

Finding Lolita's Voice: Reconciling Love, Truth, and Art

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Lolita is a labyrinth creation, a work grappling with complex questions about the nature of love, truth, and art. The dark story is presented through an enchanting lens as Nabokov's narrator, Humbert, employs a brilliant use of language and effective rhetorical arguments to give his actions a logic and even a shade of beauty that they certainly do not deserve. And as Humbert attempts to bury the heinous nature of his behavior into a maze of solipsism, rhetoric, and dazzling images, he also buries Lolita. This is not to say, however, that Lolita is absent. *Lolita* is the story of both Humbert and Lolita and to deny her presence would mean, "there is no novel here that matters, only the brilliant, vain spinning of a mind hooked on nothing but its figments" (Wood 24). Lolita's voice is quiet, it can at times barely be noticed and it is very often concealed, suppressed under the layers of Humbert's elaborate prose. This paper attempts to extract and examine the fragments of Lolita's voice that do emerge and compare her perceptions of events with the distorted reality that Humbert presents to the reader, two distinct viewpoints that often do not reconcile well. Using these refracted and fragmented bits of Lolita's voice the paper attempts to discern Lolita's true feelings, to give her a presence otherwise lost, attempting to answer critical questions, such as: How does Lolita construct notions of love? Does she ever love Humbert? Does she ever truly believe that Humbert loves her? The answers to which will hopefully contribute to a more nuanced understanding

of Nabokov's work by acknowledging Lolita's victimhood while also preserving her agency.

Because Lolita's presence is so carefully repressed throughout text, it is easy to forget her and to unconditionally embrace the veracity of Humbert's rendition of events. Certainly, many critics have done this, embracing Humbert as a tragic hero while condemning Lolita as a seductress—a terrible misappropriation. In her article "Lolita Misrepresented, Lolita Reclaimed: Disclosing the Doubles," Elizabeth Patnoe points out that Lolita has not only been misappropriated within the text, but also outside of it, explaining "Instead of embracing the muted, violated Lolita, our misogynistic culture created and reified a violating Lolita (83). However, criticism that sympathizes with Humbert and underscores Lolita's role as a seductress seems to largely overlook two crucial points. First, Humbert is not reliable as a narrator; he is in fact remarkably unreliable. Secondly, Humbert is an adult while Lolita is a twelve-year-old child. The power dynamics of a romantic relationship between the two are inherently and grossly skewed and furthermore Lolita, as any child, is incapable of consenting to sex.

In the search for Lolita's presence, Humbert is, of course, the most obvious barrier we encounter. He not only silences her but also objectifies her, displacing her authentic self in favor of his idealized,

nymphet creation. Humbert himself acknowledges, “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 62). To Humbert, Lolita is an aesthetic subject, not an actual person and to him she possesses neither volition nor agency.

Interpretations of Nabokov’s text emphasizing Lolita’s perspective, such as Elizabeth Patnoe’s, have primarily adopted similar stance. These interpretations, which Timothy McCracken terms “Lo-centric Criticism,” argue that Lolita should be seen as a passive victim, maintaining that close readings of the text reveal clear indications of rape and abuse. Patnoe contends, that Lolita’s “will character and voice are supplanted throughout the novel, her life, fate, and image . . . supplanted, distorted, and used” by Humbert and his sexual desires (Patnoe 98). Linda Kaufman, similarly, argues that “Humbert’s sexual craving compels him to abuse Lolita, and while he insists that he does not want to be moved by such desires, he is never able to cease violating her” (Kaufmann 72).

Humbert, however, is a master of trickery, skillfully employing poetic language to hide the damage done by his sexual abuse to Lolita, a practice evident from their very first sexual encounter on the couch. Though Humbert maintains that Lolita was “safely solipsized,” there are clear indications that Lolita knows what is occurring. When Humbert uses a small bruise on her upper leg as an excuse to grope her thigh, Lolita insists ‘Oh it’s nothing at all . . . with a sudden shrill in her voice” (Nabokov 61). Furthermore, Humbert reports that “she wiggled, and squirmed, and threw her head back, and her teeth rested on her glistening under lip” (Nabokov 61). From this image, we can deduce that Lolita is

uncomfortable—she is wiggling, squirming, and biting her lower lip. However, Humbert continues the escapade and “crushes out against her left buttock the last throb of the longest ecstasy man or monster had ever known” (Nabokov 61). And while Humbert insists that she is unaware, he comments “Immediately after (as if we were struggling and now my grip had eased) she rolled off the sofa and jumped to her feet—to her foot, rather—in order to attend to the formidably loud telephone . . . There she stood and blinked, cheeks aflame, hair awry” (Nabokov 61). It would seem that Lolita is aware, and also uncomfortable, that she takes the first opportunity she can to escape the situation, a ringing telephone, and is quite embarrassed, as her red cheeks would indicate. As James Phelan explains, “Nabokov provides numerous signals that we ought to resist Humbert’s appeal, to recognize that the line between solipsizing and molestation is paper thin and, above all, to recognize Humbert’s use of Dolores for his pleasure as an abuse of her” (135).

Lolita’s presence can similarly be felt as Humbert recounts their night at the Enchanted Hunter’s Hotel. Elizabeth Patnoe devotes considerable attention to this portion of the narrative, offering a careful deconstruction of the sex scene, arguing that vague wording (he said, she might have said) destabilizes the version of events Humbert relays. And in fact, clues that it was not Lolita who seduced Humbert, but rather Humbert who rapes Lolita, subtly permeate Humbert’s account of the next morning. Humbert casually lists the various things he has bought to placate Lolita—“four books of comics, a box of candy, a box of sanitary napkins, two cokes, a manicure set, a travel clock, a ring with real topaz, a tennis racket, roller skates with white high shoes, field glasses, a portable radio set, chewing gum, a transparent raincoat, sunglasses, some more garments—swooners, shorts, all kinds of summer frocks” (Nabokov 141). Hidden in this

laundry list of frivolous items, discreetly placed between the box of candy and the two cokes, is a box of sanitary napkins, obviously necessary because Lolita is bleeding. Various other indications of the physical damage Humbert has done to Lolita are sprinkled throughout this section of the text. Humbert notes, “As she was getting back into the car, an expression of pain flitted across Lo’s face. It flitted again, more meaningfully, as she settled down beside me” (Nabokov 140). When Humbert asks her what is wrong, she responds “nothing you brute” (Nabokov 140). She later refers to him as a “revolting creature,” insisting, “I was a daisy-fresh girl and look what you’ve done to me. I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me. Oh you dirty, dirty old man” (Nabokov 141).

Perhaps one of the most compelling images of Lolita’s victimization comes in an artistic veil. After he rapes Lolita, Humbert imagines:

Had the management of the Enchanted Hunters lost its mind one summer day and commissioned me to redecorate their dining room with murals of my own making, this is what I might have thought up, let me list some fragment: There would have been a lake . . . There would have been nature studies—a tiger pursuing a bird of paradise, a choking snake sheathing whole the flayed trunk of a shoat. There would have been a sultan, his face expressing great agony (belied, as it were, by his molding caress), helping a callypgean slave child to climb a column of onyx . . . There would have been a fire opal dissolving within a ripple-singed pool, a last throb, a last dab of color, stinging red, smarting pink, a sigh, a wincing child. (Nabokov 134)

Here artistic device cloaks content, Lolita’s pain and suffering are not only hindered by, but also rendered using, aesthetic opulence. However, a careful reading reveals it is abundantly clear that Lolita is

in intense physical, and also emotional, pain. Of course the nature images of predator hunting prey—“a tiger pursuing a bird of paradise, a choking snake sheathing whole the flayed trunk of a shoat”—serve to implicitly juxtapose Humbert’s predatory behavior. There is a slave child, a stinging-red, a smarting pink, a wincing child. Phelan argues that here “Humbert obliquely rewrites the scene of the first intercourse, and in this revision his selfish violence and Dolores’s pain are foregrounded (140).

Furthermore, as the text progresses it becomes increasingly clear that Lolita is essentially Humbert’s prisoner. There are indications that Lolita seeks attention, perhaps in an attempt to escape. Humbert comments, “I tried to keep as far away from people as possible, while Lo, on the other hand, would do her utmost to draw as many potential witnesses into her orbit as she could” (Nabokov 164). As the text progresses, it remains clear that Lolita is not a willing participant in her sexual relationship with Humbert. He laments, “Never did she vibrate under my touch and a strident ‘what d’you think you are doing’ was all I got for my pains” (Nabokov 166). On another occasion he describes their morning in bed as “violent” (Nabokov 160). Ultimately, these small images, these barely audible fragments of Lolita’s voice, cobbled together, present a clear image of rape and abuse, not seduction, directly conflicting Humbert’s claims that “I am not, and never was, and never could have been a brutal scoundrel.”

However, Lo-centric criticisms present two problems: they rely on categorical binaries and also understate Lolita’s agency. While traditional *Lolita* readings often problematize themselves by grossly overstating Lolita’s role as seductress and blatantly ignoring her victimhood, “Lo-centric” readings at times present a related problem, relying on an inversion of the active/passive and good/evil binaries and portraying a situation in which Lolita is

a passive victim and Humbert is the active violator. And while this kind of reading may preserve our moral comfort zones, it is far too simple an explanation for an extraordinarily complex text. Regrettably, the world that Nabokov so precisely crafts in *Lolita* is not a world of black and white categories but rather one of moral grey zones and blurred boundaries.

At the end of novel it seems clear that Humbert not only atones for his cruelty and depravity, but that Lolita accepts this atonement. Within criticism that accepts Humbert as a victim and Lolita as a seductress this does not generate any difficulties. However, within the context of more Lo-centric Criticism, the notion of Humbert's atonement often proves highly problematic. For Patnoe, for example, this atonement is not valid and argues that it remains clear that Humbert "does not love Lolita spiritually, or as an individual, that his feelings for her are pathological and self-serving, and that he remains fixated on what he cannot have" (Patnoe 98). Patnoe's argument, however, relies on fixed binaries and also depends on a limited and idealized definition of love, a definition that fails to incorporate the possibility that love can be flawed. Love is neither a static nor homogenous concept and it is necessary to consider the possibility that love can be dark and damaging, that it can be obsessive and possessive. Humbert is depraved, yes. But he is also human, capable of human emotion. Therefore, it seems inappropriate here to disregard Humbert's professed love for Lolita as an illusion of art.

Towards the end of the novel, Humbert seems to at least be aware of the trauma he has caused Lolita, asserting "a North American girl child named Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac" (Nabokov 283). Whereas Humbert initially claims he could never be a "brutal scoundrel," he later emotionally acknowledges "I

was a pentapod monster . . . I was despicable and brutal, and turpid, and everything" (Nabokov 283). When we meet Lolita again she is only "the faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo of the nymphet she used to be" (Nabokov 276). Humbert sadly observes "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 . . . hopelessly worn at seventeen" (Nabokov 277). If one assumes that Humbert's feelings for Lolita stem from his nymphet obsession, one would also assume that given her current worn, adult state, Humbert would abandon her. And yet, rather, Humbert insists "no matter, even if those eyes of hers would fade to myopic fish, and her nipples swell and crack, and her lovely young velvety delicate delta be tainted and torn- even then would I go mad with tenderness at the mere sight of your dear wan face, at the mere sound of your raucous young voice, my Lolita" (Nabokov 278). Over and over again in these final pages of the text Humbert poignantly declares his love for Lolita; he insists, "You see I loved her. It was love at first sight, at last sight, at ever and ever sight" (Nabokov 291). In contrast with Humbert's erudite diction, logical argument, and complex syntax that fill much of the text, these professions are not marked by logic or by rhetoric, but emotion. In more ways than one, his narrative labyrinth has begun to crumble.

As Phelan explains, claims that Humbert is incapable of loving Lolita rest on the ethical assumption that "giving credence to Humbert's questionable claims about his new understanding of feelings for Dolores puts the ethical emphasis in the wrong place: on Humbert the narrator rather than on Dolores and what Humbert the character has done to her" (Phelan 102). But perhaps the possibilities of Lolita's victimization and the authenticity of Humbert's atonement need not be mutually exclusive. It is also necessary to consider Lolita's

perceptions of Humbert in their final meeting. It would appear obvious that Lolita does not love him, as she has suffered brutal abuse and oppression at his hands. However, whether or not Lolita believes that Humbert loves her is a related and perhaps more pertinent question.

It is clear that Lolita initially fears Humbert, withholding her home address from him in her letter in case he is still angry. It also she does not look back on years spent with her abuser fondly and even avoids trying to remember it at all. Humbert writes:

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).

She is repulsed when Humbert attempts to coherence her into leaving with him, immediately taking a position of defense, “opening her eyes and raising herself slightly, the snake that may strike,” asking Humbert, “you mean that you will give us that money only if I go with you to a motel. Is *that* what you mean” (Nabokov 278). When Humbert explains that he wants Lolita to come live with him, to die with him and everything else, Lolita tells Humbert that he is crazy. However, it is important to note that Lolita does not seem to be angry with Humbert and in fact her tenderness towards Humbert emerges after he has given her and Dick four thousand dollars. She refers to him as “honey,” gently touches his wrist, and comforts him as he cries. It would see this tenderness indicates that she recognizes the money as a gift of love, of atonement. Ultimately, we are searching to find Lolita’s presence, to endow her with a voice. It doesn’t matter whether we personally believe in the veracity of Humbert’s repentance. It only matters that Lolita does.

The second problem with Lo-centric Criticism is that it also, at times, understates Lolita’s agency. When viewing Lolita as a victim, it also important to preserve her autonomy. Albeit the choices afforded to Lolita throughout her plight are few and far between, but this is not to say that she doesn’t choose, that she doesn’t act. While Lolita is undoubtedly a victim, she is also a participant. It is unreasonable to call Lolita Humbert’s seductress, but it is not unfair to point out that Lolita does flirt with Humbert, though the extent to which she does so is certainly debatable. Lolita, initially, possesses a childish attraction to him, entering into a kind of game with Humbert, a game of seduction, a game of limits. But, as a child, she is tragically unaware of the very uneven playing field. And in the end Lolita chooses to accept Humbert’s repentance. Though economic necessity does mandate that she accept the money from Humbert, she chooses to do so with tenderness and sensitivity.

And of course, Quilty needs to be considered here as well. Lolita does, after all, fall in love with Quilty, another man of Humbert’s age who exhibits the same cruel and selfish nature and obsession with nymphets. Quilty is just as depraved as Humbert, if not more so. Lolita admits that he wanted her to do “weird, fancy, filthy things. I mean, he had two girls and two boys, and three or four men, and the idea was for all of us to tangle in the nude while an old woman took move pictures“ (Nabokov 276). And yet in spite of this, Lolita claims that, “he was the only man she had ever been truly crazy about” (Nabokov 276). Lolita chooses to leave the hospital with Quilty and there are numerous indications throughout the text that this was not a spontaneous decision, that they communicated throughout her time in the road, orchestrating her flee from Humbert. So the question that remains is why does Lolita love Quilty but not Humbert, in spite of their overt similarities?

In considering the Quilty question, it is helpful here to turn to Nabokov's essay, "On A Book Entitled *Lolita*." Here, Nabokov briefly explores the origins of the work, explaining:

The first little throb of Lolita went through me late in 1939 or early in 1940, in Paris . . . The initial shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes, who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature's cage. (Nabokov 311)

Perhaps *Lolita* is the captured creature and Humbert is the cage, and once out of her cage she is only able to use her freedom to recreate her captivity. It would also seem plausible to consider that perhaps *Lolita* doesn't love Quilty, per say, but the possibility he represents, the single possibility of escape from Humbert. It seems that she chooses to marry Dick for similar reasons. Though he is obviously not an ideal choice, he is the only opportunity, the only trajectory that presents itself. Humbert may not destroy *Lolita's* agency, but he does severely and tragically limit it.

Ultimately, however, it is crucial to recognize that any attempt to extricate *Lolita's* voice and authentic self from the text has inherent flaws and limitation. As Linda Kaufman points out, "One can unveil *Lolita's* viewpoint and simultaneously stress its verisimilitude—as opposed to its *veracity* (Kaufman 77). Any act of presencing *Lolita* is an act of re-presencing, of representation, a representation, that may or may not be faithful to who *Lolita* actually is. Towards the end of the novel, Humbert laments, "there was within her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate—dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me, in my polluted rags and miserable convulsions."

This garden, this twilight and palace gate may not only be inaccessible to Humbert but also to us, as readers.

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