Lolita Explained: Novel And Film

The novel Lolita, published in 1955, tells the story of a middle-aged English professor named Humbert Humbert who, after marrying his landlady Charlotte Haze, becomes the stepfather of 12-year-old Dolores Haze; or as he describes her, Lolita. From the start, Humbert develops an obsession for Dolores and when Charlotte passes away in a car accident, Humbert and Lolita—much to the avail of many readers and critics—become sexually involved with one another. The novel is structured as a memoir, brilliantly written by the imaginative narrator Humbert Humbert who writes his story in the confines of a prison cell on account of murder. In his Confession of a White Widowed Male,— or Lolita— Humbert Humbert, the fictional narrator within Nabokov's most critically acclaimed novella, writes: "I am not concerned with so-called 'sex' at all," (89) and is to be kept in mind during the duration of this paper. Nevertheless, on the subject of the narrative theme surrounding the narrator's pedophilia, it is difficult to take the previous statement or any other account that the narrator presents readers with seriously. Alas, if we the reader do in fact take his confessions to heart, we may then come to distinguish Humbert's sexuality as representative of another overlooked theme. Additionally, it is important to note that, combined with Nabokov's configuration of memory, consciousness, and time, Lolita becomes a novel that illustrations the creative mind of Humbert Humbert through the use of time and space. Or rather, a spatial existence brought about by a loss that has helped insure the making of Humbert's confession.

Moving forward, although the murder is one aspect of the novel, the novel as a whole looks at the relationship between middle-aged Humbert Humbert and his obsessive desire with 12 year old Lolita, or Dolores Haze. Additionally, Lolita encompasses the interrelated relationship between memory, consciousness, and time and views such inseparable ideas as problematic as it correlates Humbert's unreliability. Consequentially, it is through this problematic lens that readers understand that Lolita is a novel about much more than pedophilia. In fact, Lolita is a novel about loss and memory.

To begin, according to Olga Hastly in her article "'Memory, Consciousness, and Time in Nabokov's Lolita.'", in his afterword "On a Book Entitled Lolita," Vladimir Nabokov speaks on a particular incident in his life that came to stimulate the creation of Lolita. Nabokov claims:

"The first little throb of Lolita went through me late in 1939 or early in 1940, in Paris […] As far as I can recall, the initial shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes, who […] produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature's cage," (225).

Although such a scene shares no resemblance to the main theme of pedophilia that haunts the novel— one in which critics scrutinize the most— the living conditions that the ape invokes within Nabokov is important. In this way, this muse that Nabokov acclaims revels that although the ape is a captive, it is only aware of the cage bars that confine him and cannot comprehend the world beyond that, even though beyond the cage is a world constantly adapting and changing. Nabokov terms this state of being as a state of tragically circumscribed consciousness, a concept that readers may see in Humbert Humbert's narrative (Hastly 233 and Phelan 229). Within this context, the pedophilic theme that shock readers can be recognized as a symptom

that only exists due to the structure of time and space presented by the narrator. Given that we the reader understand that it is the highlighting of time and memory that determines whether consciousness is restricted or completely present, the novel presents this concept as being therefore controlled within the text. Moreover, we see this more evidently in chapter 26 when Humbert says:

“This daily headache in the opaque air of this tombal jail is disturbing, but I must persevere. Have written more than a hundred pages and not got anywhere yet. My calendar is getting confused. That must have been around August 15, 1947. Don’t think I can go on. Heart, head — everything. Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita. Repeat till the page is full, printer” (72).

In this way, the remembering self that Humbert projects is clearly presented through the memory(s) repeatedly being drawn out for his reader’s, furthermore demonstrating his use of recollected details. Hypnotized by the devices the narrator uses to exclaim and frame his thoughts, we the reader come to understand that Humbert’s sexuality centers time and his symbolic cage is a temporal prison constructed by his own mind. In this sense, readers must come to understand that the mental cage that Humbert finds himself in is a result of the repressed sexuality that was not experienced during a time in which he thought himself to be in love. This proves and highlights the idea that the change that emerges over time has the potential to save memory from complete disappearing. As in, both the act of remembering and what is subconsciously remembered is an essential part of memory and consciousness.

Keeping the previous statement in mind, we see brief moments of this when Humbert is reintroduced to his first love when glancing at Lolita for the first time, comparing Annabel Leigh to Lolita. Readers recognize Humbert’s attempts to link Lolita with Annabel when Humbert utters on about the resemblance of Annabel within Lolita when stating:

“The twenty-five years I had lived since then [that is, since his summer with Annabel], tapered to a palpitating point, and vanished. I find it most difficult to express with adequate force that flash, that shiver, that impact of passionate recognition” (25).

To give more background, Humbert’s first love, as he describes it, resulted in an unconsummated young affair cut short due to her early death. Annabel’s death came as a shock, and any memory of her was enflamed during the summer of 1923 on the French Riviera narrator Humbert Humbert spent his childhood. Moreover, through this remembrance of time, it is in this recollection of intense memory recall that the relationship between Humbert and Annabel is recalled and sought after through Lolita. This connection as it is presented, portrays itself as a signal indicating the relationship that Humbert has discovered within Lolita, or rather a relationship reincarnated from the first that never existed. Humbert moreover insists that readers come to recognize and understand his own recollection of Annabel when he first sees Lolita, claiming:

“[. . .] from a mat in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses. It was the same child - the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair” (25).

However, continuing, the source of Humbert’s excitement within the previous quote is more profound than may appear, for he has recognized not only Annabel, but a very promising new

replacement— although ultimately he is reluctant to have Lolita replace his first love all at once. Because his first love is both defined and sustained by unfulfilled desire, it must remain unsatisfied if it is to be preserved.

The satisfaction of his desire with a child onto whom Annabel is projected can only eliminate the distinctive feature of the relationship he wishes to recapture. Far from being “the same,” as Humbert insists they are, Annabel and Lolita are, in this sense, mutually exclusive. Hasty explain this more in depth by acclaiming:

“[…] for all of his efforts to establish an identity between them, his relations with them, like the girls themselves, are different. If Humbert’s love for Annabel is characterized by protracted desire, his relations with Lolita are marked by repeated gratification” (233).

Alas, Humbert speaks of cutting away bits of film (memory) in order to preserve and place side-by-side events that are— if experienced— separated by time. Humbert is conscious of the ‘edits’ within his own narrative. Readers see this in chapter 10 of the novel when narrator Humbert Humbert invests in the playful act of world play while in his prison library. He states:

“How the look of my dear love’s name even affixed to some old hag of an actress, still makes me rock with helpless pain! Perhaps, she might have been an actress too. Born 1935. Appeared (I notice the slip of my pen in the preceding paragraph, but please do not correct it, Clarence) in The Murdered Playwright. Quine the Swine. Guilty of killing Quilty. Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!” (20).

In this light, the age difference in which he speculates in chapter 5 and insists must happen between himself and the desired nymphet are showed as rehearsed and timeless. Again we see this notion being brought up when he, at the time, remembers sitting by a bench casually but not noticeably watching young girls play on a nearby playground. In this way, we find that in such an instance, this is the remembered self, untouched by any other outside memory. However, further down the chapter, Humbert begins to console his readers by explaining his actions with the description of “Nymphets”— as he likes to call them— saying:

“Now I wish to introduce the following idea. Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as “nymphets.” It will be marked that I substitute time terms for spatial ones. In fact, I would have the reader see “nine” and “fourteen” as the boundaries —[…]” (12).

Because of this, readers may see how in most parts of the narrative, the change is spatial and not something that was thought of during the time of the memory he recalls throughout the novel. To reiterate, according to Elizabeth Prioleau, in this way— as emphasized before— memory and consciousness are as inseparable as they are relevant to one another. Furthermore, the remembered self, the self perceived only in relation to oneself and own experiences, in relation to the creative identity is thus fundamental (Prioleau 430). Thus marking, early in the novel, the account of unreliability the narrator possesses. Humbert’s narrative as a result turns into an urgent retort regarding his desire to ensure that his memory remains true as he recounts and recollects his thoughts behind a prison cell. However, this proves problematic because of the one-sided nature of these memories. Continually, far from

recovering his childhood love, Humbert's repeated mentioning's and desire for Lolita results in the second loss of Annabel in regard to memory. Thus, due to Humbert's desire for the more then unattainable, Annabel's memory is soon replaced in order to capture Lolita's essence, leading Humbert to confess, "this nouvelle Lolita, this Lolita, my Lolita, was to eclipse completely her prototype" (Lolita 26). Having replaced Annabel with a new, Humbert admits, "I knew I had fallen in love with Lolita forever; but I also knew she would not be forever Lolita" (43). This powerful relationship between time and consciousness emphasizes the acknowledgment that the creation of memories exists through loss and furthermore thrives depending on the situation that is sequentially brought about through the impending terror of losing the memory all together (Phelan 238). From the quote above, Humbert embodies this concept due to the fact that because his first love is both defined and sustained by unfulfilled desire and memory, it must remain unsatisfied in order to remain a part of his memory. The satisfaction of this desire through Lolita can only be lost and reconstructed through the relationship Humbert seeks to recapture.

Moving forward, it is important to note that the truth of Humbert's confession, or lack thereof, should not take up the readers time. Rather, the notion of memory and consciousness within the broader frameworks of the novel along with the passages regarding mortality and loss should be presented as most crucial within the text. Moreover, Humbert's "Confession" itself depends on as well as it effects the outcome of the time between the events he records and the (now past) time of recollection in which this has already discusses. Within the narrative the portrayals of intervening time creates the possibility for a present that divides itself endlessly both in the past and into the future. In this, the loss of Annabel and the prospect of losing Lolita notwithstanding, Humbert recognizes the invaluable likelihood that the prospect of unfolding time offers for him a chance to capture and trap his memories— as he sees them. So despite all that has been uncovered, it can be said, studied, and reveled that Lolita wholeheartedly started with Annabel Leigh.

Although the process of recollection, memory, consciousness, and time in Nabokov's Lolita creates in it of itself a more then vivid experience for Humbert Humbert, one that he obsessively cherishes more than the one he lived. Highlighting the idea that Lolita, in all of its brilliance, should in turn not only be read as a written experience, but as a visual experience as well. In Samira Fetahaj article entitled, "Humbert Humbert's Unreliability in Nabokov's Lolita" detail such film adaptations directed by Stanley Kubrick (1962) and Adrian Lyne (1997), claiming that, "[…] writing is a version of experience sent down. It is a representation of the result of shifting and perspective" (Fetahaj 3). We see part of this shifting of consciousness— or shifting experience— when Humbert attempts to remember and describe Lolita as he thought her to be at her prettiest, stating, 'I could have filmed her! I would have had her now with me, before my eyes, in the projection room of my pain and despair!' (Lolita, 116). Exited over the thought of having captured his Lolita on film, securing her image forever in a physical sense, Humbert criticizes himself for not filming her, telling his readers that he is an "Idiot, triple idiot" (117). In this way, if Humbert had in fact filmed his beloved, he would have captured her in a visual sense, not just mentally as shown throughout the novel.

Additionally, even though his immediate intentions for film may be immoral, Humbert himself in this way reports on the issues surrounding the differences between novel and film. Therefore, this very notion is something text is incapable of presenting since, as previously stated, Humbert in the time that he is writing his confession, is in an American jail cell. Humbert Humbert's unreliability on a textual level is the most important aspect within the novel. With that being said,

the text itself is a result of Humbert’s memories, the art of putting his thoughts into words giving readers an overall insight into the narrators mind. Inevitably, portraying thought into film would prove to be difficult without the text being in such a form. Moving forward, Humbert nevertheless points out the flaws and limits of text in relation to film within Lolita on multiple occasions with regard to presenting concrete, visible situations or events, shown in the quotes above. Nevertheless, apart from providing concrete and vivid imagery, other more abstract aspects in the novel are important to consider when making a film adaptation. In Lolita, the sole narrative of the story is told by Humbert Humbert and is therefore a story told solely through his perspective. Despite his intent to be truthful, claiming that his story is faithful to the events as happened, there are nevertheless enough hints that require the readers to question Humbert's reliability more critically (Prioleau 420). The ambiguity and unreliability are relevant and essential parts of the novel, but take place especially on textual level, for example in Humbert's writing style and choice of words. Compared to a novel, the extent in which the medium of film can incorporate text is severely limited. Therefore, in order to maintain the complete experience and layering of the novel by Vladimir Nabokov, film in this sense plays an important part.

In Lolita, Humbert touches upon the issues concerning the difference between novel and film, the textual and the visual. Humbert, obsessed with presenting events as faithfully as possible, in describing private moments shared with Lolita and himself, proved to be less limiting when compared to the text. Additionally, descriptions of one specific moment in the text follow a structure that makes simultaneity thought and action impossible. Readers may see this here:

““Give it back,” — she pleaded, showing the marbled flush of her palms. I produced Delicious. She grasped it and bit into it, and my heart was like snow under thin crimson skin, and with the monkeyish nimbleness that was so typical of that American nymphet, she snatched out of my abstract grip the magazine I had opened (pity no film had recorded the curious pattern, the monogrammic linkage of our simultaneous or overlapping moves)” (38).

However, these examples are concrete, visible scenes. In the novel, Humbert's unreliability is an aspect that is integrated on a textual level, creating a problematic illustration, as language and text are not as prominently present in film. This connects with the difference of describing and experiencing time in film and text. In distinction to the time necessary to read a scene, or watch it, there is also the time that unfolds within the story. Since film has the ability to present multiple events simultaneously, a situation or moment that requires a long piece of text to be presented in a book can result in a two second rendition if showed in a film. Moreover, a description in a text creates, as it were, a pause in between events. In essence, the reader experiences a moment that might take little time in the real world as opposed to a reading sharing the same scene. We come to a better understanding of this when Humbert is seen attempting to describe the accident of Charlotte Haze, saying, 'I have to put the impact of an instantaneous vision into a sequence of words; their physical accumulation in the page impairs the actual flash, the sharp unity of impression' (64). The description within text can hereby be shown as an expression when depicted in film. In closing, Lolita, a novel written in a filmic way, in this sense can easily be made to adapt into film in terms of depicting the events and situations as portrayed in the novel. Moreover, it is also likely that the events resented in the text are recollected incorrectly because they took place a long time ago. The oldest memories regarding Lolita are five years old, however Humbert writes these memories down in extensive detail while in prison as noted in the early areas of the text. Continually, Memories can also deliberately be remembered differently, as Humbert himself points out: '... as I watched, with the stark lucidity of future recollection (you know - trying to see things as you will remember having

seen them)' (57). This quote indicates that Humbert is self-reflective on the issue of being unreliable from a retrospective point of view and is therefore concedes his recollection of events might not be trustworthy.

In conclusion, Humbert Humbert's assertion discussed in the earlier parts of this paper, "I am not concerned with so-called 'sex' at all" (89), however questionable it may sound in the context of the events he describes in his "Confession," is overall a statement that proves true in a very important way. Humbert indicates that his pedophilia manifests a temporal problem— i.e. "Anybody can imagine those elements of animality. A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets" (89). His nymphets in this sense have to inhabit a brief span of time that he describes using a spatial allegory. Nine and fourteen being the boundaries he sets for himself; 'five' being symbolic of the five month age difference between himself and his first love mentioned in the early parts of the novel. In this way, Humbert's desire to fix himself, or not as he so likes to mock, can be seen in his juxtaposition of Annabel and Lolita. Similarly, although Humbert Humbert's pedophilia takes center stage for most readers in Lolita, it is not the act of sex that should remain the focus, but rather memory and time that should be closely studied within the text. Lolita, in presenting the remembered and experience as two ideas, becomes a novel that also shows how the passage of time and space— rather spatial existence— itself might be reveled and understood in the creative mind of fictional character Humbert Humbert. In this, readers come to realize that such a novel thrives with the reintroduction and recollection of more memories that come in the form of either Humbert the prisoner, Humbert the writer, or Humbert the young teenager. With these figurations of memory, the remembering self in which Humbert projects throughout the novel is defined in terms of the exceptional memory in which the novel obtains its film like attributes. Continually, because of the unreliable aspect of the novel itself, to concern ourselves with the actions of the narrator, that only seem to shock readers, memory is one underlying theme that surrenders a retrospective imagination. As Nobokav puts it, in his forward rendition at the end of the novel, this underlying theme "which feeds the analytic faculty with boundless alternatives and which causes each visualized route to fork and re-fork without end in the maddeningly complex prospect of [the] past" (8) is the very idea that creates the foundation for Lolita. Reemphasizing the idea that Lolita, in a convincing fate-powered way, began with Annabel. Likewise, rather than focus on the novel entirely, the passages regarding time and space are seen more clearly within the film adaptations. Only highlighting the narrators infamously known unreliability and moral ethics.

Works Cited

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