

# Character analysis: lolita

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“ Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul” The opening lines of ‘ Lolita’ directly initiate the reader into the essence of Nabokov’s bewildering novel where an obviously pedophilic protagonist Humbert Humbert narrates his undying love/lust for the questionably innocent twelve year old Dolores Haze, better known as Lolita. Humbert, in his extravagant and flowery description of Lolita, implies the word “ nymphet”, a term invented by Humbert himself and introduced to the English language by Nabokov in 1955 when the novel was first published, to refer not only to the object of his affection but also to other girls of Lolita’s age and characteristics. Nymphic” is adjectival for the noun ‘ nymph’ and theMicrosoftEncarta Encyclopedia defines nymphs to be, in Greek and Roman mythology, “ lesser divinities or spirits of nature, dwelling in groves and fountains, forests, meadows, streams, and the sea, represented as mortal and beautiful creatures that were sometimes love objects to Olympian maidens, fond of music and dancing”. They could also be “ vengeful and destructive”, characteristics that will be shown to work against Humbert, not physically, but emotionally. Hence quite certainly with this origin of meaning in mind Humbert Humbert drafts his beloved term of the “ nymphet”: “ Now I wish to introduce the following idea. Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as “ nymphets. In a way Humbert’s definition or coining of the term nymphet almost seems like a statement of defense that that he so tactfully constructs to possibly hide behind in an attempt to feed his subliminal yet perceptible conscience.

His illicit affair with little Lolita is not only a legal and social crime but more so is “moral leprosy” and as a novel *Lolita* has faced much skepticism, disapproval and critical evaluation to understand Humbert’s as well as Lolita’s true nature. However the purpose of this paper is to discuss in detail Lolita’s character as a “nymphet” and her impact on the male characters of the novel but such an analysis can only productively develop with a simultaneous study of the inner workings of Humbert’s disturbing yet enthralling mind since arguably Humbert is the eye of the novel and the reader only has Humbert’s perception or narrative of Lolita as evidence for her character. Hence as the reader only knows Lolita through Humbert’s expressed view of his girl-child love it is hard to say who the true Lolita or rather Dolores Haze is. Therefore the Lolita that this paper will explore can only be a “Humbertian” version of this girl; a child the audience of Vladimir’s novel never gets to meet *tete-a-tete*. The 1980s and 1990s marked a defining moment in criticizing *Lolita* as a novel, as critics increasingly shifted their focus from the formal aspects of the novel to the moral and ethical implications of Humbert’s behavior, and the possibility that in spite of Nabokov’s statement in his afterword to *Lolita*, his novel did indeed have a “moral in tow”.

In particular, the 1980s and 1990s saw a deepening interest in the figure of Lolita and her representation in the text. Or perhaps more accurately, this period witnessed a devoted interest in the ‘non-representation’ of Lolita. It is an interesting notion to evaluate that Humbert is blind to Dolores, replacing her with, or substituting her with an idealized image that is the product of his twisted and artistic imagination; an image he names Lolita and it is arguably

to a large extent only this fantasized Dolores called Lolita that the reader has access to in the novel. Humbert in the very first chapter of the novel provides the reader with an attestation of the abovementioned argument in the following phrase: “ She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita. ” Humbert’s attempt to rename the little girl “ Lolita” exemplifies the unreliability of his first-person narrative.

The way in which he elucidates Lolita, for much of the novel, prevents readers from identifying with her or even understanding how she might differ from his description. Humbert’s narration is deceptive to the point that readers may find it necessary to use separate designations, for example, her legal or actual name and her nickname given by Humbert, in order to distinguish between the actual child and Humbert’s construction of her as a seductive temptress. However after decades post the initial publication of *Lolita*, there is no longer a critical debate over how to refer to the title character. Some critics, such as Ellen Pifer, call her by various names (*Lolita*, *Dolores Haze*, *Dolly Schiller*, and so forth), depending upon the context; still others choose either “ *Dolly*”, as Julian Connolly does, or “ *Dolores*” . Such indeterminacy is entirely appropriate and expected, because it reveals the way in which Nabokov’s novel “ ultimately undermines the narrator’s attempts to control its heroine” .

Hence *Lolita/Dolores*’s character takes the form of a prism that leads one to view her character in multiple colors. Hence there is a kind of uncertainty in who *Lolita* is and her character can be analyzed in various dimensions that prevent the reader or the critic to assume a single scenario for *Lolita*’s character. Focusing on Humbert’s *Dolores* and his elucidation of her

mischievous character the reader is confused between the verdict of either deeming her as a naive child or a clever little vixen who as Humbert's nymphetic Lolita has a sexual allure that instantly attracts men like him. However, although the name Lolita has become synonymous with underage sexpot, Nabokov's Lolita is mostly portrayed as a stubborn child. She is neither illustrated as very beautiful nor particularly refined, and Humbert frequently remarks on her skinny arms, freckles, vulgar language, and general unladylike behavior. Lolita attracts the depraved Humbert not because of her precocious beauty or charm, but because she is a nymphet; Humbert's ideal combination of girlhood and the first blushes of female maturity with a shrewd cleverness that sets nymphets apart from conventional pre-adolescent females.

In fact Lolita is possibly a rather ordinary twelve-year-old girl if one 'defamiliarizes' the Humbertian version and simply focuses on a regular pubescent and petulant girl of twelve that Dolores is. Her ordinariness is also a constant source of frustration for Humbert, and she consistently thwarts his attempts to educate her and make her more sophisticated. "Lolita, when she chose, could be a most exasperating brat. I was not really quite prepared for her fits of disorganized boredom, intense and vehement griping, her sprawling, droopy, dopey-eyed style, and what is called goofing off – a kind of diffused clowning which she thought was tough in a boyish hoodlum way. Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl.

Sweet hot jazz, square dancing, gooey fudge sundaes, musicals, movie magazines and so forth – these were the obvious items in her list of beloved

things” . Dolores is addicted to popular culture, is convivial and enjoys mingling freely with other people and like most prepubescent girls is a bit of a drama queen. In the quote previously mentioned one can also make the assumption that the part of this child that frustrates Humbert so much is in fact the real Dolores who is a far cry from Humbert’s fantasized darling Lolita. However, when she shouts and rebels against Humbert, Lolita exhibits more than the aggravation of an ordinary adolescent as she clearly feels trapped by her disconcerting arrangement with Humbert and is powerless to extricate herself; in other words she is a helpless girl who is being manipulated by a deranged and dysfunctional, perverted man. With the passing of time we see that Dolores continuously strives to emancipate herself from being Humbert’s captive as she either realizes the abnormality of her situation or simply is fed up of Humbert; her father and her lover; a Freudian nightmare. Yet her attempts to escape could also only be a result of boredom or the monotony her life or simply because she realizes that her life with Humbert is in fact forced upon her, the minute she felt incarcerated she naturally would want to break away from her imprisonment as basic human nature suggests.

Lolita changes radically throughout the novel, despite aging only about six years. At the beginning of the novel she is an innocent, though sexually experienced child of twelve, a fact that Humbert uses as a defensive excuse for his sexual endeavors with young Lolita. “ Suffice it to say that not a trace of modesty did I perceive in this beautiful hardly formed young girl whom modern co-education, juvenile mores, the campfire racket and so forth had utterly and hopelessly depraved” ... Did I deprive her of her flower? Sensitive

gentlewomen of the jury, I was not even her first lover. " Humbert escorts Lolita's transition into a more fully sexual being, but seemingly Dolores never acknowledges or realizes that her sexual activities with Humbert are very different from her fooling around with Charlie in the bushes at summer camp or maybe she was completely aware of her actions and can only be redeemed in the fact that a twelve year old girl is still a child with hardly any regard for her actions and little clarity in life. In a couple of years that follow, till Lolita is fourteen, she is too conditioned with her situation in life and Humbert's advances to really look at the bigger picture or rebel towards such injustice. By the end of the novel, she has become depleted and haggard married to a laborer and is with child.

Throughout her life Lolita sustains an almost complete lack of self-awareness, with nothing important enough to value. It is almost unsettling that as an adult, she recollects her past with Humbert dispassionately and does not seem to hold a grudge against either him or Quilty for the corruption of her childhood. Her attitude suggests that as a child, contrary to her juvenile behavior she was perhaps partly a shade of Lolita and a then tone of Dolores, Dolores Lolita Haze, her pseudonym perhaps better suited as a middle-name that truly dwells in her person somewhat somewhere and her silent attitude suggests that maybe she did consider herself to have an equal hand in her anomalous and illicit past. Dolores's refusal to look too deeply within herself and her tendency to look forward rather than backward might represent her acceptance of shared guilt, but Humbert definitely deserves the fundamental blame. He objectifies Lolita, creates

rationalizations for his behavior by holding her responsible and robs her of any sense of self.

Lolita exists only as the object of his obsession, never as an individual. It may be argued that the lack of self-awareness in a child is typical and often charming and is the easiest thing to manipulate and Humbert succeeds in taking so much from Dolores's self that she has become vacant and apathetic towards her experiences in life. It is her guilt, this lack of self or a confused amalgamation of both that results in such passivity and lack of emotional response from Lolita. However Lolita's meekness can also be attributed to the fact that Humbert is alas the only family she has after her mother's death. Initially we see Humbert constantly warning Dolores of the repercussions she must face if she chooses to run away from him.

Lolita's alternative is of an orphaned life spent in some institution for waifs and strays which would also mean her being deprived of Humbert's material pampering. But with time Dolores decides to abandon her captor maybe because she is sick of playing a part in the dysfunctional drama that her life is and because she has matured with age and does not prioritize material over her freedom. Yet it is a particularly odd and intriguing turn of events when Lolita runs away with none other than Humbert's doppelganger, Clare Quilty. Quilty serves as a kind of mirror image of Humbert, reflecting similar traits and thoughts that are only embodied in a darker and much harsher personification. Humbert and Quilty both are attracted towards nymphets, but they act on their desires in very different ways. While Humbert worships and idealizes Lolita as a goddess of sorts, Quilty takes her for granted and wishes to denigrate her through pornography.

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Humbert in his rich language of an aesthete paints himself as a man in love, while Quilty quite obviously is, as it seems, a more typical pedophile. But then again, *Lolita* is not Quilty's novel but Humbert's sugar-coated flowery account of an unlawful and immoral love affair and hence it is easy for the reader to redeem Humbert and render Quilty as truly villainous. However a real shocker is disclosed when we learn that Lolita was actually in love with Quilty who dumped her when she refused to participate in a child-pornography orgy leaving Lolita heartbroken and devastated. That Lolita adores Quilty who is merely an intangible presence in the novel and remains unaffected by Humbert's constant presence and attention is an interesting notion to deliberate that also represents a cruel twist in the novel. This unexpected outcome suggests that Lolita was indeed banking on a future outside of Humbert's control and that the nature of this future was also identical to her present. Technically she has only replaced one man with another who is only a cruder edition of Humbert entailing that Lolita quite possibly is the infamous nymphet Humbert so ardently croons over.

But yet again it is all a game of perhaps and maybes even if there is concrete proof for Lolita's nymphetic nature because all things aside she lives and passes away in a seventeen year juvenile life span of insecurity, uncertainty and exploitation. It is not easy to simply blame Lolita for either her forwardness or her compliance or anything at all for that matter since she lived and died as a minor, both officially and socially. Her actions cannot be held accountable as from beginning to end Dolores/Lolita is redeemed of all moral, social and even legal obligations because to be fair, Lolita died evergreen as a girl who never got to live long enough to consider and

question her past as a woman; as an adult. In other words, Dolores died as Lolita without a chance to exonerate or more so even discover her own true self, leaving the reader with shades of who she was and predictions of who she potentially could have become.