

Solipsizing Lolita: the unreliable narrator in Nabokov's Lolita



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In his “ On a Book Entitled Lolita”, Vladimir Nabokov recalls that he felt the “ first little throb of Lolita” run through him as he read a newspaper article about an ape who, “ after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature’s cage.” The image of a confinement so complete that it dominates and shapes artistic expression (however limited that expression may be) is a moving and powerful one, and it does, indeed, reflect in the text of Lolita. Humbert Humbert, the novel’s eloquent poet-narrator, observes the world through the bars of his obsession, his “ nympholepsy”, and this confinement deeply affects the quality of his narration. In particular, his powerful sexual desires prevent him from understanding Lolita in any significant way, so that throughout the text what he describes is not the real Lolita, but an abstract creature, without depth or substance beyond the complex set of symbols and allusions that he associates with her. When in his rare moments of exhaustion Humbert seems to lift this literary veil, he reveals for a moment the violent contrast between his intricately manipulated narration and the stark ugliness of a very different truth. In one of the most elaborately vivid scenes in the novel, Humbert excites himself to a sexual climax while Lolita sits, unaware, on his lap. Rejoicing in the unexpected and unnoticed fulfillment, he asserts that, “ Lolita ha[s] been safely solipsized” (60). Solipsism is the epistemological theory that the self is the only knowable thing and that reality consists solely of its perceptions and active modifications. It very closely reflects Humbert’s relationship with Lolita. Through his language, he creates a distance between Dolores and Lolita, between the child and the “ solipsized” creature upon whom he can “ safely” impose his sexual desire. Humbert’s version is a blend of several tightly

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connected, often conflicting personal images. Some are the products of his own imagination, while others stem from classic works of literature or popular songs. He makes no effort to separate these images, but shifts rapidly from one to another as the narrative demands. They come together to form a new Lolita, one who is only Humbert's projection of the original, one who possesses only those qualities that he imposes upon her, and who shows no evolution beyond that which he allows her. Lolita's primary frame, and the most persistently reductive, is that of the nymphet. Humbert claims that this category is not his own creation but a specific natural quality to which he has assigned a clever name. It is well defined, if difficult to accurately describe, and it pre-exists its members: Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched traveler... reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate " nymphets".... Between those age limits, are all girl-children nymphets? Of course not. Otherwise, we who are in the know, we lone voyagers, we nympholepts, would have long gone insane. (16-17) This definition serves two complementary purposes. It dehumanizes the nymphet by making her foreign (" demoniac"), and it absolves the passionate admirer who is not in love, but " bewitched". Humbert can, and does, use this identity to justify his sexual urges toward Lolita. Recalling the restless hour spent wandering through the Enchanted Hunters hotel, waiting for Lolita to fall into a drugged, defenseless sleep, Humbert confesses that he was gravely mistaken in his assumption that Lolita was powerless and innocent: I should have understood... that the nymphaean evil breathing through every pore of the fey child that I had prepared for my secret delectation would make the secrecy impossible and

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the delectation lethal. (124-125) Through this characterization, he attributes to Lolita not only the responsibility for their first sexual encounter, but for the suffering he would later undergo. She can do such things because she is more than human, because she is an “immortal demon disguised as a female child” (138). The darkly sexual image of the nymphet openly conflicts with another of Lolita’s adopted identities: the reincarnated Annabel Leigh. From his very first encounter with Lolita, Humbert equates her with his lost love: I find it most difficult to express with adequate force that flash, that shiver, that impact of passionate recognition. In the course of the sun-shot moment that my glance slithered over the kneeling child... the vacuum of my soul managed to suck in every detail of her bright beauty, and these I checked against the features of my dead bride. (53) The weight of this image is much greater than it seems at first, because Annabel’s identity is in itself a complex and intricately shaded tangle of meanings. By his own admission, he “remembers[s] her features far less distinctly today than [he] did a few years ago”. By naming her Annabel Leigh, Humbert simultaneously confines and expands her to fit Poe’s mythical Annabel Lee, and many of his descriptions in fact contain direct references to the poem. When he meets Lolita he transfers onto her this perfect image, an artificial image that is all that remains of his first love, an image that is now at the root of both memories and so creates them: My real liberation [from my obsession for Annabel] had occurred... at the moment, in point of fact, when Annabel Haze, alias Dolores Lee, alias Loleeta, had appeared to me, golden and brown, kneeling, looking up, on that shady veranda.... (167) Here he refers to Annabel Lee, not Annabel Leigh. Humbert cannot distinguish between the original girl-child and the literary filter through which he remembers her.

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Likewise, the image he imposes on Lolita is a crystalline, artificial one, colored by visions of envious angels and a mythical kingdom. Over the course of the novel, Humbert's Lolita adopts countless other disguises. When overwhelmed by the hopelessness of his love, or by the dangerously volatile nature of his situation, Humbert refers to Lolita as his Carmen. The name first appears as the refrain of a popular song depicting promiscuity, a song that Humbert twists into a frantically stilted poem about Lolita's absence. It slowly evolves, so that by the end of the novel it refers to the gypsy heroine of Merrimée's famous novella, another sometimes cruel and elusive creature. When he glimpses the signs of age on Lolita's face and manner, he makes her an echo of her mother, "Charlotte [rising] from her grave" (275). She can be a "simple child" (180) one moment and a "plotter" the next (183). When, long after she has escaped from him, he visits her and her husband, the changes he sees in her make him uncomfortable. He finds an instant of peace only when she returns to a more familiar shape, a shape of his own creation, when "for a moment ~~and~~ strangely enough the only merciful, endurable one in the whole interview ~~and~~ [they] were bristling at each other as if she were still [his]" (272). These contrasting images ~~and~~ the reverent and the bitter, the sacred and the profane ~~and~~ come together in a larger, more complex image. At times Lolita ascends to the most abstract of forms: she becomes only the object of artistic expression. She represents some immense truth he wishes to capture; she is his creation, his inspiration. She is his girl, "as Vee was Poe's, and Bea was Dante's" (247). She is his Lolita. She gives his life purpose, for only through him can she "live in the minds of later generations" (309). In turn, he uses language to shape and define her identity; she is not real without him. This web of images persists throughout <https://assignbuster.com/solipsizing-lolita-the-unreliable-narrator-in-nabokovs-lolita/>

the story, and Humbert rarely allows the reader to see his young lover without the lens of his interpretive imagination. At times, however, the veil of language does lift, and we see Lolita without her masks and costumes. As readers, we cannot know whether this, simpler, Lolita is in fact Dolores Haze and not just another product of Humbert's imagination. Nonetheless, these ostensibly honest moments provide insight into a wholly different creature than the capricious nymphet to which Lolita is often reduced: 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 in the night ~~the~~ every night, every night ~~the~~ the moment I feigned sleep. (176) Her nightly sobs, for which we are given no analysis, suddenly change the entire narrative. The reader must sift back through the details of the story and place, among the cynical judgments and ecstatic sexual references, this beautifully simple image. Among the novel's moments of rhetorical clarity, perhaps the most poignant are those in which Humbert claims to feel remorse. In these rare instances, Lolita loses all of the wickedness, the sexual power, and the cruelty that Humbert so often attributes to her, and becomes nothing more than a child: There was the day when having withdrawn the functional promise I had made her on the eve... I happened to glimpse from the bathroom, through a chance combination of mirror aslant and door ajar, a look on her face... that look I cannot exactly describe... an expression of helplessness so perfect that it seemed to grade into one of rather comfortable inanity just because this was the very limit of injustice and frustration. (283) Humbert cannot see this Lolita, the child

Lolita, without the aid of a "chance combination". As he delves deeper into <https://assignbuster.com/solipsizing-lolita-the-unreliable-narrator-in-nabokovs-lolita/>

his past, he claims to discover other such “ smothered memories, now unfolding themselves into limbless monsters of pain” (285). He recalls a particular moment of beautiful lucidity, when he saw Lolita in her own anguished form, free from his imposed images: There was the day that... as Avis clung to her father’s neck and ear while, with a casual arm, the man enveloped his lumpy and large offspring, I saw Lolita’s smile lose all its light and became a frozen little shadow of itself.... (286) This is not Carmen, or Annabel, or the fey nymphet of Humbert’s preceding tale. This is a real child, without a father or a home, who must settle for a twisted parody of life. Does Humbert Humbert love Dolores? Does he even see Dolores, or can she never be more than Lolita to him? Ultimately, the novel provides no conclusive answers to these questions. It is Humbert’s tale, colored with his suffering, speckled “ with bits of marrow sticking to it, and blood, and beautiful bright-green flies”, and it has as many shades and subtleties as his convoluted psyche (308). It takes on many forms ~~and~~ memoir, confession, testimony, elegy ~~and~~ and each provides a different perspective on Humbert’s immense rhetorical distance from Dolores. Perhaps he cannot see her in any other way, trapped as he is by the grim bars of mental instability, or perhaps he can and refuses to do so. Whatever his true purpose for creating this abstract Lolita ~~and~~ and in all likelihood, Humbert himself does not know ~~and~~ he makes her more real than her flesh-and-blood counterpart. Dolores Haze, a. k. a. Dolly Schiller, is dead from the very first moments of the novel, so that only the nymphet, only the starlet, only Lolita truly exists.