



## Lolita and the aesthetics of forbidden love

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### Abstract:

*Lolita may thus be viewed as didactically reinforcing our distaste for Humbert as a sexual criminal but artistically examining the ardour, passion and romantic ideals behind his sexual misdeeds. While Humbert is a sexual predator and criminal, he is also an artist and intellectual who rationalizes and lends wit and charm to the crimes he is committing. So while Lolita was dismissed as pornography in many quarters ensuing its publication it is also arguably artistic in bringing out the depths of passion, torment and guilt that accompanies Humbert's fall as a sexual criminal and predator. Lolita then is an aesthetic of doomed and forbidden love rather than mere pornography.*

### Keywords:

Lolita; Pedophilia; Crime; Forbidden love; Depravity

Readers who view Nabokov's *Lolita* as mere pornography or depravity are missing the point. It is an idealization of forbidden love, and as such falls more into the category of tragedy than pornography, as Nabokov himself pointed out. Humbert meets Annabel, a beautiful young girl in his youth, and the aesthetic of youthful beauty or the idealization of woman as nymph follows from his failed romantic tryst with her. This ideal of woman as nymph is imprinted in his mind as a romantic ideal from then on, and his obsession with Dolly Haze or *Lolita* is a consequence from this first encounter.

The novel *Lolita* however is not an apologetic for paedophilia. It is clear that Humbert has damaged *Lolita* through his

repeated rape and sexual abuse of her. Humbert has isolated *Lolita* from other youths of her age, particularly boys and deprived *Lolita* of a normal childhood. The corruption of *Lolita* through Humbert is evident through her eventual involvement with Claire Quilty, Humbert's double. It is Humbert's initial seduction of *Lolita* that whets her appetite for older men and sexual gratification through lewd encounters to satisfy the perversions of older men.

The novel *Lolita* is about the immortality and ideal rather than merely sexual nature of Humbert's obsession with *Lolita*. Indeed while the novel is not an apologetic for paedophilia it is an insight into the romantic and ideal notions that underpin such desire. While paedophilia is condemned as sexual perversion and brutality, what the novel *Lolita* does is provide an insight into the idealization of woman as nymph that fuels such desire. It also depicts paedophiles as human, as the witty and intellectual Humbert embodies an insight into the psychology behind paedophilia.

However the destruction that Humbert has wrought on *Dolly* is not dismissed. *Lolita* is described as crying every night after her sexual encounters with Humbert. Humbert also experiences something quite close to guilt in his eventual arrest and imprisonment. When he encounters *Lolita* heavily pregnant at 17, he comes to view her separate from his desire not as an object of lust but an independent individual with emotions and her own needs to be met, with her new found husband.

It is also clear that paedophilia is not romanticized and it is quite clear that



Humbert has imposed himself on Dolly and come close to using brute force on her quite a few times. He almost drugs her but is seduced by her instead, but we should not discount the amount of suggestion he has made to her that leads to this. He also manipulates Dolly heavily through language and his status as an adult and parent.

However because what Humbert experiences for Dolly also has a romantic and ideal dimension to it we do not experience complete moral outrage with Humbert. Because of his intense and pathological passion for her we come closer to identification rather than pure outrage with Humbert. If Humbert is depraved he just represents that portion of depravity that is common to us all.

How Humbert palliates our moral outrage is thus his invocation of our sympathy with him as a tragic figure. Who has not experienced love that is misplaced or for an object that is out of our reach? While it is true that paedophilia is a crime, the same can be said of homosexuality. Both are forms of passion that are denied to us because of law or convention in society. Forbidden love is tragic because it is made illicit or illegitimate by convention or decree. Indeed, paedophilia and homosexuality are viewed as perversions, but this is by virtue of the fact that they deviate from the norm.

There is also some suggestion that Dolly Haze is not as innocent as most would make her out to be. She is described as the one who seduces Humbert, as flirting with him previously, there is also some suggestion that she has previous sexual experience and she makes a confession to Humbert that she is 'a friend to male animals' and is filthy. So while Humbert has preyed on her sexually and abused her, there is some suggestion that she has some complicity in the sexual crimes performed on her.

Humbert may be viewed as revulsive as a sexual criminal, but utilizes humour,

witticisms and jokes to palliate our moral outrage with him. The richness of the language and prose that Humbert uses with his status as a literary professor and the vast amount of literary allusions to European writers in the literary tradition lend weight to our sense of his erudition as a literary writer and the sense that his confessional is more than mere pornography but artistic and literary as well.

It is also the exotic nature of Humbert's status as a European that arguably attracts Dolly Haze to him. It is mentioned that Dolly Haze was very susceptible to influence by advertisements and the media and Humbert reminds Dolly of all the European actors with their charm, wit and sophistication that we doubtlessly experience on a linguistic level in his memoir. It is also arguably her idolization of Clare Quilty the writer that draws her to Humbert as his counterpart. So while Humbert is a sexual criminal, Dolly Haze had some interest in him to begin with, beginning with her idolization of Clare Quilty as a writer that the sophisticated and charming Humbert reminds her of. So Dolly Haze does share some complicity in her eventual degradation with Humbert.

"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. She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita. Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, an initial girl-child. In a principled by the sea."(Nabokov, 1955: 7)

In the above quote we see that Humbert adored Lolita to the hilt and fetishized her as a girl child and nymph. So indeed Humbert is a sexual criminal, but from the above quote we see that he fetishized Lolita, put her on a



pedestal and was truly and ardently in love with her.

The spiritual and the physical had been blended in us with a perfection that must remain incomprehensible to the matter-of-fact, crude, standard-brained youngsters of today. Long after her death I felt her thoughts floating through mine. Long before we met we had had the same dreams. We compared notes. We found strange affinities. The same June of the same year (1919) a stray canary had fluttered into her house and mine, in two widely separated countries. Oh, Lolita, had you loved me thus!"(Nabokov,1955: 12)

Hence we see from the above quote that describing Humbert as a mere sexual criminal does not quite do him justice as there is a spiritual dimension to his yearnings for Lolita as well. He has a metaphysical affinity with Lolita and she was something of a metaphysical other to him rather than a mere sex object.

Through the darkness and the tender trees we could see the arabesques of lighted windows which, touched up by the colored inks of sensitive memory, appear to me now like playing cards-presumably because a bridge game was keeping the enemy busy. She trembled and twitched as I kissed the corner of her parted lips and the hot lobe of her ear. A cluster of stars palely glowed above us, between the silhouettes of long thin leaves; that vibrant sky seemed as naked as she was under her light frock. I saw her face in the sky, strangely distinct as if it emitted a faint radiance of its own. Her legs, her lovely live legs, were not too close together, and when my hand located what it sought, a dreamy and eerie expression, half pleasure, half-pain, came over those childish features."(Nabokov, 1955: 13)

We thus witness Humbert's love for Lolita as an intense all consuming passion rather than a mere sexual one, he adored Lolita has completely was enthralled with ever part of her being. Humbert was thus truly and madly

in love with Lolita. In fact this first description was a description of his encounter with Annabel whom he incarnated in Lolita. There is thus a metaphysical and ideal underpinning to Humbert's obsession with Lolita.

She sat a little higher than I, and whenever in her solitary ecstasy she was led to kiss me, her head would bend with a sleepy, soft, drooping movement that was almost woeful, and her bare knees caught and compressed my wrist, and slackened again and her quivering mouth, distorted by the acidity of some mysterious potion, with a sibilant intake of breath came near to my face. She would try to relieve the pain of love by first roughly rubbing her dry lips against mine; then my darling would draw away with a nervous toss of her hair, and then again come darkly near and let me feed on her open mouth, while with a generosity that was ready to offer her everything, my heart, my throat, my entrails, I gave her to hold in her awkward fist the scepter of my passion."(Nabokov, 1955: 13)

The exuberance of the language with which Humbert celebrates Lolita should then show us that it was no fading passion but an enduring and agonizingly tender one. Humbert loved Annabel with tender delirium in this passage which he was to incarnate in Lolita as a metaphysical and ideal passion rather than a mere physical one.

All at once we were madly, clumsily, shamelessly, agonizingly in love with each other; hopelessly, I should add, because that frenzy of mutual possession might have been assuaged only by our actually imbibing and assimilating every particle of each other's soul and flesh." (Nabokov 1955: 13)

Humbert thus describes them as mutually in love, whether this is true of Lolita is questionable but one cannot question his ardour and intoxication with deep driven passion for Lolita. The beginnings of Humbert's obsession with Lolita and its



metaphysical rather than merely sexual nature are seen here in this first description of mutual intoxication and rapture.

Foucault's work of madness and sexuality should have some relevance in our consideration of whether *Lolita* should be considered mere pornography or a work of art. In Foucault's work, the abnormal or criminal is a function of discipline and punishment by the powers that be and institutions such as the prison and the law. It is the rule of convention and law dictated by political leaders and powers that produces the abnormal or mad and insane, which Humbert's obsession with *Lolita* arguably is. Hence Humbert's pathological obsession with *Lolita* is construed abnormal or madness and criminal by its status of being pathologized or criminalized by the powers that be. Hence it is Humbert's status as someone who is conventionally decreed mad or criminal that invokes our moral outrage with him.

His madness is a function of our respect for the law and convention. It is also arguably what renders Humbert artistic rather than a mere criminal because he is a victim in this sense of law and convention rather than strictly insane or criminal on his own account. Hence while we are morally outraged with Humbert as a sexual criminal, we should be reminded of our privilege relative to him because we fall within the confines of what would be construed normal or lawful while he is denied his passion by virtue of its being labelled criminal by law and convention. It is then our being aligned with the status of being normal as construed by the law and the powers that be that lead us to condemn Humbert as a sexual criminal, but again one should be reminded that being normal is to be considered a privilege in Foucauldian terms because Humbert's passion is only criminal because of its status outside the law decreed by powers that be. It is law and convention thus that criminalizes Humbert rather than any a priori moral sense of what passion should confine its limits to.

However this should not blind us to the fact that Humbert is a sexual criminal. He has abused Dolly Haze sexually not a few times but repeatedly and taken advantage of his status as a foster parent to perpetrate sexual crimes on her. The fact that Dolly cries nightly after their intercourse indicates how vile and perverse she finds him. She is also described at various times as disgusted with him and indifferent to him. It is also arguably her ruined youth with him that leads her to seek out Claire Quilty for similar perverse adventures.

So is Humbert a tragic figure for desire that is ruinous or a mere sexual criminal? Again there are many ways that the novel suggests that Humbert is indeed a sexual criminal but tragic because of his obsessive and doomed love for *Lolita*. The novel also utilizes the humour of Humbert and his literary genius to palliate our sense of moral outrage with him. Indeed, Humbert may be a sexual criminal, but the novel plumbs his psychological depths to bring out the ardour and passion behind his sexual crimes.

*Lolita* may thus be viewed as didactically reinforcing our distaste for Humbert as a sexual criminal but artistically examining the ardour, passion and romantic ideals behind his sexual misdeeds. While Humbert is a sexual predator and criminal, he is also an artist and intellectual who rationalizes and lends wit and charm to the crimes he is committing. So while *Lolita* was dismissed as pornography in many quarters ensuing its publication it is also arguably artistic in bringing out the depths of passion, torment and guilt that accompanies Humbert's fall as a sexual criminal and predator. *Lolita* then is an aesthetic of doomed and forbidden love rather than mere pornography.

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