

Illusions of grandeur: narrative 'games' in Nabokov's *Lolita*



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In a 1964 article for *Playboy*, Vladimir Nabokov wrote of his most famous and controversial novel: "I shall never regret *Lolita*. She was like the composition of a beautiful puzzle its composition and its solution at the same time, since one is a mirror view of the other" (Nabokov 16-21). The possibility of *Lolita* having a definitive solution is fascinating how can a book that has divided critics for decades with its intricate narrative have a single answer, an unequivocal resolution? Treating the novel as a riddle implies that Nabokov wrote each and every word with a clear solution in mind; the reader must search for clues rather than complexities, for answers rather than interpretive questions. In "'Lo' and Behold: Solving the *Lolita* Riddle," Trevor McNeely treats *Lolita* the novel as the riddle in an attempt to find this ultimate solution. McNeely, however, misinterprets Nabokov's words by only discussing narrative structure and style and claiming that "*Lolita* as a character means nothing" (McNeely 183). If we look at Nabokov's quote from a different perspective and keep in mind the term "mirror view," the riddle would seem to be the novel itself while *Lolita*, the character, is the solution. By examining Humbert's narrative technique and various tones, *Lolita*'s purpose as a character, and the interaction of moral concerns and aesthetic device, we realize that *Lolita*, as a character and composition, is simply a literal projection of Humbert's ego. Treating the novel itself as a "riddle and solution bound together," McNeely seeks a one-dimensional resolution of a contradictory narrative filled with a seemingly "complex set of questions" (McNeely 182). In order to follow Nabokov's lead and find this solution, he ignores all possibility of reality in the novel, dismisses the character portrayals as elements of the "author's trap," and presents a solution whose very obviousness...has no doubt contributed to the ease with which it has

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duped a generation of the subtlest adult readers...Lolita was written to prove a simple point in a complex way. The point is that style can do anything.

(McNeely 184-5)Before I examine Lolita the character as a subtler example

of this premise, it is important to understand this concept of all-

encompassing " style"- style that has the purpose of both creating and

subverting reality. This pseudo-reality, of course, belongs to Humbert

Humbert, our lead character whom Nabokov endows with a " fancy prose

style" and a remarkable array of narrative tones (9). Indeed, because

chronology, character, and plot are entirely filtered through Humbert's

perspective, it becomes " impossible...to separate form from content in

terms of character and plot in the novel as it is in terms of structure and

style" (McNeely 183-5). Four basic types of narrative tone comprise

Humbert's perspective - each flows in and out of the prose without the

slightest disruption. First, decidedly black (often obsessively morbid) humor

softens Humbert's grave seriousness; for example, " Fat fate's formal

handshake (as reproduced by Beale before leaving the room) brought me

out of my torpor; and I wept" (103). Though here he manipulates humor to

dilute open emotion, he occasionally melts into blunt, loving candor; after his

first sight of Lolita, he tries to express the " force, that flash, that shiver, that

impact of passionate recognition," but struggles since it requires

unadulterated honesty (39). The third type of tone Humbert uses the stylistic

" joke" is perhaps the most recognizable; " Vivian Darkbloom" is a brilliant

anagram of the author's name, Maximovich's name " taxies back" to the

playful narrator, and Quilty's death sentence is a fervent parody of T. S.

Eliot's " Ash Wednesday" (30, 300). Finally (and most importantly), Humbert

infuses his narrative with striking self-awareness; he often preempts

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audience reaction, artificially creates suspense (for example, Lolita never actually names Quilty as her abductor), and treats his audience as a “ jury” to maximize the effectiveness of his “ pleas” for understanding and forgiveness (9). The combination of these four tones creates a reality that is made up of narrative styles rather than human emotions an effect which “ is slick, it’s very authentic, it’s even appealing in its own way, but to swallow it is to choke” (McNeely 193). “ Choking,” as McNeely labels it, implies emotional involvement in Humbert’s reality which is, in itself, a subversion of reality. This recognition of subversive reality is the key to solving Nabokov’s “ riddle” we already realize that style not only serves to ambush the nave reader, but also to “ implicate him” in Humbert’s crimes (McNeely 193). McNeely effectively proves the existence of this stylistic trap, emphasizing how plot and character “ are literally waved in the reader’s face as phony from start to finish” (McNeely 196). Yet, his argument is not only oversimplistic, but also does not go far enough his nihilistic perspective labels the novel a “ literary game,” but fails to interpret it (McNeely 193-4). The true solution to Nabokov’s riddle lies in the ultimate meaning of this “ game” namely the way in which plot and character achieve unity with style. Of the former, McNeely claims the “ whole plot of the book is put together with the same care and for the same purpose. The plot has one justification and basis only to trap the reader” (McNeely 193-4). He proceeds to list a number of episodes in the novel (Charlotte’s death, for example) that are nothing more than “ phony” and “ insignificant” ways of exhibiting stylistic cleverness (McNeely 194). Such a claim, however, grossly underestimates the “ care” he previously extols. Instead, every development is fine-tuned to reflect Humbert’s personal quest for fulfillment and acceptance. The plot, for <https://assignbuster.com/illusions-of-grandeur-narrative-games-in-nabokovs-lolita/>

instance, continuously undermines Humbert's depravity to force the audience into sympathizing with him. During their first sexual encounter, Lolita not Humbert is the seducer: 'you mean you never - ? - her features twisted into a stare of disgusted incredulity. ' you have never' she started again...'You mean,' she persisted, now kneeling above me, ' you never did it when you were a kid?' Never,' I answered quite truthfully.'Okay,' said Lolita, ' here is where we start.' (133)Not only does Lolita control this exchange, but she also kneels " above" Humbert, reversing the position of the sexual position where the female pleasures the male; such a reversal clearly reappropriates the power in their relationship. Moreover, this manipulation clearly subverts Humbert's position as the male and his responsibility in the sexual act; in a sense, he becomes the victim of a sexual predator. McNeely recognizes this convenient stylistic device but goes no further in his interpretation. Yet, Humbert's ego clearly is on display here. He reimagines this plotted encounter as a projection of his own perverse desires - a projection that simultaneously lessens his responsibility and enacts his greatest fantasy. Additionally, the novel's design builds towards an exceedingly manipulative climax; the reader is virtually tricked into a " romantic vindication" of Humbert (McNeely 195). The murder of Quilty places Humbert in the position of the traditional (epic) hero his love for Lolita seemingly " proves" itself in such an act. Indeed, the " poetical justice" Humbert has Quilty read aloud is a clear example of how Humbert manipulates language and truth to elicit sympathy: Because you took advantage of my inner Essential innocenceBecause you cheated me-Because you cheated me of my redemptionBecause you tookHer at the age when ladsplay with erector sets (299-300)Yet, while this attempt at gaining <https://assignbuster.com/illusions-of-grandeur-narrative-games-in-nabokovs-lolita/>

compassion is clearly hollow (the poem parodies T. S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday" which itself is a parody), these plot developments do not simply collapse into stylistic games as McNeely argues. Here, Humbert is once again projecting his ego in every word; his "romantic" avenging of Lolita's kidnapping is nothing more than the expression of pure, unadulterated jealousy. Yet, by emphasizing his role as the "victim" whose "innocence" and "redemption" are destroyed, he becomes the unexpected hero (299-300). Indeed, such a reversal is even more fascinating since Quilty is basically Humbert's double; they are both responsible for "cheating" Lolita's "innocence" (299-300). (Humbert often mentions Charlie's role in defiling Lolita, another manipulation to lessen the impact of his own evil.) Indeed, the entire plot is designed to subvert Humbert's evil and proclaim him the hero; this narrative manipulation is our most important clue in solving Nabokov's riddle. The book is more than a "literary game," as McNeely claims instead, it is a narrative game (195). If the entire plot is the projection and product of Humbert's ego, who then is Lolita? Turning our attention to the title character, we discover that she and not the composition itself is the riddle and solution, "bound up" in a "mirror view" of one another (McNeely 183, Nabokov 20). Lolita, the character, is our key to penetrating the many layers of Humbert's voice and reaching the core of the narrative. Critics who have labeled Lolita the ultimate "love story" never track this line of interpretation; Humbert's memoirs are not an "immortalization" of his Lolita, but rather an unverifiable set of fantasies (309). "Lolita" is nothing more than a carefully constructed word: "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta"(9). Not only is her name a syllabic

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construction, but the essence of her character depends on such labels: She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita. (9) The paradox, of course is that Humbert is defined by his lecherous body; he mentions bodily functions almost obsessively and euphemistically labels his "scepter of passion" with a "thousand eyes wide open in my eyed blood" (15, 42). This contrast between Lolita as a word and Humbert as an extant body is a recurring theme: Thus had I delicately constructed my ignoble, ardent, sinful dream; and Lolita was safe-and I was safe. What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita-perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness -indeed, no life of her own. (62) Lolita has no "will" or "consciousness" outside Humbert's elaborate fantasies. Without a "life of her own," she only serves as a reflection an "encasing" agent of her father's physical (and literary) ecstasy. Besides her role as a projective device, Lolita herself is derivative and devoid of her own reality. She is, instead, the "incarnation" of Annabel Leigh, Humbert's childhood fantasy (15). The twist, of course, is that Annabel Leigh is an incarnation herself namely the static title character of Edgar Allen Poe's famous poem. In Poe's poem, Annabel Lee, statuesque and mute, lives in a "kingdom by the sea" as a prisoner of fate. She lives and dies without the slightest agency, solely reflecting the desires of an egotistical narrator: It was many and many a year ago, In a kingdom by the sea That a maiden there lived whom you may know. By the name of ANNABEL LEE And this maiden she lived with no other thought Than to love and be loved by me. (Lee 1) Humbert is a more carefully crafted

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version of this narrator in a "princedom by the sea," he awakens Lolita as a "mirrored" reincarnation of Annabel Lee (9, Nabokov 20). These subtle hints at Lolita's shallowness point towards a final solution which Humbert almost makes explicit: "Imagine me,; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me; try to discern the doe in me, trembling in the forest of my own iniquity; let's even smile a little" (129). Despite his pleas, Humbert is gleefully deceiving the reader. His character requires no such imagining. Indeed, he artfully deflects attention from Lolita the literary projection who must be imagined, who truly does not exist. McNeely fails to reach this solution because he dismisses the character Lolita as meaningless and thus cannot track the narrative to its conclusion. Indeed, since we know that Lolita is herself an exercise of Humbert's voice in fact, the result of the four tones discussed earlier the conclusion becomes sparkingly lucid. Once Quilty dies, Humbert acknowledges his ultimate goal the permanence of his stylistic creations: And do not pity C. Q. One had to choose between him and H. H., and one wanted H. H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita .

(309) Viewing this passage in light our solution prompts a final question: is it possible to imagine the life of another in full reality? Clearly explicit in Humbert's final words is the doubling of the narrator and his archenemy (his alter-ego?) Quilty. Yet, the reader must "choose" Hubert not only to allow him "a couple of months" to produce his memoirs, but because he is the heroic voice of "art." In fact, his "refuge of art" is a reality in itself that can that must be immortalized. And in this "refuge," Lolita lives as a literary

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incarnation amidst the “ aurochs and angels” of mythology, the “ durable pigments” of penned compositions, and poetry that will spark future “ incarnations” (15). (The term “ prophetic” is particularly disturbing, implying Lolita is a blank canvas on which future artists will project and reflect.) Interestingly, Nabokov chooses the term “ immortality” a word dangerously close to “ immorality” as the thrust of his final sentence. Here, he deliberately juxtaposes artistic and ethical concerns to provoke the debate over the value of the narrative a debate that is anticipated by an earlier couplet: “ The moral sense in mortals is the duty / We have to pay on mortal sense of beauty” (283). This couplet is a riddle in itself; Nabokov implies that if we accept Humbert’s narrative as “ beautiful,” we must accept the “ moral sense” of evil in which it is based. Humbert’s final words eerily compare to the summoning of the muse on ancient epics only in this case, Humbert is his own muse. Thus, he not only immortalizes the aesthetic beauty of his prose, but the evils attached to it. Though he ends by pairing himself with Lolita, the epithet “ my” shatters all illusions and underscores Humbert’s subverted reality. He whispers his victory to a fantasy a vision appropriated by ego and desire, a vision that cannot answer. Works Cited” Annabel Lee.” Electronic Journal of American Poetry. [http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/browse-mixed-new?id=PoeAnna&tag=public&images/modeng&data=texts/english/modeng/parsedMcNeely, Trevor. “ Lo” and Behold: Solving the Lolita Riddle. Studies in the Novel. Summer, 1989. 21\(2\): 182-199. Nabokov, Vladimir. Lolita. New York: Vintage International, 1955. Nabokov, Vladimir. Strong Opinions. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973. 16-21.](http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/browse-mixed-new?id=PoeAnna&tag=public&images/modeng&data=texts/english/modeng/parsedMcNeely,Trevor.‘Lo’andBehold:SolvingtheLolitaRiddle.StudiesintheNovel.Summer,1989.21(2):182-199.Nabokov,Vladimir.Lolita.NewYork:VintageInternational,1955.Nabokov,Vladimir.StrongOpinions.NewYork:McGraw-Hill,1973.16-21.)