

Humbert humbert's underlying misogyny in lolita



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Humbert Humbert, the narrator of Vladimir Nabokov's infamous yet beautifully written *Lolita*, is considered by most readers to be a pedophile due to his adoration of underage girls, whom he calls "nymphets." The eponymous nymphet, Lolita, is, of course, Humbert's main fixation, so the majority of the text is devoted to describing his interactions with her. However, a few descriptions of other, fully-grown women can be found in Part One of *Lolita*. Two of the novel's most prominent female characters, other than Lolita, are Valeria, Humbert's first wife, and Charlotte Haze, Lolita's mother and Humbert's second wife. Humbert's descriptions of these women ultimately reveal that he is a misogynist as well as a pedophile. Not only does Humbert seem to have a sense of utter disdain for women, but he views them in only two ways: as irritating obstacles in the way of his desires, or as objects that can be used to help him get what he truly wants.

Humbert's portrayal of Valeria in chapters seven and eight of Part One is an early sign of his contempt for women. Shortly into Valeria's introduction, Humbert not-so humbly mentions that he "could obtain at the snap of [his] fingers any adult female" to be his wife (25, emphasis added). Aside from the off-puttingly egotistical nature of this statement, the word "obtain" seems to suggest that women are objects and not people. Also, the fact that Humbert uses the term "adult female" instead of "woman" is quite telling. Such a phrase is more commonly used to describe an animal, not a human being. Thus, this short passage establishes that Humbert views women as subhuman.

At first, it seems that Humbert is somewhat impressed with Valeria; perhaps women are not as horrible as he had once thought they were. However, he

himself soon admits that this initial attraction to Valeria is only because of the “imitation she gave of a little girl” (25). He carries this a step further by having her wear a girl’s nightgown on their wedding night. But Humbert soon comes to realize that her imitation can only go so far; she is still a woman and not a nymphet. After this initial fantasy, Humbert’s true feelings toward women are once again revealed when he refers to Valeria as an “idiot” who is “big-breasted and practically brainless” (26). The fact that Humbert specifically points out Valeria’s large breasts is worth noting because the young girls in which he is truly interested are, of course, not fully developed and thus do not have sizable breasts.

Humbert makes several other significant remarks about Valeria in chapter eight. He states that her “only asset was a muted nature” (26, emphasis added). The word “muted” alludes to the inherently patriarchal notion that women should be quiet or even silent, an idea to which Humbert certainly adheres. He also refers to Valeria as a “stock character” and says that she has a “poodle head,” both of which add to his characterization of her as distinctly inhuman (27). Lastly, it is important to note that these scathing remarks are made in an extremely causal manner, as though they seem perfectly normal to Humbert and as though he makes these types of comments rather frequently.

Despite Humbert’s disdain for her, Valeria does serve her purpose, which is to help Humbert cope with his “fantastic predicament” in a “legal” way, at least for a few years, (26). Once she proves as an obstacle to him, he is more than happy to be rid of her and head to the United States. There, he

encounters Charlotte Haze, with whom he will have a similar yet even more blatantly misogynistic relationship.

From the moment Humbert meets Charlotte, it seems that he has made up his mind about her. At first, when detailing her physical appearance, he more sympathetically describes her as a “ poor lady” with “ not unattractive features” (37). But, by the end of the paragraph, he has harshly categorized her as “ one of those women whose polished words may reflect a book club... but never her soul” and who is “ completely devoid of humor” (37). Even though he has only just made her acquaintance, Humbert assumes that he knows everything about Charlotte because she is one of “ those women.” However, his remarks about other female characters suggest that he views all women in a similarly disparaging light. Indeed. Valeria was portrayed as humorless and unintelligent as well.

Humbert has no intent to board with Charlotte due to his immediate dislike of her, yet this resolution quickly changes once he encounters her nymphet daughter, Lolita. After this event, his initial aversion to Charlotte grows into a complete hatred of her, as she becomes an obstacle between himself and Lolita. Notably, he refers to her simply as “ Haze” rather than by her first name. This mode of address not only displays his refusal to be friendly with her, but also emphasizes the meaning behind the name. A “ haze” is something that obscures one’s view, and Charlotte’s presence is similarly something of a screen between Humbert and Lolita, since she constantly interrupts their interactions. Humbert also refers to Charlotte as “ mother Haze,” which reveals another one of his misogynistic notions (43). By

utilizing only the word “ mother” and not her first name, he insinuates that her motherhood is her only defining characteristic.

One particular scene in which Humbert reveals his disgust for Charlotte occurs in chapter eleven. He is attempting to reach orgasm just by viewing Lolita, but is interrupted by “ fat Haze” who attempts to start “ a make-believe conversation about a fake book by a popular fraud” with him (43). Here, he sees Charlotte as an overt obstacle between him and his pleasure, which causes him such anger that he lies about her in a strange, internal outburst. He calls her “ fat,” yet nothing in his initial description of her suggested that she was overweight. Perhaps it is merely because she is adult-sized, and not a child like Lolita, that he sees her this way. He also insults her intelligence by completely dismissing the book that she desired to discuss. Instead of simply stating its name, Humbert calls it a “ fake book” written by a “ fraud,” implying that Charlotte is a fool for being interested in such a book.

This passage also highlights a distinct difference between Valeria and Charlotte. While Valeria was “ muted,” much to Humbert’s satisfaction, Charlotte is not. She has opinions and quite often states them, which Humbert despises, calling her “ obnoxious” (55). He also frequently ridicules her attempts at French, not even bothering to try to correct her. This pattern of behavior shows that Humbert places very little intellectual value in women.

It is only when Charlotte stops being an obstacle to him and becomes a way for him to get closer to Lolita that Humbert begins to show the smallest

amount of respect for her. Once he receives her love letter and decides to marry her, he starts to speak about her in slightly kinder terms, calling her a “woman of principle” and even using her proper name instead of “Haze” (70, 75). However, this should not be seen as a shift in his view toward women. Humbert is merely satisfied by his ability to exploit Charlotte for his own gain, not by Charlotte herself. After all, one cannot forget that he nonchalantly considers drowning her in the lake in chapter twenty. Indeed, a sceptical reader may even come to doubt the convenient timing and circumstances of Charlotte’s actual death, but the text provides little evidence to indicate Humbert’s direct involvement.

Though one may be tempted to focus solely on Humbert’s relationship with Dolores Haze when reading *Lolita*, it is important to consider his relationships with adult women as well. A close analysis of these interactions reveals that Humbert does not view women as complex individuals but rather as annoying and simpleminded creatures who are only bearable when they can be manipulated for his own gain.