

Lolita as a psychological case study



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Nabokov's *Lolita* is a unique book in that its narrator, under the 'pseudonym' of Humbert Humbert, often breaks the fourth wall to retroactively embellish his story. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," he addresses the reader on multiple occasions, the way he would if he were standing trial. Nabokov does this in order to play with the reader's sense of what is and is not real.

Humbert literally comes to life through his apparent total untrustworthiness. Nabokov's choice to include the forward in *Lolita* is his way of preparing the reader for Humbert's unreliable narration. The fictional John Ray Jr. serves to inform us that we are reading the memoir of an unstable man, and blatantly tells us that "Lolita will become, no doubt, a classic in psychiatric circles." In effect, he is telling us to consider the book as a case study, a look into the mind of the pseudonymous Humbert Humbert, which is how Nabokov intends it to be read. Humbert's unreliable narration is effective in demonstrating to us, as readers, precisely how his mind works. As the book is written more as a psychological study than a narrative, it's important that we see the events of the story through the eyes of the criminal, so we gain insight into his thought processes, such as his creation of the term 'nymphet'. Humbert's theory that there is in fact a certain, particularly tempting variety of young girl is a good example of blaming-the-victim mentality common to perpetrators of violent crimes like rape, essentially what he does to Lolita. Of his first sexual encounter with her, he insists, "I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me." Lolita, obviously, could not comprehend the importance of her actions, and Humbert does not acknowledge the responsibility he had. In another example, in the opening scenes of the book, Humbert dwells on his encounters with a girl he once knew named Anabel. He cites her as an explanation, an excuse even, for his

behavior. Their relationship may or may not be of major psychological significance to him, but he self-analyzes it as such, and finds it comparable to the one he has with Lolita. He also gives frequent and earnest descriptions of being enchanted or bewitched, or otherwise not in control of his actions. His creation of the word 'nymphet' reflects this. The nymphs of legend were temptresses, creatures of the forest that seduced innocent men. Humbert casts himself as the victim in his story, helpless against his alleged love for Dolores Haze. This idea that he is the true victim also helps Humbert feel justified in killing Claire Quilty. Quilty also notices, and attracts the notice of, Lolita, and like she did with Humbert initially, she seeks Quilty's affection and approval in her own skewed way, letting him exploit her childishness and cuteness. However, while Humbert spends years obsessed with Lolita, Quilty does not consider his sexual encounters with her to be very important. He tells Humbert, "I made a mistake. Which I sincerely regret. You see, I had no fun with your Dolly." Quilty's glibness with regards to Lolita serves to highlight Humbert's passion and obsession. He is even angry at Quilty for his objectifying and scorn toward the girl. Again, Humbert does not see his raping Lolita to really be taking advantage of her. He sees himself as the guileless prey of a seductive demon. Later in her life, when Lolita marries Dick Schiller, Humbert takes a jealous dislike to him, and mocks everything about him; his beard stubble, his posture, his way of speaking: "He guessed Bill and he would be going back to fix those wires. He guessed Mr. Haze and Dolly had loads of things to say to each other. He guessed he would be seeing me before he left. Why do these people guess so much and shave so little, and are so disdainful of hearing aids?" Nabokov never tells the readers outright that Humbert is jealous, but we can sense it in every word. The two-

part structure of the novel is also significant. At the very end of the first section of the book, we start to see the first hints of the essential conflicts that will cause their relationship to collapse, such as their radically different perspectives and the imbalance of power. As Part Two progresses, Lolita becomes aware of the emotional influence she exerts over Humbert and begins to exploit it. The split in the novel's structure also occurs at the very beginning of Lolita's adolescence, heralding the friction that occurs between a father and daughter under normal circumstances, and only made more difficult by their pseudo-incestuous relationship. Nabokov divides the novel in half as he does in order to emphasize the major shift in Humbert and Lolita's relationship, namely Lolita's transition from a Humbert's ideal to a real, living, and flawed girl.