Lolita: Anomalies Of A Memory In A Novel

“Among the anomalies of a memory, whose possessor and victim should never have tried to become an autobiographer, the worst is the inclination to equate in retrospect my age with that of the century,” says Vladimir Nabokov in the foreword to his autobiography “Speak, Memory!” (15). Nabokov gained most of his popularity after publishing one of the most controversial novels of the century entitled “Lolita”. Even though it was considered as a disgusting pornography by a vast number of critics and literary scholars, it has become a masterpiece anyway. One of the main reasons is Nabokov style of writing that makes its easy to lose yourself in the numerous allusions and word games. However, a careful reader may notice several discrepancies that appear in the novel. In addition, there is some evidence showing that even such a scrupulous writer as Nabokov can make a mistake. For instance, his wife Vera once said that we should not rely on her husband's manuscripts because he “would often write one thing when he meant another” (qtd. in Ellen Piffer 60). The same story could happen with calendric dates in “Lolita”. They could be simple slips of the pen that author refused to correct or to which he did not pay any attention; however, they have enough power to change our vision of the main protagonist and final events that happened to him.

First of all, it is important to acknowledge all mistakes that appear in the final chapters of “Lolita”. According to Humbert, on Monday, September 22, he receives an unexpected letter from Lolita in which she tells him about her marriage, pregnancy, poor financial situation and asks for help. Immediately, our hero gets into the car and drives more than 800 miles from New York City to Coalmont, Tennessee. He arrives there on Tuesday, has a conversation with Lolita and discovers her abductor’s name. After about two hours he leaves her home to drive towards Ramsdale to fulfill a revenge agains Quilty.

He arrives there the next day, makes an appointment with dr. Ivor Quilty and learns Clare Quilty's address: Pavor Manor, Grimm Road, 12 mi N of Parkington. Then, he spends a night in Insomnia Lodge and, on September 25, finally fulfills his wish and murders Quilty. It is interesting that he walks away unnoticed but gets arrested by the police for driving on the wrong side of the road. From the end of September to mid-November he stays first at the mental institution and then in jail where he starts writing his memoir “Lolita”. This is a moment that triggered numerous debates over the very reality of final scenes in the novel. Humbert mentions that he started to write “Lolita” fifty-six days ago, “first in the psychopathic ward for observation, and then in this well-heated, albeit tombal, seclusion...” (“Lolita” 351). It is highly probable that he finished it on the very day he died that is on November 16. There are several unexpected changes in his style of writing that can prove it. One of them is an abbreviation of Humbert's and Quilty’s name to H.H. and C.Q at the last paragraph of the memoir. Nabokov himself responded to it during an interview with Alfred Appel, Jr. in such a way: “No, I did not want to introduce a different voice. I did want, however to convey a constriction of narrator’s sick heart, a warning spasm causing him to abridge names and hasten to conclude his tale before it was too late” (qtd. in Christina Tekiner 465).

Therefore, opening the calendar for the year 1952 (United States) and counting back 56 days, brought me exactly to September 22, a day when Humbert received Dolly’s letter. Taking into an account almost a week that he spent on traveling, visiting Dolores and killing Quilty, it

becomes obvious that our narrator could not start writing his memoir in the psychiatric ward; thus, we cannot trust him anymore. In addition to the problem with calendric dates, it is hard to believe that Humbert was able to write “Lolita” during such a short period of time. Above all, it took Nabokov almost five years to finish the novel. Plus, days spent in the psychiatric ward and then in jail can hardly be suitable for writing a long and complex memoir.

“But what about the Lolita’s letter to Humbert?” you may ask. Leona Toker gives us a key to this question. In her essay, she puts a special emphasis on a one phrase said by Humbert just before he received Dolly’s letter: “Several times already a trick of harlequin light that fell through the glass upon an alien handwriting had twisted it into a semblance of Lolita’s script causing me almost to collapse…” (“Lolita” 300). Consequently, we may assume that Lolita has never written any letter. Toker claims that Humbert’s extreme desire of Lo and his fear of becoming a criminal have forced his mind to invent the letter (Toker 219).

Finally, even though the novel presents us with a huge number of examples that prove Nabokov’s hatred to psychology and psychoanalysis, it is hard not to look at it through the prism of psychology. I also think that because Humbert identifies himself as a true artist, art for him is a way of expressing his real emotions, understanding things, accepting his mistakes and atoning for his sins. There are also numerous scenes where Humbert does not want to accept reality and prefers to fly in the world of dreams. Moreover, he even admitted that some details in the earlier chapters of the novel were the product of his imagination. As an example we can take a tiny remark done by Humbert in the end of chapter 16: “There is just a chance that “the vortex of the toilet' is my own matter-of-fact contribution.” (“Lolita” 76). Thus, all the facts mentioned above bring us to a possible conclusion that everything happened in the last paragraphs of the book was, indeed, a product of Humbert’s imagination.

Now, let us have a closer look at the scene of Humbert’s reunion with Dolly and how it could possibly influence him. According to the memoir, on September 23, our protagonist arrived in Coalmont and found Mrs. Richard F. Schiller's house. The first thing he noticed is that his beloved Lolita lost almost all characteristics of a nymphet; moreover, she “was frankly and hugely pregnant” (“Lolita” 307). This is a crucial moment that has a great influence on our character. It helps him to understand that he is still in love with Lo, even though she is not a nymphet any more. We can also see the development of Humbert’s sexual desires into a more profound feeling. However, we are all familiar with a disappointing ending of this story: Lolita refuses to stay with our main hero anyway. So, if it all was his fantasy, why did the story has a tragic ending? Why did not he imagine a happy ending in which Lolita entirely belonged to him?

In my opinion, for Humbert it was a way of understanding his guilt. He, finally, realized that his actions had disastrous consequences and that he was responsible for Lolita’s broken childhood: “... and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord…” (“Lolita” 351). It can also be seen as a way in which his mind tries to accept a love to an adult person and not a nymphet. We already know that Humbert is firm in his convictions that nymphets never grow up; instead, they go to a mysterious island surrounded by the sea. However, seeing an already adult Lolita forces him to question his beliefs and to accept a cruel reality in which he is not special anymore, he is an ordinary man that loves an ordinary women. Nothing interesting.

So, if the scene of reunion with Lolita is a product of Humbert’s imagination, then how did he discover that Clare Quilty was the one responsible for Lolita’s disappearance? In her essay,

Christina Tekiner lists numerous ways in which Humbert could simply guess the abductor's identity. For instance, she suggests that Humbert was able to draw a line between Ivor Quilty and Clare Quilty, which gave him a clue about the role of Clare Quilty in Lolita's life ("Time in Lolita" 467). I personally believe that after years of thinking he finally could bring all puzzles together and answer the question that was bothering him so much.

This leads us to another crucial moment in the life of our hero, death of Quilty. Clare Quilty is an extremely significant character for the novel. He remains present since the very beginning and appears more as a Humbert's shadow, his alter ego or even Humbert himself. It is interesting that Humbert sees Quilty as a reflection of his own sins and crimes, even his name sounds very similar to "clearly guilty". Unlike an underaged Lolita, Humbert knew that he was in a full control of their relationships and also his girlfriend's life, in general; he knew the power he had, and he was not afraid to use it. Even though Humbert was ready to spend all his time and money on Lo, we can see a lot of scenes of moral and physical abuse against the girl. Therefore, it becomes clear that for Humbert Quilty is an immoral version of himself. So, in the murder of Quilty, I see an attempt of Humbert's sick mind to commit a self-punishment for the harm that he did to Lolita.

To sum up, it is hard to say whether these mistakes were done on purpose or they appeared accidentally. In my opinion, the reunion with Dolly and murder of Quilty are psychological events that did not happen in the Humbert's reality. This kind of approach gives us a chance to see Humbert's personality from a radically different perspective.

With a development of the plot we can observe the birth of Humbert's secret desires, fulfillment of his most secret dreams and, finally, their inevitable crash. Writing a memoir, on the other hand, gave him an opportunity to analyze his whole life and brought some order to it, and the invention of final scenes helped him to answer all questions, bring all puzzles together and, finally, it gave some peace to his tired and exhausted soul.

Works Cited

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