

Deliberate Artistry

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As human beings, individuals want to be remembered for the good they have done, the things they have accomplished and the lives they have changed. Those with the luxury to create and craft their own story have the automatic power to immortalize themselves. Humbert Humbert, the protagonist of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, is no ordinary storyteller, and the tale he spins is no love story. Humbert uses his pedophilic relationship with a teenage girl to craft a narrative about himself as a Romantic artist.

Humbert Humbert describes his obsession with Lolita as a quest for a Romantic ideal, casting himself as a poet who is “[re]incarnating ... [his first love] in another” (15). Notably, the name of his first love—Annabel Leigh—alludes to Poe’s poem “Annabel Lee.” In this context, Lolita is an “objective” (11); she represents a second chance to fulfill his imaginative future with Annabel. In fact, Lolita’s story would not exist without Annabel (9) because “everything they [share makes] one of them” (40). Quite literally Annabel Leigh, (pronounced Annabel *Lee*) combined with *Do-lo-res* make “*Lo-lee-ta*” (9). To Humbert, she is the “same child” (39) as Annabel, with “the same frail, honey-hued shoulders... [and] chestnut head of hair” (39). Humbert’s realization that she is an “absolutely optical replica of [his] beloved” (11) suggests his desire to relive his “one immortal day” (39) with his first love. His steadfast belief that Lolita is a “fatal consequence of that ‘princedom by the sea’ in [his] tortured past” (40), indicates that to him, Lolita symbolizes the fated closure he never got. Ironically, much like Annabel died after having a relationship with Humbert, the use of the word “fatal” (40) also foreshadows Lolita’s death following the end of their relationship. Indeed, Humbert’s initial sighting of her reveals to the reader his obsession with accomplishing an impossible task: controlling time. Much like Romantic poets use the timeless nature of poems to preserve something even after it has died, Humbert is trying to preserve Annabel in Lolita. When he first meets his “Riviera love” (39), he is in his “adult disguise” (39), suggesting that he sees her through the gaze of his younger self. While time is indisputably irreversible and unstoppable, to him, “[the] twenty-five years... since then tapered to a palpitating point, and vanished” (39). This concept of time being erased implies how, in Humbert’s mind, Lolita exists in a space where time does not.

In contrast to his relatively pure desire of realizing youthful lost love, Humbert Humbert’s predatory diction indicates his underlying darker pedophilic lust for Lolita. Indeed, she is “safely solipsized” (60) in the infamous scene where Humbert masturbates with an oblivious Lolita on his lap. Because Humbert seeks to “fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (134), he looks to trap Lolita before she matures past the maximum nymphet age of fourteen (16). He depicts himself as an “inflated pale spider” (49) sitting in the “middle of [his] luminous web” (49) ready to ensnare Lolita, his prey (49). Humbert gives himself away once again when he calls himself a “Wounded Spider”

(54) and literally “creep[s] up to her” (54). The aggressor-victim language becomes louder at the Enchanted Hunters hotel where he drugs Lolita in order to molest her (122). When Lolita is asleep he has successfully trapped the “nymphean evil breathing through every pore of [her]” (125). Sleeping, which is often seen as a tamer version of death, keeps things in a temporary state of permanence. Through being “the enchanted hunter” (131) and the “Spider” (54), Humbert has unwittingly exposed the reader to Humbert the character.

Troubled by a growing awareness of his pedophilic lust, Humbert Humbert employs Quilty as his literary double to cleanse himself of guilt and to recapture his self-image as an artist. Humbert establishes their similarities gradually. Quilty is “said to resemble some crooner or actor chap on whom Lo ha[d] a crush” (43). When describing the advertisement above Lolita’s bed showing “a distinguished playwright” (69), Humbert begrudgingly comments, “the resemblance was slight” (69). It is as if he recognizes himself and seeks to downplay the growing connection. Similarly, when tracking Quilty, he begrudgingly concedes that “[Quilty’s] type of humor... the tone of his brain, had affinities with [his] own” (249). Like Humbert, his double is “well-read, ...knew French, ...[and] was an amateur of sex lore” (249-50). By acknowledging Quilty’s existence, Humbert recognizes himself as Lolita’s predator, undermining his own vision of himself as an artist.

As the double, Quilty represents what, as the host, Humbert wants to repress; the two are interconnected but cannot coexist. Much later, when Lolita, who now embodies Humbert’s dark success at capturing a nymphet, is abducted, Humbert is “free to trace the fugitive, free to destroy [his] brother” (247). When he physically confronts his double, Humbert’s own anxieties are projected back onto him. Quilty mocks Humbert’s poetry (300), accuses him of being “a beastly pervert” (298), and even speaks French (298) to appear more elevated. Subsequently, Humbert merges with his double in an attempt to stop those anxieties. As the two wrestled, Humbert narrates that, “[Quilty] rolled over me. I rolled over him. ... We rolled over us” (299). In this scene, Humbert and Quilty are indistinguishable, indicating that Humbert is actually unable to separate the Romantic poet in him from the pedophile; he is incapable of placing his guilt onto Quilty despite his best attempts. Indeed, Humbert’s triumph over his evil self manifests in his murder of Quilty (303), who symbolizes of his repressed sexual and “beastly” (298) desire for young girls. Only by killing Quilty does Humbert exonerate himself. For in that moment, “everything [falls] into order, into the pattern of branches that [Humbert wove] throughout [the] memoir with the express purpose of having the ripe fruit fall at the right moment” (272). In expunging himself of sexual grossness, Humbert the character finally becomes Humbert the Romantic hero.

As previously noted, Lolita represented a Romantic ideal that Humbert the character

desired to fulfill; however, astute readers will notice that Humbert uses Lolita as his muse, indicating his quest was not for Lolita the girl, but for *Lolita* the story. He first claims Lolita as “[his] girl, as Vee was Poe’s and Bea Dante’s” (107). Humbert’s obsessive description of Lolita playing tennis is an extended metaphor of his desire to be recognized as an acclaimed Romantic artist. Despite “her form ... [being] an absolutely perfect imitation of absolutely top-notch tennis – without any utilitarian results” (231), Humbert believes her tennis to be the “highest point [at] which [he] can imagine a young creature bringing the art of make-believe” (231). Lolita’s game is aesthetic perfection but does not serve a single purpose. Despite that, it is when she is playing tennis that he admits “[he] loved her hopelessly” (234). Humbert’s emphasis on this moment and his desire to “have filmed her” (231) indicate that to him, this is how he will always remember Lolita. His ephemeral and god-like diction in describing what she looks like (231-232) suggests that he seeks to “immortalize” (232) his perfect memory of her.

Humbert never explicitly uses any diction associated with murder, making the reader second-guess if he actually did it. On the one hand, “poets never kill” (88), and Humbert thinks, “Nowadays you have to be a scientist if you want to be a killer. No, no, I was neither” (87). But on the other hand, he states that “you can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style” (9) and that he is “[g]uilty of killing Quilty” (32). Humbert asserts that the only instance in which he would murder is in his dreams: “For instance I hold a gun. ... Oh, I press the trigger all right, but one bullet after another feebly drops on the floor from the sheepish muzzle” (47). This comically mirrors the Pavor Manor murder in which, “[he] pointed ... and crushed the trigger” (297). The gun discharged “with a ridiculously feeble and juvenile sound ... [and] the bullet entered the thick pink rug” (297). By mirroring his dream from earlier, he obscures the reader’s sense of reality. Even after admitting “that [he] was responsible for every shed drop of [Quilty’s] bubbleblood” (304), he immediately pardons himself stating “a kind of momentary shift occurred” (304) and that he was suddenly “holding on one of [Quilty’s] slippers instead” (304) of the murder weapon. Humbert is dreaming up a scene where Quilty dies from sickness, not the actual gunshot wounds (304). By deliberately contradicting himself, he is able to hold onto himself as a Romantic hero but the reader does not know if the murder ever occurred. Moreover, the reader does not know if the double even exists; Humbert wonders if he is “losing [his] mind” (229) as “it was becoming abundantly clear that all those identical detectives ... were figments of [his] persecution mania, recurrent images based on coincidence and chance resemblance” (238). These self-proclaimed “hallucinations” (217) make it difficult to delineate between Humbert’s interpretation of reality and reality itself, a mechanism that allows him to continue to be an artist even after violating his own prerequisite of being one.

Humbert’s foremost desire in eternalizing himself occurs in the very action of writing this memoir. Thus, *Lolita*, as the title of this book, is slightly misleading. Although the first and last word of this narrative are undeniably “Lolita” (9, 309), it is not her story but “[Humbert’s] story” (308) about his nymphet, Lolita. Notably, he chooses to end his

memoir with his reflection on nature (306-8), not his triumph over Quilty. For in defying “all laws of humanity” (306) he is able to listen to the “musical [vibrations] from [his] lofty slope” (308). In doing so, he admits that the “hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence... but the absence of her voice from that concord” (308). In “possess[ing] her” (21), Humbert creates his version of that voice, ultimately immortalizing not Lolita, but himself. Described as “[his] sin, [his] soul” (9) from the outset, *Lolita* is not a love story, but instead a deliberate and calculated attempt to enshrine Dolores Haze’s nymphetness (134). All individuals want to be remembered after death; Humbert Humbert is no different in narrating his own story.