, are clearly fabricated. Some of these are subtle in their falsity. Others, such as his own rather absurdly repetitive name of Humbert Humbert, are not. Such unreliable information, along with Humbert's inconsistent memories and hazy distortions of his affair with twelve-year-old Lolita, means there is no possible way to discern whether the events he describes actually happened in the way he describes them or, in fact, at all. This, along with Humbert's complete

control of his own story, transforms Nabokov's *Lolita* into an amoral American fairy tale. The novel uses three tactics to achieve this fantastical nature. First, Nabokov doubles the character of the novel's first-person narrator and protagonist, granting Humbert the opportunity to create his own delusional world. Second, *Lolita* includes a fantastical, sexualized "other" and relies upon mythical references and plot structure, which includes a nonlinear and whimsical presentation of time. The final, third tactic deploys a curious mirror imagery that the novel tends towards as a product of Humbert's psychopathy, to the point that the structure of the novel even reflects the trend.

The story of *Lolita* appears in the form of a manifesto narrated by Humbert Humbert, a middle-aged convict who has a sexual obsession with a sect of preteen girls he dubs "nymphets" (Nabokov 16). This obses-

sion leads him to kidnap and engage in a violent affair with one such girl named Dolores Haze or, as he names her, Lolita. Humbert sets the story of their destructive relationship against a quaint, car-obsessed American cultural landscape filled with obstacles to one man's single-minded quest for sexual fulfillment. For the sake of clarity, I will now define a "nymphet" in the eyes of H.H. (Humbert Humbert). According to the narrator, a nymphet is a girl between the ages of 9 and 14 with a "fey grace, [an] elusive, shifty, soul-shattering, insidious charm that separates the nymphet from such coevals of hers" (Nabokov 17). H.H. insists nymphets are not normal girls. In fact, Humbert refers to them in the novel with demonic and fantastical words and phrases more than several times in order to categorize these girls as somehow other-than-human. Normal girls, as he says, are human children, and he would never molest a child. In his mind and in his story, however, nymphets are not like human girls. It is thus acceptable to think of them as diaphanous agents of pleasure and mischief (Nabokov 17). It is easy to see evidenced in the text that Humbert "others" these children to justify his own perverted sexual appetites. He does this by categorizing their attractiveness to him as otherworldly temptations by demonic and supernatural forces out of his control, rather than as an unhealthy fetish for uninhibited prepubescent children who are unable to hide from (or are simply not fully cognizant of) the adult male gaze. This delusion of magic and sorcery allows the narrator to manipulate readers into suspensions of disbelief as he begins to present the novel's plot as might a fairy tale with rules and species unfamiliar to human reality.

One explanation for his delusion and predation is encapsulated in the way H.H. sees himself. Numerous times throughout the novel, he refers to himself as a monster, a beast, a spider, or a madman. This malevolence, according to H.H., is what allows him and others like him to distinguish nymphets from ordinary human girls:

You have to be an artist and a madman... with a bubble of hot poison in your loins... in order to discern at once, by ineffable signs... the little deadly demon among the wholesome children; she stands unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power. (Nabokov 17)

In this case, like recognizes like, and his view of himself as a corrupted individual convinces Humbert that what he sees is indeed the truth and not simply a

twisted perception. It is, therefore, not too far of a leap to conclude that he sees the girls as nefarious beings of the same sort as he, even if, as he says, they are "unconscious... of [their] fantastic power." H.H. is convinced that like attracts like (or, perhaps, H.H. wants to convince the readers), and his own self-hatred combines with his intense narcissism to cause the delusion that he is seeing something no one else except those like him, "artists," can see.

Humbert's delusions are further evidenced by the doubling prominent in *Lolita*. There are, for example, two Humberts. There is the Humbert who is in the past performing the actions he describes in the story and the Humbert of the novel's present who is writing what he wants to be seen as a manifesto. His doubled identity is hinted at in his name—Humbert Humbert. He reflects himself. Humbert provides readers with obvious insights about how exactly he wishes to be seen. Humbert refers to himself as Lolita's protector (Nabokov 121), for example, only to then describe himself and his pathological sensuality as a "great and insane monster" (Nabokov 124). This duality or pair of opposites is one of the many seduction techniques Humbert uses to sway his reader's heart and mind. The protagonist is certainly a madman, but he is also an artist. As he narrates, Humbert admits that he is writing something more than a mere manifesto when he implores readers not to get impatient with the "tenderhearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect hero of [his] book" (Nabokov 129). In this way, his narration mirrors more conventional autobiographies and memoirs because in these texts, like in the fictional *Lolita*, narrators tell their stories through the prisms of their present states of mind. There is no other way to interpret the past; it is impossible to exactly replicate one's past reactions. However, adding H.H.'s insanity to this past-present dynamic, it should come as no surprise that *Lolita* becomes a fantastical interpretation rather than a true account. In fact, H.H. distinguishes his work from an autobiography the moment he identifies his past self as a hero starring in a book. Humbert's narcissism is inescapable; though sometimes a hero, and sometimes a monster, he imbues himself with a sense of red-blooded virility and purpose of action much closer to the heroic deeds of mythical and fantastical beings than the very human characters described by autobiographers.

As well as the existence of two Humberts, there are also two Lolitas in Nabokov's novel: the titular character refers most directly to Dolores Haze, but there is also

Annabel Leigh, Humbert's young summer love before her untimely death the same year of their fling. Annabel's existence, however, is not a narrative fact, argues critics such as Daniel Thomieres. In his essay, "Cherchez La Femme: Who Really Was Annabel Leigh?" Thomieres backs up this interesting claim by pointing out the inversion of Annabel's story. We learn about her death in Chapter 3, yet it isn't until Chapter 4 that we are granted information about their love affair. This is because, as Thomieres argues, Chapter 3 is reality, while Chapter 4 is H.H.'s fantasy about a half-remembered childhood sweetheart who, like Dolores, was merely an object over which Humbert exerted his control. In a similar way, which lends itself to the final point I will address later, the end of the events of *Lolita* is when the book begins to be written with fantastical flourishes similar to those in Chapter 4 discussing his love affair with Annabel. We are given textual evidence to back up Thomieres when the novel's imprisoned Humbert laments to an absent Lolita that now he only has "words to play with," implying that, if she were to be with him in the room, he could be "playing" with her body instead (Nabokov 32).

In addition to the novel's fantastical "others" and the doubling of characters such as Lolita and H.H., Nabokov's narrative is characterized by a whimsical sense of time and space. This whimsy, paired with the novel's vulgar and grim plot, calls to mind fairytales such as those collected by the brothers Grimm. Unlike Grimm's stories, however, *Lolita* is abjectly disconcerting and continues to be controversial because, while presenting disturbing and criminal events, it does not offer a moral. In "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," Nabokov is quite honest about *Lolita* having no moral and emphasizes that he is "neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction" (314). According to him, fiction survives only as long as it provides "aesthetic bliss," which, if the extensive scholarship on the novel and a Stanley Kubrick movie adaptation of it are of any indication, is, at the very least, nominally accurate of *Lolita* (Nabokov 315). One of the best examples of Nabokov's "aesthetic bliss" is the entire middle portion of the novel. This section consists of a series of chapters that appear almost as an intermission to the plot because here readers are treated to a rush of quaint 1950s nostalgia made up of flashy Coca-Cola signs, rest stops, pink flamingo motels, and the like. Just like the roadside attractions, which can keep restless drivers entertained, H.H. struggles to keep Lolita distracted by movies, comics, ice cream, and dresses,

and there is little mention of what is obviously going on every morning and night—the rape of Dolores. This grim reality is left out of the story as readers are distracted by the "aesthetic bliss" of the American roadside.

Despite the absence of any moral lessons, the novel's characters and their actions recall many popular fairy tale archetypes. For instance, Humbert Humbert is at one time the embodiment of a prince charming because he saves Dolores from her "wicked" stepmother. At other points in the novel, however, he also becomes the evil, jealous stepfather, and at others still, the enchanted hunter who stalks his nymphet prey. Similarly, Dolores changes roles or functions, though it is important to remember that her appearance, behavior, and words are only shown through the unreliable and biased testimony of a murderous narcissist. Through the course of the novel, Dolores goes from a princess in distress to a capricious, inhuman spirit that must be hunted and subdued by the valiant hunter that is Humbert Humbert. This is confirmed by scholars such as Steven Swann Jones who argue that though several characters are molded to resemble fairy tale characters in their personalities and actions, Humbert in no way attempts to disguise the crass nature of what he claims to have initiated. On the contrary, he embraces it, and this is one of the reasons his charismatic narration so successfully sways readers into becoming sympathetic towards him. While it is undoubtedly true that this novel lacks a moral, it also lacks an emphasis on the good fortune of youth while condemning old age, as seen in Snow White or Cinderella. The most memorable part of any fairy tale, after all, is the "happily ever after," which usually includes true love and happiness. Humbert does not achieve a happily ever after; after all, Dolores, our nymphet princess, dies giving birth to a stillborn girl. Jones claims that this lack of a denouncement of death means *Lolita* can never be seen as a fairy tale. However, the structure and themes of this novel put us at the mercy of Humbert the embellished storyteller, and he shows himself to be a corrupted yet romantic idealist that imagines the themes of his life and licentious mission as schemes and quests built into a larger structure. A primary characteristic of this novel, one noted by the fictional Dr. Woodworth in the introduction to *Lolita*, is its seductive nature. Woodworth (and Nabokov through him) mentions that Humbert's manifesto is a "mask — through which two hypnotic eyes seem to glow," suggesting that the bizarre enchantment of this story hides a "hypnotic" purpose (Nabokov

6). The fact that this is told as a fairy tale tricks the readers into hoping that Humbert has “learned his lesson” and is at the end experiencing moral enlightenment. We know from Nabokov, however, that he had no intention of providing a moralistic happy ending. The aesthetic beauty of this story keeps us wanting this poor hero to learn his lesson and make amends, but these characters can never experience their happily ever after.

Fairy tales are closely linked to myths in the power they hold over the listeners. This particular novel in many ways mirrors the Greek myth of Hades and Persephone. Like Persephone, Lolita represents fertility, youth, and innocence. Also like Persephone, Lolita is abducted by an older man who has fallen in (what is believed to be) love with her. The two young women share an inability to escape once having eaten of the fruit of the underworld—in Persephone’s case, this is literal, yet for Lolita, the meaning is more symbolic. One of the most striking similarities is the name change: Just as Dolores is given her new name by Humbert, Persephone, whose original name was Kore, underwent a name change upon her union with Hades. This abduction, the subject of countless art, sculptures, and stories, is commonly portrayed as “The Rape of Persephone.”

This is, through and through, a novel of seduction. Humbert seduces not only Dolores, but also her mother and his audience. Through his ironic, narcissistic, playful attitude, Humbert Humbert portrays himself as a hapless man who has been seduced by a young girl. And in some cases, it has worked. One prominent literary critic, Leslie Fiedler, described *Lolita* as “The seduction of a middle-aged man by a twelve-year-old girl” (Connolly 3). Daniel Thomieres puts it best when he says, “We, readers, are invited to feel superior, share the joke with Humbert and become his accomplice in his hunt and possession of the nymphet” (3). This dehumanization of Dolores into the nymphet Lolita gives the novel a basic framework of a fable or myth of sorts: A man falls for a young girl, then saves her from her jealous mother. The girl has enchanted the man, who becomes obsessive until the young girl runs away with the help of another. Then, the girl finds her prince charming and makes up with her first rescuer. If this was a moralistic story, there would perhaps be room for a change of heart or a successful family. However, this American myth only captures Humbert’s madness and Dolores’ untimely death. Like Persephone, Dolores is escorted to the underworld to live on in the story told by her rapist. Jones

points out the parallels between *Lolita* and *Snow White* with the jealous and beauty-hungry mother, the pure and (seemingly) sexually innocent girl-child, and of course the hero of the story, who awakens the princess with a kiss and, according to Jones and other experts, signals the sexual maturation of Snow White herself.

Even the recurring theme of “The Enchanted Hunters” is a call to fantasy stories. Not only is it the name of the hotel where H.H. and Lolita’s first sexual congress takes place, it is also the name of a play written by Humbert’s shadow and sexual rival, Clare Quilty, with a plot of a girl bewitching a poet that lines up nicely with Humbert’s perception of himself as an artist and his captive as an enchantress. It is important at this point to include a reminder that it is not the plot alone nor the story that make this novel a fairy tale. The transformative element lies primarily in the narrator’s unreliability, as many fairy tales do. As someone who never wants to grow up, Humbert has captured his own aversion to aging in an enchanted narrative that includes funny, charming, vulnerable, seductive, and wholly convincing elements. Just as he claims Dolores Haze enchanted him, Humbert Humbert thoroughly enchants the readers.

Though in virtual control of this seductive narrative, Humbert becomes, as Jones would say in “The Enchanted Hunters: Nabokov’s Use of Folk Characterization in ‘Lolita,’” the “ogre-like” father of Lolita, which brings up Tamir-Ghez’s point that despite the obvious rhetorical technique implemented in the narration of *Lolita*, it is not Humbert speaking of his own free will. It is Nabokov controlling Humbert, which I suspect we see when he inserts an aside with, “(I am writing under observation)” (Nabokov 10). This aside seems to be referring to the presence of a prison guard, but considering Nabokov’s nature when it comes to layering levels of awareness in his narratives, it could be a reminder not to take Humbert too seriously and not to be seduced by the corrupting fairytale about to be shared. In “A Reader’s Guide to *Lolita*,” Julian Connolly comments on the balancing act Nabokov must accomplish to write the character of Humbert Humbert without tipping into being too grotesque for readers to sympathize with or going the other way and allowing the reader to ignore the negative actions in favor of Humbert’s charm. Here Connolly quotes Steven Butler when he asserts that Nabokov did what Humbert tried to do but never succeeded at—bridge the gap between “the beastly and the beautiful” (Connolly 4).

In “Time Will Tell: (Re)reading the Seductive Simulacra of Nabokov’s *Lolita*,” Harriet Hustis brings up a few interesting points as to the temporal nature of Humbert’s cognizance. One such point is better said in her words than in mine:

Perception is a form of play that substitutes immediacy and simultaneity or temporal duration: this presumed transparency of objects and objectives will ultimately legitimize Humbert’s practice of nympholepsy as a form of self-proclaimed artistry, a magical “game” all his own. (Hustis 14)

Essentially, just as Humbert uses spatial terms in place of time, this altered perception of the humanity of these girls he obsesses over allows him to think himself a connoisseur, an artist, a sort of Lost Boy, outside of time and reality that is out of his control. His first “love” was taken from him in death, so perhaps by courting the favor of nymphets who embody youth and magical desire, he will never grow up. Hustis further goes on to argue that Humbert is not looking to reincarnate in Lolita a replacement for Annabel; on the contrary, he strives to, as Hustis says, “break the spell” of his uncomfortable awareness of man’s mortality, especially in the midst of his own poor health. In the innocence and games Dolores encounters and shares with Humbert, he in return chooses to interpret them (as justification to himself and to the readers) as sexual advancements and nympholeptic teasing. The fairy-tale tone here is strong where, despite the reality of his maturity and experience, Humbert chooses to feign ignorance when interacting with those he perceives to be the embodiment of youthful pleasure.

Crystal and mirror imagery show up several times during Humbert’s journey in *Lolita*, and one major purpose behind it is that, according to Nabokov himself, Humbert’s original prototype was Lewis Carroll, author of *Through the Looking Glass*. The backwards chronology, the doubling of characters and situations, and even Humbert’s relationship with Lolita takes inspiration from not only Wonderland but also the real relationship between Carroll and his young muse, Alice Liddell. Elizabeth Prioleau is one of the strongest sources to point this out in her essay “Humbert Humbert Through the Looking Glass,” a close view at the symbolism used in this amoral fairy tale. Even past Humbert begins to “[drive] on the queer mirror side” after killing his sexual rival at the end, and as I’ve said before, the moment this novel ends is when *Lolita* truly begins (Nabokov 306).

In a way, the manifesto Humbert writes acts as a mirror for his own personality and solipsism, as well as a twisted reflection of the events of his youth onto his abuse of power upon reaching adulthood. Reading *Lolita* is not unlike walking through a funhouse—mirrors distort and misshape the real image for nothing but aesthetic enjoyment. Another small nod to Humbert’s fight to craft his own mirrored reality is the book his father read to him as a child: *Don Quixote*. At the end of that novel, the noble and arguably mad Don Quixote battles with a man from his town who had previously posed as none other than the Knight of Mirrors. This story of a man delusional and determined to see magic in a world of grim reality seems quite familiar. Like Quixote, Humbert also believes himself to be behaving honorably by, for instance, striving to (in his mind at least) protect the purity of Dolly Haze by only having his way with her when she is unconscious (Nabokov 124). This, of course, does not last long, because they soon become “technically” lovers.

Prioleau points out another element that mirrors (pun intended) *Through the Looking Glass*: Humbert and Dolores’ road trip across America is similar to the attempts of Alice and the Red Queen to run away from one point in space in this children’s book (Prioleau 6). However, no matter how far the two women run, they always end up right back where they started. In a similar way, the journey in *Lolita* drives in a large circle through America, yet as Humbert remarks, “We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing” (Nabokov 175). One more thing Prioleau mentions is the randomness of certain events in *Lolita* and how they reflect the topsy-turvy Wonderland world. Examples she gives include Valechka, Humbert’s ex-wife, becoming a surrogate monkey, as well as Humbert’s unremarkable neighbor deciding to randomly elope with a professional Chilean skier.

As a small sidebar from this argument, I would like to point out that this novel, though primarily a fairy tale, may be effective in serving a distinctively different purpose: as a textbook, perhaps, and an instruction manual. On page 17, Humbert is establishing the rules of nymphets, how to spot one, and the power they hold. At one point, he says, “the student should not be surprised to learn...” The inclusion of the word “student” insinuates that Humbert is not merely writing this story for a possible jury or to have his side of the story known. He could very well be crafting a blueprint and a guide for other “nympholepts” to follow in their continued pursuit of nymphets. Everything thereafter is a justification for

men of a similar persuasion to use the excuse, as Humbert does: “It was she who seduced me.”

In Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*, the literary critic constructs a water-tight argument that the sole purpose of the presence of a minority in popular American literature is to act as a reflexive character—to mirror and enhance the main, white character’s own virility and positive characteristics. Her criticism targeted the Africanist presence specifically, but as it is hinted that Dolores is of Latin American origin and is furthermore female, a similar mechanism is at play. Humbert Humbert seems to harbor a hatred and disgust for adult women, viewing them as grotesque (“insolent hag,” “big-breasted and practically brainless baba,” “a portable witch”), yet girls, especially his prized nymphets, Humbert views as priceless objects on which to enact his own power and pleasure. Annabel receives this during their summertime romance, the sex worker Monique when he hires her services, and of course Dolores, whose agency is stripped when she is given the new, sexually implicit (as well as racially charged) name of Lolita. Even her words are taken from her most of the time, such as when Humbert justifies her lack of speech by saying that she “said unspeakable things.” Even when Dolores is permitted speech in Humbert’s narrative, it is generally out of context or quoted through Humbert’s own words so as to mar their effect on the reader (Nabokov 205). Nomi Tamir-Ghez gave herself the daunting task of unpacking the rhetorical devices the narrator uses throughout the novel and has found that many times, we the readers hear *about* Lolita, but we rarely hear *from* Lolita. Even when we do hear from her, such as on page 205, there is no dialogue, simply Humbert transcribing the kinds of things she says: “She said she loathed me. She made monstrous faces at me, inflating her cheeks and producing a diabolical plopping sound.” Even now, after having sexual relations with Dolores for quite some time, Humbert still treats her like a child, taking away even her legitimacy in anger.

*Lolita* is an easy novel to read, and Humbert Humbert makes for a rather sympathetic, charming, witty protagonist. That is what makes this story so perverse to many readers. When a perverted individual such as the main character of this novel can become sympathetic, his sins overlooked or, worse, pardoned, the only positive result is a newfound realization of how simple it is to manipulate a reader’s emotions even though they know they should feel otherwise. This novel is highly

seductive, and it is precisely its naïve, fairy-tale narration of the events leading up to Humbert Humbert’s arrest that causes the audience to forget his villainy in favor of seeing him as nothing more than a poor old gentleman who has done terrible things and paid dearly for it. We “other” Lolita because of what we perceive to be her capricious nature and her ingratitude towards her stepfather. Humbert in this narration believes himself to be father, lover, and friend to Dolores, because that is what his delusions cause him to believe. Through omission and manipulation of facts, dialogue, and actions, Humbert Humbert, and Nabokov through him, crafts a great American fairy tale, free of morals, and set against a bustling 1950s American landscape.

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