

Vladimir nabokov's techniques of rhetoric in lolita



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In this brief essay, I will draw upon *Lolita* to demonstrate how Vladimir Nabokov uses the techniques of rhetoric to create an explication of the female body, encapsulated in the characters of both the adolescent Lolita and her older, less nubile mother, Charlotte. In the novel, we as readers are presented with the spectacle of a man facing the awful truth of his own existence: that he has come to a point of no return in his life, and he has no one except himself to thank for this problem. It is his fascination with women as sex objects and with his own sexuality that has brought him to this pass. Nabokov is said to work hard to purge his narrator's voices of all commitments save one that is all-powerful, as well as preoccupying in the extreme. Nabokov makes his narrators both commentators and participants in the plot and action of the story. The all-powerful commitment central to *Lolita* is the commitment of Humbert Humbert to his own sexual, erotic passions and drives. In the name of these passions and drives, he is ready to sacrifice everything, even financial security. Nabokov believes in the ironic interest and the poignancy of a man's fated self-destruction. Thus, what we see in the character of Humbert Humbert is a sense of detachment from the action that surrounds him; even the discovery of his infidelity and his lust for a teenage girl by his wife (who coincidentally is the mother of the child in question) does not penetrate the shell created by his self-centered determination to have what he wants. While we know that he has and will continue to go to great lengths to secure the physical and emotional attention of his Lolita, we also recognize that even as he tells us the story he is distancing himself from its uglier and more sordid ramifications. *Lolita* is a story of how a man's sexual preoccupation with a teenage nymphet destroys his self-esteem and his life. Stories of this type may be thought of as

allegories. Allegories are inherently analytic stories that preserve conventional distinctions between the real and the imagined, and which also demonstrate that the line dividing these two constructs may be far less well-defined than we would like it to be. We know from the beginning of *Lolita* that Humbert Humbert is a man dedicated to the preservation of the self. He has married a rude, rough woman solely because as her husband he will be financially secure. He tolerates this woman's abuse and contempt because, in a strange manner, she gives him control; she recognizes that there is something superior about this husband of hers, and even though she treats him badly she also flatters his self-image. When she realizes that his attraction to her daughter, Lolita, has become a reality and not an abstract, she must die and he must be free. Humbert has been encouraged by Lolita, who no doubt finds the attention of her mother's lover to be a form of coming of age herself. Lolita, who also rejects her mother, allows Humbert to play out his fantasy because it suits her; like her mother, she sees this man as a means to an end. However, unlike her mother, she will not always be willing to put up with his demands, and will finally reject him, caring little for his pain. Humbert is, for the most part, a man who thinks of himself as an actor, but in reality an audience member. Nabokov himself made this point about his character. He did not find Humbert likable, nor did he respect him. He felt instead that he had created in this character a model of all men who allow passion to become more important than self-awareness. Nabokov was also interested in creating a character who could become a symbol of man's preoccupation with his own sexuality; and in this he was highly successful. In fact, as much as he wished to present Humbert as an aging Don Juan with a penchant for little girls, he also managed to create in the character of Lolita

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a stereotype of young girls who know that they are attractive to older men and capitalize on that attractiveness (Nabokov 312). It is interesting that Nabokov said that he wrote this novel quite literally to “get rid of it” (Nabokov 311). One suspects that this is indeed the case with many writers, who find themselves creating characters out of some experience of their own life and then writing a book to put those characters in their proper, fictional place. In *Lolita*, Nabokov has Humbert reveal that he, in spite of the intolerable nature of his marriage and the pain of his loss of Lolita, had managed to be happy. In fact, in all the suffering and humiliation of his affair with Lolita, Humbert claims that he has placed himself “beyond happiness,” and on a plane where sensual experience is the only reality. This is a state of “oculate paradise” (Nabokov 163). Paradise, therefore, might well mean that all standards of proper and decent behavior must be abandoned. Humbert also tells his reader (once he has lost Lolita and his “paradise” is an empty house) that he has no remorse. He states, for example “I see nothing for the treatment to of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art” (Nabokov 283). One of the most delightful aspects of *Lolita* is watching Humbert almost make a case for himself. Throughout the book we hear again and again that the passion of his involvement with Lolita is so strong that he was unable to resist her attractions. He chooses, very deliberately, to risk everything on the chance that a nymphet will remain a child, remain attractive as only a young woman can be attractive, and remain interested in him. When he sees the now-pregnant, blowzy Lolita after an absence, his attraction is over. He might feel some remorse, but he in no way feels that he should be held accountable for having stolen her childhood and her innocence. Even then, he makes it seem that she was as

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much a partner in their escapades as he was himself. Both Lolita and her mother seem almost incidental to the stories or the male characters. We could argue, of course, that Lolita, as the object fixe of Humbert's somewhat inexplicable passion for a young girl, is very important in the story and in the development of Humbert's self-centered analysis. In point of fact, however, what emerges from a careful reading of the novel is a sense that Lolita is more of a symbol than a reality. We have noted above that once she is no longer a nubile nymphet, much of her attraction is lost in Humbert's opinion. We must suspect that what made her attractive in the first place – pure sexual response set aside – is that she was forbidden; there is a suggestion that the relationship borders on the incestuous, and this is a very forbidden fruit. There is also the fact that Lolita has a way of putting her mother in her place and gaining some control over the marriage. In any event, one finally must conclude that Lolita mattered very little to Humbert. What mattered was his own sense of fulfillment and pleasure. In the case of Humbert, he has managed to escape a loveless unhappy marriage to an unattractive and domineering woman, find temporary passion with a desirable young girl, and escape from that relationship as well. He has suffered a few pangs of loss, but has little real remorse for any damage that he might have inflicted on the girl. In fact, he is resentful of her having changed from the nymphet to the young woman and holds against her the inevitable process of maturing. If we find that he is alone, and that his life is boring and futile, we must conclude that he is the author and architect of his own problems. In describing his sexual approach to Lolita, Humbert refers to the fact that “ his pillow smelled of her hair” (Nabokov 131). Her body evokes “ mists of tenderness,” encourages “ tremors and gropings,” and he contends that it

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was she who seduced him (Nabokov 131). Lolita revels in the pleasure of her own body and is more than willing to use that sexuality to obtain the things (material and otherwise) that she desire. Her older mother, Charlotte, is all too well aware that her body cannot stand a comparison with her daughters; what Nabokov appears to be suggesting, particularly in Humbert's continued fascination with a "nymphet's" body and sexuality, is that older women automatically become less desirable to males as they become physically less firm. Humbert's final commentary upon his sexual involvement with this young girl reasserts his fascination with youth and young girls. His soul actually "hang(ing) around her naked body" which he claims is his carnal knowledge of Lolita and his greatest pleasure with her (Nabokov 285). In sum, Nabokov explicates the female body in all its stages of development as little more than a vehicle for satisfying men. That body is most appealing when it is young, "fresh," and relatively untouched. Older women have certain attributes – mostly intellectual – that younger ones certainly lack, but it is the younger female that fascinates a man like Humbert Humbert.