

Dolor, Dolores: The Duality of Love Within *Lolita*

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Lolita, Vladimir Nabokov's abominable creation of wonder, has tugged at the hearts and minds of its readers for the better half of a century. It is a story of travesty, and deranged criminality; the confession of a pedophile, the perception of a madman, and the wretched soul of an artist. How can such a forbidden subject enthrall readers so? What makes Humbert Humbert's memoir of despair so captivating as to completely engulf one's sense of morale, and replace it with raw, tainted emotion? The complexity of this work stems from Nabokov's ability to foster a cultural taboo into the ultimate passion, the most virile fruit of temptation, an embodiment of obsession, and allure of original sin. The horrific subject of predatory, pedophilic love is presented with just the right amount of distortion to morph it completely into what some call one of the most powerful love stories of all time.

The root of controversy regarding the possible romantic aspect of *Lolita* is, in its most fundamental form, that the love of Humbert Humbert is irrevocably unconventional. Collectively, the world views the idea of love in the sense of fleeting butterflies and rainbows of angst. People assume that love is beauty and happiness, laced with a blissful hopelessness. It is what we read in smutty novels and see in romantic comedies. What Nabokov presents in the way of love is that these things are not mutually exclusive.

There does not need to be happiness for there to be beauty, nor bliss in hopelessness. He provides for us, the other side of the coin: the pain, consumption, torture and the severe ruthlessness of love. He showcases the dark corner of our emotions that we, as humans, never wish to admit even exists, let alone venture into.

Humbert's love, his deadly infatuation, is born of a terrible obsession. It is an obsession that consumes him, dominates him, dictates his every thought and action. "And what is most singular is that she, *this Lolita, my Lolita*, has individualized the writer's ancient lust, so that above and over everything there is - *Lolita*"(Nabokov, 45). As Humbert falls prey to the demons inside, one world gives way to another. His life, his very existence revolves around *Lolita*. The rug is pulled out beneath him, and he revels in the plummet. "The twenty-five years I had lived since then, tapered to a palpating point, and vanished. I find it most difficult to express with adequate force that flash, that shiver, that impact of passionate recognition"(Nabokov, 39). The claws of Humbert's obsession take hold instantly. It is this brutality that curbs their relationship, the merciless torment of his fantastical phantasm.

A point of argument regarding *Lolita*, is whether or not Humbert's obsession is love, or just an insane

infatuation. I believe this question supplies the perfect groundwork for the former. There is no rule that says what love is and is not. There is no law that designates love as a force for good or evil. It is an emotion, it churns and evolves, and is unique in its characteristics to each individual. It is the most dangerous of emotions, because it has the power to control and utterly destroy a being from the inside out; and that is exactly what happens in *Lolita*. And as far as Humbert Humbert, a deranged maniac, an artist ruled by urge and the rush of emotion, there is no one better to welcome and succumb to the rawness, the harsh primality that is, in fact, *his* perceived love. Is that not what love is? A perception? If Humbert believes he is in love with Lolita, then who is to say to the contrary? And while it is true that, for a time, what he loved was not the child, Dolores Haze, but in fact, the mirage of his own fantasy, *that love* was real, and throughout the course of the book, it has the chance to evolve into something else. "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"(Nabokov, 63). Humbert becomes so consumed with the entity of Lolita, that he will do anything to make her happy, without necessarily considering the wellbeing of the physical child. "...and it would take hours of blandishments, threats and promises to make her lend me for a few seconds her brown limbs in the seclusion of the five-dollar room before undertaking anything she might prefer to my poor joy"(Nabokov, 147). His every action is calculated to keep Dolores at bay, so that he may revel in Lolita, "Now, in perusing what follows, the reader should bear in mind not only the general circuit as adumbrated above, with its many side trips and tourist traps, secondary circles and skittish deviations, but also the fact that far from being an indolent *partie de plaisir*, our tour was a hard, twisted, teleological growth, whose sole

raison d'être (these French clichés are symptomatic) was to keep my companion in passable humor from kiss to kiss"(Nabokov, 154). Humbert Humbert, as perceived both by society and himself, is a monster, and it is the selfish, sinful, completely morbid eroticism of his love that tempts and entices us so.

Nabokov presents a love story that is vicious and one-sided. He proposes that love may be given, and never received- it may be taken and never returned. The reality of Dolores and Humbert's situation is that she is the innocent, helpless, voiceless victim of a pedophile. His love for her is totally his own; he offers himself completely and is never allowed the faintest glimpse inside her own heart. It is selfish, it is immoral, most painful and absolutely horrible; and yet, I think that this one-sidedness, this lack of connection, the despair and pain and anguish we readers cannot help but feel alongside both Humbert Humbert and Lolita is perhaps the most powerful form love can ever take. There is nothing more devastating, more horrific, more heart-wrenching than a story that paves the way for the ideal that there is nothing loving about love. "She had entered my world, umber and black Humberland, with rash curiosity; she surveyed it with a shrug of amused distaste; and it seemed to me now that she was ready to turn away from it with something akin to plain repulsion. Never did she vibrate under my touch, and a strident 'what d'you think you are doing?' was all I got for my pains. To wonderland I had to offer, my fool preferred the corniest movies, the most cloying fudge. To think that between a Hamburger and a Humburger, she would - invariably, with icy precision - plump for the former" (Nabokov, 166). Humbert knows the awfulness transpiring between them, he knows he is alone in his sea of fancy, and yet any and all tortures cannot possibly compare to any amount of bliss that can be derived between one wound and the next. "There was a day, during our first trip - our first circle of paradise - when in order

to enjoy my phantasms in peace I firmly decided to ignore what I could not help perceiving, the fact that I was not her boyfriend, not a glamour man, not a pal, not even a person at all, but just two eyes and a foot of engorged brawn -”(Nabokov, 283). Dolores may be Humbert’s captive, but Humbert is Lolita’s slave. “Despite our tiffs, despite her nastiness, despite all the fuss and faces she made, and the vulgarity, and the danger, and the horrible hopelessness of it all, I still dwelled deep in my elected paradise - a paradise whose skies were the color of hell-flames - but still a paradise”(Nabokov, 166).

What makes this love powerful not just between the characters, but to the reader, is the temptation of the taboo, the questions that begin to surface from the dark corners of your mind you pretend aren’t there. This book offers the account of a crime from the perspective of the offender. Rarely do we entertain, let alone get a glimpse, into the perspective of a pedophile. Rarely do people give their time to try to understand the other side. The narrator’s distortion, perception, or maybe even blatant honesty, causes readers to question themselves, their values, morals, and perceptions of good and evil. Is Humbert a criminal? Is he evil? Or is he just a different kind of victim? Whether or not we are able to answer these questions for ourselves, it asks something more of us; Do we accept him not just as a criminal, but as a human being? Weak and flawed? And if so, do we understand his criminality? Can we sympathize with his actions? With his pain? The pondering of these various questions causes readers to call into question, and at times even re-evaluate their own moral standing. But, what must be considered is that the love story this book presents us has nothing to do with our sense of morality. It is true that Humbert commits heinous acts of violence against Dolores, and it is true that Dolores is deadlocked in a constant state of hopelessness, that she is irrevocably broken, her life shattered; but, this is not

a story of hope, nor of happiness; therefore the love derived from such a palate is in fact devoid of these traits, and must be accepted. It is not a story of a perfect, or even flawed fairytale love; and as such cannot be judged or weighed by such predilections of our own moral justification. This story is the torment and torture of reality and awareness of the evil molding it; and in this, through the eyes of both a madman and an artist, we can find, “the awfulness of love and violets”(Nabokov, 300). It is a love that is beautiful because of its pain. Humbert is aware of his actions, he is aware of his destruction, yet his emotion inhibits any and all sense, or the ability to seek out, redemption, or atonement. “I loved you. I was a pentapod monster, but I loved you. I was despicable and brutal, and turpid, and everything, *mais je t’aimais, je t’aimais!* And there were times when I knew how you felt, and it was hell to know it, my little one. Lolita girl, brave Dolly Schiller”(Nabokov, 284-5).

This is tragedy; but it is a different kind of tragedy than we have come to recognize through Shakespeare and his counterparts. It is not a tragedy of doomed lovers, but a tragedy of two beings doomed by love; and it is not a love that is their own, it is not a love they hold, but are in fact held, with vicious claws, by *it*. It is not a story of the love they shared, because no love was shared, it was expressed with no receiver, a question asked with no answer. “In her washed-out gray eyes, strangely spectacled, our poor romance was for a moment reflected, pondered upon, and dismissed like a dull party, like a rainy picnic to which only the dullest bores had come, like a humdrum exercise, like a bit of dry mud caking her childhood”(Nabokov, 272). One thing that creates an impact on the reader, is that in lieu of condemnation, of redemption or salvation, there is apathy. Lolita does not face her demons; she does not convict her offender. She does not offer him the sanction of her anger, of her acknowledgment

at all. Indifference, indifference to their romance and a willingness to forget, that is the tragedy of their love. She kills him with her numbness. He does so much, commits so many acts of violence against her, and yet she admits no impact of it. She does not give him the satisfaction of him knowing he affected her as a person. He, who dedicated his very existence to Lolita, is blown away by the realization that he meant, means, absolutely nothing to her. He will not have any part of her, whether it be her happiness, or her pain. He acknowledges this completely, utterly, and despairingly, “She groped for words. I supplied them mentally (*‘He broke my heart. You merely broke my life’*)” (Nabokov, 279). A love of two individuals, but a love that only exists in the desperate heart of the villainous and in the sympathy of its witness: it is a sorrow more horrific, more heart-breaking than that of Juliet and her Romeo.

What cements the absolute certainty I have in regards to the question of the presence of love in Lolita, what thrusts me past the controversy, the rational woes, is the beautiful transformation, the evolution of evil that flows and twists and chokes the audience. On the surface, *Lolita* is the story of a pedophile and the short escapade of him and his victim. But if it was only this, if it was solely a recount of evil, it wouldn't continue to be one of the most discussed works of fiction in modern times. No one would bother, because there would be no point. What makes this story more than a criminal's confession, a recount of sin and debauchery, is the transcendence, the epiphany, or realization of humanity: the beauty in the maleficent, the serenity of human flaw.

Humbert Humbert is more than a criminal, he is a human being. His obsession is not a disease, it is not logical, but a corruption of the soul. It exposes and exploits; it grows and churns and manifests in

his Lolita. It takes seed in her vision, and blooms into something more.

It is almost a religious ascension; a split moment in time where the reader finds themselves, even for just a split second, caught between one world and the next, where the line between good and evil, moral justice and personal sway, disappears. The coin begins to flip, and blurs as one plane succumbs to the other. Humbert Humbert is not just a pedophile. Lolita is not just a victim. His obsession, his love, changes as he realizes, it is not for nymphets, it is for Dolores, Lolita Haze, Dolly Schiller. There is a moment in the text, when Humbert's affliction transforms, and is reborn, and what is left, what he sees, is not strictly Lolita, not Dolores Haze, but a convergence of the two. “Somewhere beyond Bill's shack an afterwork radio had begun singing of folly and fate, and there she was with her ruined looks and her adult, rope-veined narrow hands and her goose-flesh white arms, and her shallow ears, and her unkempt armpits, there she was (my Lolita!), hopelessly worn at seventeen, with that baby, dreaming already in her of becoming a big shot and retiring around 2020 A.D. - and I looked and looked at her, and knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else”(Nabokov, 277). This is the moment where Humbert's obsession transcends strict pedophilia, and becomes true love. “...but thank God it was not that echo alone that I worshiped. What I used to pamper among the tangled vines of my heart, *mon grand peche radieux*, had dwindled to its essence: sterile and selfish vice, all that I cancelled and cursed. 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 gray-eyed, still sooty-lashed, still auburn and almond,

still Carmencita, still mine”(Nabokov, 278). It goes beyond the criminality, beyond the pain and torture, the convention, standards, and the wrong of it all. And it is through the combination of all these things, or perhaps because of them all, that true beauty is found. It is the one rose amidst a sea of thorns, the one star breaking the night sky, the faintest twinge of conscience in the Devil’s eye.

There is such a dark and dangerous mystique surrounding the idea of the Forbidden Fruit that is absolutely entrancing, the idea of forbidden love; a love forbidden even to Humbert. *Lolita* is a story of love, in a multitude of dimensions. It is of time and reality and life. It is a flow through different planes, the characters, the author, the text, and the reader. It is a love of pain, of abuse, despair and obsession. It is all of these things. It is power. It is consumption. It is the allure of shadow, the pluck of the apple, the pulse of original sin. Nabokov, through the seduction of the English language, has conveyed beauty in its most painful, controversial state. *Lolita*, his home grown Fruit of Eve, showcases an understanding of the *other side*, of the other perspective, one of a maniac, of an artist and a madman, with such sweet subtlety, that the reader may not even realize that beyond the bliss of such a nectar, they have thus forsaken themselves so completely to the whim of the author. By using brilliant poetry, wit, emotional/perceptual distortion, and humor, he is able to unveil the blossom of beauty lurking within the most violent knot of thorns. He communicates the beauty of the world, of language, of emotional, psychological, and social perception, through utter travesty, horror, morbid humor, and most dangerously, love.

REFERENCES

- [1] Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Annotated Lolita*. New York: Vintage Books, 1955.