

Humbert humbert's tragic misconception of love in nabokov's lolita



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The trouble with an unreliable narrator often lies in choosing what to believe. In the case of Vladimir Nabokov's incestuously illicit novel *Lolita*, it proves to be an intriguing predicament, as the unreliability of narrator Humbert Humbert is unquestionably severe, yet his convincing intellect persuades the reader to at least consider his point of view and reasoning. As one of Humbert's main goals in his testimony is to persuade his "jury" that he was actually in love with his pre-pubescent stepdaughter - whom he essentially kidnapped and repeatedly took advantage of sexually - he is somehow able to have us consider his disturbing and inconceivable claim as truthful, an indicator of his powerful cogency. So is it possible that this clearly unreliable and heinous pedophile loved Lolita as he says he did? As unlikely of a notion as it is, there are many indications that his feelings were more than carnally driven. He even says to his audience at a point when he has nothing to gain in pleading, "You may jeer at me, and threaten to clear the court, but until I am gagged and half-throttled, I will shout my poor truth. I insist the world know how much I loved my Lolita, this Lolita, pale and polluted, and big with another's child...but still mine" [Nabokov, 278]. Indeed, there are many signals (such as this) that point to truth behind the pathological pedophile's claim; in fact, there is enough evidence within his reflection to prove that Humbert did actually love Lolita. Or rather, he loved her in the sense of what he understood love to look like. In conventional terms, Humbert had no right classifying his relationship with Lolita as love, but from the twisted perspective of a man with obvious mental imbalance it was love in the only way that he knew how to express it. As love is a very difficult abstraction to define - the aberrant obsession that Humbert had with Lolita illustrates his personal perception of love, and further allows the audience to probe into <https://assignbuster.com/humbert-humberts-tragic-misconception-of-love-in-nabokovs-lolita/>

the roots and rationale of a disturbed pedophile's misconception of love. The unconventional and appalling understanding of love that Humbert holds can only be understood by observing the twisted fate of his childhood. While about the same age as his adored Lolita, he began a relationship with a young girl named Annabel Leigh, which he similarly regarded as love, saying, "All at once we were madly, clumsily, shamelessly, agonizingly in love with each other" [Nabokov, 12]. This infatuation certainly proved to be nothing more than an adolescent crush, which by Humbert's own account was bent on sexual experimentation. When Annabel tragically died of typhus, just months after Humbert's second and final chance of "possessing" her, he became trapped within the juvenile understanding of an incredibly powerful emotion. At this early teenage point of Humbert's life he had already begun to use the term 'love' loosely, and his appreciation of the word's connotation was not fully realized. Through his own account of their relationship it appears that their simple passion for competitive tennis as well as their sexual curiosities were the only shared interests between the two; and because of this premature romance, (her sudden death did not allow it to bloom into something of true endearment), Humbert began to associate love and lust as interchangeable. After her passing, Humbert was never able to shake his unquenchable desire for the young 'nymphet' whom he never managed to 'posses;' nor was he able to rid his psyche of the fallacious perception of love that had developed within him. This false sense of love, rooted in both lust and nympholepsy, follows Humbert throughout his life and finally reaches its climax with Lolita. The first few descriptions of his emotions toward Lolita are all physically driven, as he is unable to focus on anything but her 'honey-hued shoulders,' or 'juvenile breasts,' [Nabokov, <https://assignbuster.com/humbert-humberts-tragic-misconception-of-love-in-nabokovs-lolita/>]

39] and his passion for Lolita seems to parallel his love of Annabel – albeit more extreme. Ironically he even spends a good while trying to teach Lolita how to play tennis competitively, which symbolizes the unrelenting cycle of destruction that his obsession held over him, through its correspondence to his pubescent relationship with Annabel. However, after he has already had sexual relations with Lolita, seen her become pregnant by another man, and gazes upon what he calls “ the faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo of the nymphet,” [Nabokov, 277] – it is only then that he finally and completely professes his true love of Lolita. This assertion causes the reader to wonder if he actually did undergo a change – if he did indeed develop a true understanding of love, separate of the juvenile one he had carried with him throughout his life. If he claimed to still have loved her at a point when she was seventeen years old, and carrying the child of another man, it indicates that he had undergone some sort of change, and that his feelings for Lolita were more than a carnal obsession of her youthful appearance. The transformation of Humbert is undeniable, but does it represent love? The truth is, Humbert was not lying when he said he loved Lolita, because in his mind he did love her to his fullest capacity. The trouble is Humbert did not know what true love meant, and his way of expressing love was appalling. According to the prevailing perception of the word, Humbert did not love Lolita, but despite his despicable demeanor, it is unfair to assume that he did not believe he loved her. Evidently, the debate over whether Humbert actually did love Lolita is not cut and dried; it is a very complex issue. The question that is impossible to ignore presents itself – how can a man who plotted the murder of his own wife in order to have sexual freedom with his twelve-year-old stepdaughter, say he loved her? Further, how can he defend <https://assignbuster.com/humbert-humberts-tragic-misconception-of-love-in-nabokovs-lolita/>

this claim after controlling her, sexually abusing her, and murdering the first man she claimed to have had true feelings for [Nabokov, 279]? Yet what does he have to gain in claiming that he loved her, when his grave fate is already sealed? Nothing. And this more than anything he directly says, proves that he believed he loved her, because he had no reason to lie. What then did love look like to Humbert Humbert, and how did it differ from the established connotation? Primarily, love as he understood it knew no boundaries. Though he was cognizant of the abnormality and illegality of his desire, he did not consider it off limits. The age disparity between him and his beloved was of no hindrance, as this ordinarily forbidden 'love' was not to be deterred. The second and most important component of Humbert's perception of love was the lack of mutuality that it necessitated for him. That Humbert was able to love without being loved back, as well as the fact that he attempted to extract love out of Lolita, illustrates the radically flawed understanding of endearment that he possessed. Lastly, as previously mentioned, an unhealthy balance of lust and perversion consumed his notion of love, as few details are spared in the chronicling of his sexual desires and 'accomplishments' over the young nymphet. Clearly Humbert's conception of love was a tragic misunderstanding, but to him, it was love nonetheless. The question should therefore not be whether Humbert loved Lolita; rather it should seek whether Humbert knew what it meant to love when he claimed to have been in love. If he had understood what it meant to truly love, he would have wanted what was best for Lolita - he would have accepted the fact that an illicit relationship was unfair to her (even if she agreed to it,) and he would have loved her as a father figure, in a non-romantic way.

Unfortunately, Humbert's instability made this realization impossible and his <https://assignbuster.com/humbert-humberts-tragic-misconception-of-love-in-nabokovs-lolita/>

fatal delusion overtook him, as his mistaken impression of love caused him to “ break her life” [Nabokov, 279], which he finally admits. The sad reality is that the cruel fate of Humbert's first relationship sent him into a terminal spiral, which he could never recover from. His mental imbalance and pedophilia allowed him to justify all of his disgusting actions in the name of love. Consequently, he was not lying when he claimed to have loved Lolita, he simply loved her in the only way he knew how to, which regrettably was very misconceived. Bibliography Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Annotated Lolita*. Ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. New York: Vintage, 1991.