An exploration of an aspect of the narrative voice in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

RQ: How far and to what effect does Humbert's narration of the erotic vignettes change over the course of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*?

Subject: English

Category: 1

Word Count: 3 813

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Introduction

Throughout *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, Humbert Humbert describes his attraction to young girls, or "nymphets" as he calls them, which he explains are girls "between the age limits of nine and fourteen." (Nabokov 15) When he moves to the USA, he ends up temporarily moving into Charlotte Haze's home, where he meets and instantly falls in love with her 12-year-old daughter, Dolores, whom he nicknames Lolita. After Charlotte dies in a car accident, Humbert and Lolita begin a sexual relationship, and travel around America. As Lolita grows older and develops, she becomes more manipulative and resistant towards Humbert, and eventually disappears with Clare Quilty who has been following the two. Following this, Humbert never hears of or sees Lolita again until she contacts him asking for money because she is pregnant. The book ends with Humbert's arrest as he has murdered Clare Quilty, which explains the book being written as if it were a testimony for a trial as an attempt to prove his innocence.

Lolita was published in France in 1955 after being rejected several times by a handful of British and American publishers. (Lodge) The narrator of the story, Humbert Humbert, is a hebephile who falls in love with a girl named Dolores Haze, whom Humbert decides to nickname Lolita (hence the title of the novel). The very prominent theme of hebephilia sparked controversy amongst critics and the rest of the public, calling it, for example, "the filthiest book [they] have ever read" and "sheer unrestrained pornography." (Boyd 295) This also resulted in the book being banned in several countries including France and the UK. Nonetheless, not all

reactions to the novel were negative as many actually praise Nabokov's stylistic virtuosity. (Lodge)

At the time *Lolita* was written and published, a new culture was emerging, where people were more eager to challenge the conventional morals of the years before. (Ewins) Writers were also contributing to this shift through postmodernist writing, which also contradicts the traditional ideas of novels from before — that they should be realistic and objective in their narration. ("Postmodern Literature Characteristics") Writers of this style focused more on exploring the complexity of language, as well as challenging the values of their society. *Lolita* demonstrates a number of these characteristics as seen in Nabokov's use of sophisticated writing including elements such as intertextuality, puns and other literary devices, as well as the story being highly controversial and challenging to many people's' points of views.

Arguably, *Lolita* is not controversial because of the erotic descriptions, but rather because of the fact that it is a sexual relationship between a grown man and a girl below the age of consent. The descriptions of sexual encounters between the two characters, rather than being graphic, are defamiliarized through Humbert's metaphorical inventiveness that make his recounting of the sexual acts sound innocent and even lyrical. The language, however, changes over the course of the novel. This is worth exploring at a linguistic level as the reader can feel that Humbert's mellifluousness deteriorates as the relationship crumbles and he becomes increasingly depressed while Lolita becomes more manipulative. This raises the question "How

far and to what effect does Humbert's narration of the erotic vignettes change over the course of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*?"

I find that this is worth exploring as critics tend to praise the infinitely playful language in the novel, and how it manages to charm readers into enjoyment of a highly controversial story, but, as far as I know, there is yet to be extensive discussion of how this language changes as the characters develop and as Humbert deteriorates psychologically. Because this is an aspect of the narrative language that I have not found has been delved deeper into yet, I contest that this essay is breaking slightly new ground. While contextual information will be taken from secondary sources, a lot of the points will be from my own close analysis of the text.

A Background to Nabokov's Narrative Language

Nabokov utilizes intertextuality in the novel, particularly with allusions to Edgar Allan Poe's poem "Annabel Lee". (Fraysse) Humbert traces the origin of his sexuality back to the first girl he was in love with when he was younger, (Nabokov 7) Annabel Leigh, who passed away before they had the chance to have any sexual relations. He states that "there might have been no Lolita at all, had [he] not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child. In a princedom by the sea." (Nabokov 7) Those who have read Poe's famous poem would quickly make a clear connection already at this point from the first lines in the poem: "It was many and many a year ago, in a kingdom by the sea // That a maiden there lived whom you may know // By the name of Annabel Lee." (Poe) Some suspect that the reason behind Nabokov's creative choice is not only

due to the fact that Poe is known for wordplay, but also because he was married to Annabel Lee, his 13-year-old cousin, (Israel) making it significant to the plot of the story.

A very prominent element of *Lolita* is the aforementioned complexity of the language. One of the main features that makes *Lolita* such an interesting and unique piece of narrative work is often considered to be Humbert's ability with words—his "love affair" with the English language. He plays around with puns and multilingual expressions that make for an irresistibly charming narrative voice. The fact that he is the narrator, however, has raised a question among critics of whether he is reliable or not, as "not only is Lolita's voice silenced, her point of view, the way she sees the situation and feels about it, is rarely mentioned and can be only surmised by the reader [...] since it is Humbert who tells the story [...] throughout most of the novel, the reader is absorbed in Humbert's feelings." (Pifer 24)

Part 1 Chapters 1-15: Poetics and Passion

Humbert Humbert uses his stylistic virtuosity in order to bring forth a poetic, flourishing element in the language he uses to narrate the sexual encounters between himself and Lolita. He clearly attempts to avoid admitting explicitly to the pedophilic nature of the relationship, and instead appeals to the reader's sense of the aesthetic. From the first time he sees Lolita, Humbert's diction is embroidered with an abundance of literary devices such as strong imagery, metaphors and alliteration. In the very first line of the book, "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my

loins," (Nabokov 7) we feel the excitement and joy felt by the protagonist over Lolita. Nabokov introduces the relationship as a romantic one with the metaphors "light of my life" and "fire of my loins," that mitigate the situation through the parallel structure, alliteration, and the old fashioned word for genitals. Further descriptions of Lolita are seen when he first lays eyes on her as he writes "there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses. [...] The same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair." (Nabokov 41-42) By calling her his "Riviera love," he makes a connection to his boyhood love, Annabel Leigh, and simultaneously depicts a beautiful image of an exotic paradise which provokes emotion in the readers—simulating the same emotions he feels for Lolita as he also did in the very first line of the novel. By mentioning her "peering at [him]," it introduces a flirtatious image of Lolita followed by the alliteration in "frail, honey-hued shoulders," which really brings forth a poetic description of the young girl, and is an example of why many readers of the book were impacted by Humbert's words in such a way that "a disturbing story of child abuse can somehow seem almost normal" or even delightful! ("Lolita By Vladimir Nabokov - Review")

Humbert creates a "veneer" for the erotic vignettes using language as a mask that forces readers to interpret the unsettling aspects of the relationship as less disturbing, and perhaps even exquisite or tasteful. His narration is "not the characteristic whine of the penitent but an artful modulation of lyricism and jocularity that quickly seduces the reader into something very like willing complicity." (Malcolm) In this sense, the reader's perception is manipulated by the way he pulls the readers into the descriptions. When Humbert experiences his first intimate encounter with Lolita, he introduces the readers to the setting as if it were a play, by announcing "Main

character: Humbert the Hummer. Time: Sunday morning in June. Place: sunlit living room." (Nabokov 63) This brings the reader into the action, and followed by a description of Lolita's clothes, it diverts the reader's attention away from the fact that she is a child, as he writes that she was "tight in the bodice," and that "she had painted her lips." (Nabokov 63) Through this, readers are forced to see the scenario through the protagonist's eyes. Humbert goes on to describe the escalating action between them through an interior monologue, however with such beautifully rendered words that they cover up the reality of the situation—that a grown man is aroused by a girl well under the age of consent. Rather than saying directly that he is receiving sexual pleasure from a little girl, he writes that it is a "secret system of tactile correspondence between beast and beauty," (Nabokov 65) and that he "crushed out against her left buttock the last throb of the longest ecstasy man or monster had ever known." (Nabokov 67) One could see this scene as something consisting completely of this "mask" that Humbert's words create as he combines alliteration and highbrow language in "secret system of tactile correspondence" as well as writing "crushed out," in order to describe actions more graphic and erotic than perhaps they seem! Furthermore, he adds the witty allusion "between beast and beauty," which, again, is a use of alliteration, but also a reference to the fairy tale, with him assuming the character of lower status, resulting in feelings of sympathy for Humbert from the reader. Through this, he attempts to distract the readers and get them to see the same beauty he sees while disguising what would otherwise be considered as morally wrong.

As aforementioned, the novel is written, at one level, as if it were a testimony in a court trial. He casts the reader as a member or the jury through his use of jargon, placing them superior

to him. Logically, this means that Humbert aims to convince the jury to sympathize with him in order to avoid conviction, which raises the question of his reliability as a narrator. Towards the end, however, the readers can see more of the reality as it is. The inventive, cultured language that once had readers lost in the brilliance, sensitivity and pathos of his descriptions, undergoes a change as the story unravels.

Part 1 Chapter 13-Part 2 Chapter 11: The Decay of the Romantic Element

As the novel progresses, Lolita is portrayed by Humbert Humbert as sexually precocious rather than as the innocent prepubescent girl we might expect. In the first intimate scene, Lolita is described as having "painted her lips" and "holding in her hollowed hands a beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple." (Nabokov 63) This blatant biblical reference to the story of Adam and Eve portrays Lolita as Eve in the story; the seductress that urges Humbert to take a bite from the forbidden fruit. Here, Humbert suggests that Lolita is to blame for seducing him into doing what he was not supposed to— a prime example of how the narrator distracts the readers from the ugly truth. When the two characters had their first kiss, it is also described in a way that illustrates her as the initiator as she "pressed her mouth to [his] [...] and shared in the peppermint taste of her saliva." (Nabokov 127) This has the effect of putting Lolita in the seemingly superior and dominant position in relation to Humbert, and when he tries to view her as anything less, such as "an obedient little girl," and she responds in disgust by saying "Don't drool on me. You dirty man," (Nabokov 130) it shows that she is in control of the relationship, inherently creating

sympathy for Humbert as he is treated like an animal by her through the words "drool" and "dirty."

Furthermore, Humbert writes that Lolita later reveals to him (as they are about to have sexual intercourse for the first time) that he is, in fact, not her first sexual experience as she asks him "you mean [...] you never did it when you were a kid?" and then proceeds to say "here is where we start." (Nabokov 151) Lolita's sexual experience prior to their first experience of sexual intercourse has the effect of making the relationship seem somewhat more consensual. Nabokov constructs his two main characters in such a way as to suggest that Humbert is helpless in Lolita's hands, and it is now not Humbert's fault that they have fallen into this depraved relationship, and Lolita's innocence has been broken and her childhood taken away from her. As their relationship develops, Lolita clearly loses interest, and here the reader begins to see more of the reality of the relationship.

While still maintaining an element of the charming language that was before, Humbert's words become brutally honest as he writes that "it would take hours of blandishments, threats and promises to make her lend [him] for a few seconds her brown limbs in seclusion of the five-dollar room before undertaking anything she might prefer to [his] poor joy." (Nabokov 166) The words "blandishments, threats and promises" in particular are what make this passage eye-opening for the reader, as it becomes evident that Humbert's status is inferior in relation to Lolita— that he is frantic and at her beck and call. It is a contrast to previous descriptions as Humbert often in the past used alliteration when using two or more words to describe Lolita or

an interaction between them, such as “silky supple bare back,” (Nabokov 41) “beast and beauty,” (Nabokov 65) and “beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple,” (Nabokov 63) to name a few that have already been explored. Moreover, the words “threats and promises” display Humbert’s desperation through the contrasting nature— “threats” sounding aggressive, while “promises” sounding affectionate. It shows that he is trying everything in order to receive love in return from Lolita. The sudden absence of finesse, alliteration and detail for those specific words underlines now that the relationship is not consensual any longer. Overall, it can also be seen that Humbert’s tone has shifted in regard to physical detail. The readers get less physical detail from the narrator at this point. There are still descriptions such as “brown limbs,” showing that Humbert still describes sex obliquely, but now in the context of threats and blackmail, it becomes evident to the reader that the relationship has grown tiring and irksome for Lolita.

With Lolita’s spoiled innocence and her loss of interest in having a romantic relationship with him, Humbert Humbert portrays Lolita as manipulative by appearing to use a more honest tone, which adds to the growing divide between the two characters. The tone now strips away parts of the veneer of words that once kept readers blinded from the problems in the relationship. Now, Lolita is a “cruel negotiator,” who has control over Humbert as she has the “power to deny [him] certain life-wrecking, strange, slow paradisal philters without which [he] could not live more than a few days in a row,” and even used the “magic and might of her own soft mouth” to manipulate Humbert by “[raising] the bonus price of a fancy embrace to three, and even four bucks.” (Nabokov 208) Here, Humbert’s language not only portrays Lolita as a manipulative character, but also brings forth his own state of mind through the description of the

"life-wrecking, strange, slow paradisal philters." The word choice here shows that his use of language is still passionate and almost rhythmic, but in this case it has the effect of demonstrating the degree of his addiction as he contrasts "life-wrecking" and "paradisal" as if it were a drug, and he was craving the high despite it ruining his life. The combination of Humbert's addiction to Lolita's "paradisal" love, and Lolita's manipulative character in charging "four bucks" for it, enforces Humbert's desperation, and makes it evident to the reader that there has been a shift in the nature of the relationship although the nature of the language remains side-long.

Part 1 Chapter 13-Part 2 Chapter 11: The Language of Desperation

Humbert Humbert's language grows increasingly desperate along with his portrayal of Lolita as manipulative. This gradual shift leads to the changes from witty and elegant language to more harsh language. Although it is complicated to track the changes due to Humbert's continuing linguistic talent, the erotic vignettes throughout the novel develop with the effect of tiring the reader as the narrative voice begins to seem more unstable rather than romantic. Despite the tone now having taken away the excitement that Humbert and Lolita initially seemed to have in their encounters, the narrator still manages skillfully to construct feelings of sympathy from the readers towards himself.

An aspect of Humbert's desperation seen throughout the text is how he downplays himself, for example when he writes "anything she might prefer to my poor joy." (Nabokov 166)

In this already explored example, Humbert shifts the focus from the fact that here Lolita is being pressured into doing something she does not want to, to the self-pity he feels. This is similar to the effect of his language seen in the rest of the novel, as this pattern of covering up the truth by manipulating the reader through words has always been prominent. Humbert's self-pity is a recurring aspect that is used by him several times throughout the later parts of the novel, another example being when he plays himself down as "weak" and "not wise" (Nabokov 207) to make it appear as if Lolita's manipulative character has taken the upper hand in the relationship, and is the cause for his suffering. Although Humbert appears to continue to use words as a mask, this example shows the significant change in the tone and nature of the words from the beginning of the novel, as Humbert had never previously used such harsh language when talking about Lolita's effect on him.

The development of Humbert's narrative language is a complex one as it appears to change dramatically from him meeting Lolita to their relationship deteriorating, but upon closer analysis the language he uses at its core always remains the same; side-long, rich in adjectives, and witty. It is, however, the tone that changes the way the reader perceives the relationship as it is more self-denigrating, taking the joy out of it utterly. For example, the aforementioned first intimate encounter between Humbert and Lolita was a passage with alliteration and allusions woven into it as well as an excited tone, while a passage at a later part of the novel with a similar setting, demonstrates the same melodious use of language, however the overall tone and the way the reader perceives the passage is completely altered. In this passage, Humbert writes "The fragility of those bare arms of yours— how I longed to enfold them, all your four limpid lovely

limbs [...] and take your head between my unworthy hands," (Nabokov 218) which involves the same allusive and alliterative style of writing, seen through "limpid lovely limbs," which shows how Humbert maintains his literary inventiveness. These two passages have the same passionate language, but the tone created in the latter by the use of words like "longed" and "unworthy," is more harsh and self-lacerating. Furthermore, Humbert ends the "scene" by saying "never mind, never mind, I am only a brute, never mind, let us go on with my miserable story," which, again, reinforces his own feelings of self-disgust.

Humbert shows his increasing desperation as Lolita's interest decays, which can be seen in the earlier mentioned scene where Humbert and Lolita are in a classroom with another girl, whom he describes as having "a very naked, porcelain-white neck and wonderful platinum hair," and he "for sixty-five cents plus the permission to participate in the school play, had Dolly put her inky, chalky, red-knuckled hand under the desk." Humbert's desperation in this scene derives from "the torture [he] had been subjected to," meaning he "simply had to take advantage of a combination that [he] knew would never occur again." (Nabokov 224) Here, the transition from romantic, rhythmic sentences to harsh, distasteful language and implication is evident as well as the reality of this scenario. The reader is no longer charmed into romanticizing the interactions between the two characters, but instead is fully aware of the perverse thoughts running through Humbert's mind. Humbert does not use language to mask that he is paying Lolita to do this, he does however still use language to vividly describe Lolita's "inky, chalky, red-knuckled hand under the desk," rather than what she is doing with it. The detail describing the other girl's "porcelain-white neck," and the nickname for Lolita, "Dolly," brings forth the idea of a doll,

which is unsettling as it implies childishness and artificiality. This passage demonstrates Humbert excusing his own immoral behavior because of Lolita's power in the relationship, and he also manages to mask that here Lolita is no more or less than a prostitute, as he shifts the focus to the "torture" he had been through, and his admittance to it being "stupid and reckless of [him]." In this way, it is evident that although he utilizes poetic and flamboyant words to a lesser extent, the reader is always partially unclear about what is really being described, so language is still being used with the effect of masking the reality.

Conclusion

In *Lolita*, Nabokov constructs a narrator that uses his linguistic virtuosity to depict a relationship that is pedophilic in nature, as something romantic. The narrator, Humbert, does this by his use of allusions, poetry, metaphors, alliteration and puns that always render any interaction between himself and Lolita as ambiguous, so no names of sexual organs or acts are ever specified. Although the language appears to go through a drastic change as the novel progresses, and Lolita loses interest while Humbert becomes increasingly desperate, this is still Humbert's narrative voice, at its core, in the erotic vignettes through the novel. The refinement of the language of Humbert's desperation is in fact similar to the refinement of the language in the first encounters between the two characters. What is also similar from beginning to end are the passages describing the interactions. The same rhythmic touch remains in all the passages, making the descriptions seem almost musical when being read, however a development is seen

in the tone that brings forth the speaker's self-disgust, and takes away the excitement that initially surrounded the relationship. The rich use of adjectives used throughout undergoes a change in nature, becoming more harsh, and this has the effect of tiring the reader as the text progresses, and perhaps making them more aware of the truth behind Humbert's filigree of words.

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