



## ARTISTIC REALITY AND ILLUSION IN VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S *LOLITA*

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### ABSTRACT

*Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita is an exemplary work of art that continues to push the boundaries of aesthetic and ethical literary theory. This paper explores two principle motifs— reality and imagination—in an attempt to join Nabokov's artistic mechanisms with his well-established aesthetic and ethical axioms. This paper strives to show how beauty and morality connect reality and imagination to aesthetics and ethics; and ultimately, how these interrelationships provide a dimensionality to art that invites the thoughtful reader to an elevated state of "aesthetic bliss."*

**Key words:** Illusion, Reality, imagination, beauty, Artistic Aesthetics

### INTRODUCTION

Humbert's *Lolita*—a fictional, posthumously published memoir—claims to reflect “events” that “really” happened, and if some of these events are falsified, then the reader blames the unreliable narrator. Capricious or not, however, these episodes of hypocrisy and falsification are cues to investigate the interpretive possibility that these moments of unreliability are actually real to Humbert, and thus necessitate the consideration of Humbert's average reality versus his emotional reality. One then finds that Humbert's contradictory statements are often consistent when contextualized in his perspective of reality. Humbert and *Lolita*'s stay in *The Enchanted Hunters* provides an excellent example of the visual patterning and coincidences that undermine *Lolita*'s average reality, pointing both to Nabokov as stagehand and to Humbert's solipsistic reality or Nabokov's literary world has its own formulas for right and wrong, indices of true, false, and array of values that make up the texture of Humbert's fictional existence. Thus Humbert's incongruous claims—be they emotionally charged or literarily devoid of ethical boundaries and human sensitivity—must be contextualized in the fabric of Nabokov's literary world.

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Humbert and Lolita's stay in The Enchanted Hunters provides an excellent example of the visual patterning and coincidences that undermine Lolita's average reality, pointing both to Nabokov as stagehand and to Humbert's solipsistic reality.

Their entrance into the hotel begins with a comedic interaction with Mr. Swine and Mr. Potts—"two pink pigs" running the hotel. After a sequence of playful rhymes—"Mr. Potts, do we have any cots...—would there be a spare cot in 49, Mr. Swine?"—the recurrence of the number "342" captures both Lolita and Humbert's attention:

*In the slow clear hand of crime I wrote: Dr. Edgar H. Humbert and daughter, 342 Lawn Street, Ramsdale. A key (342!) was half-shown to me (magician showing object he is about to palm)—and handed over to Uncle Tom. Lo, leaving the dog as she would leave me some day, rose from her haunches; a raindrop fell on Charlotte's grave; a handsome young Negress slipped open the elevator door, and the doomed child went in followed by her throat-clearing father and crayfish Tom with the bags. Parody of a hotel corridor. Parody of silence and death. "Say, it's our house number," said cheerful Lo. (49)*

This passage typifies how Nabokov, "the magician," uses coincidence to presuppose meaning between details, such as the Haze house number and the hotel number; more specifically, however, Nabokov is placing a hermeneutic marker, signaling the reader to consider and "fondle the details" both of and around the coincidence. Humbert fraudulently identifies himself as Dr. Edgar H. Humbert, an allusion to Poe that references Humbert's desire to be an artist and also confirms his existence as bound to and defined by literature. Humbert's recognition of the coincidence—342!—appears to induce a solemn tone that contrasts the previous comedy of Mr. Potts and Mr. Swine. Humbert alludes to Lolita's betrayal and to Charlotte's grave in a crescendo of dismal observations that lead to a pivotal shift in perspective. The fragmented lines that introduce the hallway leading to Humbert and Lolita's first night of consummation also introduce the dark nature of Humbert's problematic perception—a solipsistic thinker "most artistically caged" in Nabokov's fictional world. As though Nabokov anticipates the reader's desire to interpret the true reality attached to the "real suffering" implied by Humbert's tone, the author has only left us a fragmented, incomplete, and sardonic interpretation of the scene as a "Parody of silence and death." (46) The reader, casually enjoying the literary play of Swine and Potts, finds him or herself at a loss when attempting to interpret the significance of this phrase. Whose silence? Whose deaths? One might speculate that Humbert is referring to the silent death of Lolita's girlhood, but she chimes in as "cheerful Lo" in the next line. It is only at the novel's close that we



realize “cheerful Lo,” number 342, and the platitudinous elevator routine are the details of parody that mock the “silence and death” consequent to Humbert’s illicit love.(47)

Herein lies the textured reality of *Lolita*. As if triggering the puppeteer’s strings, Lolita brings up the coincidental room number and Humbert’s moment of self reflexivity is lost to a solipsistic metaphor:

*There was a double bed, a mirror, a double bed in the mirror, a closet door with mirror, a bathroom door ditto, a blue-dark window, a reflected bed there, the same in the closet mirror, two chairs, a glass-topped table, two bed tables, a double bed....(48)*

Appel comments that: “the room is a little prison of mirrors, a metaphor for his solipsism and circumscribing obsession,” calling “the attempt to transcend solipsism [one] of Nabokov’s major themes.”(49) However, this metaphor is all the more effective because of its short, tongue-twisting alliterations of “b” and “d” that necessitate a reread to overcome the obstructive language. Nabokov’s style and form strengthen the significance of the metaphor by forcing the reader to re-read and focus on the detail of the scene. The list begins and ends with “a double bed,” as though Humbert is about to repeat the exercise of describing the room’s total internal reflection; therefore, if the reader re-reads the passage just once, he or she has read the word “double bed” six times. The obsessive repetition suggests that the dizzying “prison of mirrors” is also a physical representation of Humbert’s imagination as he stands in the hotel room, anticipating his night in the “double bed”: “by stacking level upon level of translucent vision, [I] had evolved a final picture” of Lolita, “imprisoned in her crystal sleep.”(50) Humbert subsequently connects his vision of Lolita and the prison metaphor with the coincidental key number “342”: “The key, with its numbered dangler of carved wood, became forthwith the weighty sesame to a rapturous and formidable future.”(51) The development of this compound symbol shows how Humbert attaches meaning to the textured patterns of his “average reality”; of course the reader knows, from the vantage point of dramatic irony, that the patterns are Nabokov’s metaphors and coincidences— “McFate’s way”—which have no “true reality.”(52)

In mimesis of Nabokov’s limitation on Humbert’s artistic material, Humbert’s first lover, Annabel Leigh, is actually the artistic property of Edgar Allen Poe, author of the poem, “Annabel Lee.” Of “his” Annabel, Humbert writes: “her seaside limbs...haunted me...until at last, twenty-four years later, I broke her spell by incarnating her in another.”(53) This is Humbert’s first statement of artistic intention: to re-create Annabel, Humbert needs to aestheticize Lolita to give her the immortal, artistic reality that poetry has given “Annabel Lee.” This endeavor reflects Humbert’s misuse and misinterpretation of art as applicable to



human reality—a reality distinct in its ethical nature from the true, the average, and the solipsistic realities discussed heretofore. The quotation that follows is the final development in a series of Humbert’s attempts to realize his Lolita by giving her existence through art:

*Thus, neither of us is alive when the reader opens this book. But while the blood still throbs through my writing hand, you are still as much part of blessed matter as I am, and I can still talk to you from here to Alaska. Be true to your Dick. Do not let other fellows touch you. Do not talk to strangers. I hope you will love your baby. I hope it will be a boy. That husband of yours, I hope, will always treat you well, because otherwise my specter shall come at him, like black smoke, like a demented giant, and pull him apart nerve by nerve. And do not pity C.Q. One had to choose between him and H.H., and one wanted H.H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita. (54)*

Humbert concludes with an address to Lolita that is devoid of his normally florid prose, but true to his own beliefs in art’s ability to create and immortalize. The concept of existence is considered in three ways in this passage: life in average reality, life in Humbert’s internal reality, and life in art. These three places are of course joined in their fictional context, but it is apparent that Humbert has created the Lolita of his memoir from his interpretation of reality and transformed her into an artistic piece (“to have him make you live in the minds of later generations”). Any sensitivity that might prompt Humbert to postpone publishing the memoir until Lolita dies is secondary to the fact that his memoir gives her a form of existence that belongs only to Humbert’s reality—“while the blood still throbs through my writing hand, you are still as much part of blessed matter as I am.” Humbert knows he is ascribing an existence to Lolita that stems from his writing pen; as Appel comments in his note to the last sentence, the archaic images of the Old Master paintings (“durable pigments”) and the unintelligible allusion to the cave paintings of Lascaux (the “aurochs”) are “too obscure.”(55) Before relegating their past to the realm of art, “Humbert’s moral apotheosis, so uniquely straightforward, constitutes the end game and Nabokov’s final trompe-l’oeil.” They relate his memoir and Lolita to paintings from ancient Europe—a far cry from the America of Lolita—and draw attention to Humbert’s shifting conception of his own reality. This final image underscores his failure to reconcile his internal perception of Lolita and what he retrospectively discovers about her, that he did not allow her an innocent childhood. In his last sentence, Humbert is careful to call upon “my Lolita,” the Lolita of his solipsistic creation, suggesting that he is resigned to the loss of the “Lolita” that opens the novel. This prompts one to look back through the text in search of those moments that distinguish



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*One could make out the geometry of the streets between blocks of red and gray roofs, and green puffs of trees, and a serpentine stream, and the rich, ore-like glitter of the city dump, and beyond the town, roads crisscrossing the crazy quilt of dark and pale fields, and behind it all, great timbered mountains. But even brighter than those quietly rejoicing colors—for there are colors and shades that seem to enjoy themselves in good company—both brighter and dreamier to the ear than they were to the eye, was that vapory vibration of accumulated sounds that never ceased for a moment, as it rose to the lip of granite where I stood wiping my foul mouth. And soon I realized that all these sounds were of one nature, that no other sounds but these came from the streets of the transparent town, with the women at home and the men away. Reader! What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and so limpid was the air that within this vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic—one could hear now and then, as if released, an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter, or the crack of a bat, or the clatter of a toy wagon, but it was all really too far for the eye to distinguish any movement in the lightly etched streets. I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, 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. (58)*



Aside from the beautiful flow of prose, the passage is preoccupied with a distortion of senses that mirrors Humbert's painfully dizzying recognition that Lolita's existence is as much of a mystery to him as the magically colorful choir of sound that resounds from the "transparent town" in front of him. Humbert's kaleidoscopic experience is completely auditory and tactile, reminding us of his intentional blindness to Lolita's empty, unhappy childhood. Humbert dwells on the "vapor of blended voices" that disorients him because it comes to him in waves and "spurts." The sound is "almost articulate," a "demure murmur" that refuses him a distinct visualization but rather inspires a deep and epiphany-like moment ("and then I knew") of moral sensitivity for the ghost of Lolita's girlhood.(59 58) He attempts to immortalize not the real Lolita but his Lolita, only to find that the two are not inseparable, and that by solipsizing her he has sacrificed her reality. Pifer writes, "True consciousness is a gift realized by its operation—not by mere possession; lacking exercise, the faculty atrophies."(60) This aptly describes Humbert's muted dilemma in the final pages of Lolita, from Humbert's moral apotheosis to his constricted voice at the close of the novel. Humbert's proximity to the reality he denied Lolita is "hopelessly poignant" because he feels the consequences of ignoring her true existence. "True consciousness" lurks both "remote and magically near," (61) but will forever remain hidden from Humbert, "because consciousness is dependent on the visual discovery of interrelations among phenomena" to which Humbert has been knowingly blind. (62)

Lolita, an emotionally objectified and nearly voiceless character, reflects the limitation of Humbert's artistic success. This is not because Lolita is as shallow as he presents her, but rather because the reader is constrained to the Lolita of Humbert's solipsistic reality—a reality that denies Lolita the ethical respect that all human beings deserve. Humbert first violates Lolita by positioning her on his "surreptitiously laboring lap" (68) until he orgasms. He describes her afterward:

*Thus had I delicately constructed my ignoble, ardent, sinful dream; and still Lolita was safe—I was safe. 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.(69)*

Humbert might insert this observation as a retrospective detail, but it builds the case that Humbert created the Lolita of his memoir and desired his own creation. James Tweedie notes that "Humbert's solipsism aims at near-complete isolation, and the world beyond his insular existence is always confronted as a threat."(70 67) "'Dick, this is Dad,' cried Dolly in a resounding violent voice that struck me as totally strange, and new, and cheerful and old, and



sad.” (273). Humbert is struck precisely by Lolita’s voice many years after she had left him. The progression from “totally strange” to “old and sad reflects an emotional recognition of this “new” voice he had not listened to beforehand. This is clear from Humbert’s reassurance that both he and Lolita are safe, but from what? The threats are numerous as the novel continues, and Humbert deals with them accordingly: their love affair could be exposed, so they road trip across America; Clare Quilty steals Lolita, so Humbert hunts him down; even the real Lolita threatens his solipsized version, so he drugs her with purple pills and buys her what she wants. It is only later that Humbert faces the fact that “his insular existence” is the greatest threat to the success of his love affair with Lolita.

By denying Lolita a valid existence in his reality, Humbert only acknowledges Lolita’s internal consciousness as it presents itself in the context of Humbert’s solipsized world. As his memories unfold at the end of the memoir, Humbert recalls an episode that parallels Lolita’s dour response to the garden that foretells of Heavenly beauty:

*“You know, what’s so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own”; and it struck me, as my automaton knees went up and down, that I simply did not know a thing about my darling’s mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in 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....(71)*

Humbert allows Lolita the possibility of a life, but not even his imagination seems capable of expressing that life to the reader. The gardens of Lolita connect Humbert’s first and last encounter with Annabel Lee, the private sphere of Humbert’s nymphet fantasies in the public park (“my mossy garden”), his first meeting with Lolita in the Haze’s “breathless garden,” his hallucination of Lolita with Quilty “through the speckled shadow of a garden path,” and the “wormy vegetable garden” of Dolly Schiller’s town.(72) Humbert describes himself in the Haze house: “I am like one of those inflated pale spiders you see in old gardens. Sitting in the middle of a luminous web and giving little jerks to this or that strand. My web is spread all over the house...” (73 71) The garden functions as a coherent image linking Humbert’s nymphets, an authorial move that allows the reader to connect with Nabokov’s narrative direction. These functional images show that Humbert sees himself as the center of each garden referenced here, save for the “garden path” hallucination. Humbert’s reference to Lolita’s private, “forbidden” internal space as a “garden” reminds one of his “elected paradise—a paradise whose skies were the color of hell-flames.”(74) Humbert “dwells deep” in his paradise “despite the vulgarity, and the danger, and the horrible hopelessness of it all.”(75) With a solid understanding of Humbert’s solipsistic reality and its consequences, we



can adequately address how Nabokov depicts the role of imagination in the artistic process via Humbert's misuse of this artistic tool. Humbert wishes to immortalize "the perilous magic of nymphets" Recalling "smothered memories," Humbert arouses the striking thought that Lolita has a Humbert-less garden of her own, a prospect that brings about a selfconscious anxiety: he feels dirty ("polluted rags") and physically ill ("miserable convulsions"). Humbert's inferences about Lolita's forbidden garden, her internal space of privacy and imagination, show his re-consideration of Lolita's human reality, a process of learning that draws Humbert closer to his moral awakening at the conclusion of the novel.

Nabokov's formulation of art as the synthesis of beauty and pity serves as an eloquent description of Nabokov's own aesthetic achievement. The novel's mastery of illusion and language is of the highest literary quality, but more interestingly, *Lolita* is exactly the junction where "the beastly and the beautiful [merge]." Thus although Humbert feels pity for Lolita on the "lofty slope," his regret and sympathy are not adequately developed until this point, and his retrospective imagination—working with the material of his solipsistic reality—cannot successfully "fix" this nymphet purgatory. (93) Humbert's literary eloquence, articulation, and humor make him one of "Nabokov's most "humanized" character[s],"(94) Nabokov adjusts his style to engender the reader's emotional response, thus allowing him to write about subjects as offensive as pedophilia and murder without compromising the ethical effect of his own aesthetics. Humbert, on the other hand, fails to transcend the level of the cheap murals he imagines in the dining room of the Enchanted Hunters because his aesthetics are so self involved. The core issue underlying Humbert's aesthetic and ethical failings is his solipsistic view of reality. For Humbert, "the red sun of desire and decision" are "the two things that create a live world," (96) and thus his evil treatment of Lolita and his dedication to art are all motivated by desires that perpetuate his own reality. Additionally, Humbert's imagination floats on this rising sun of wants and resolutions and can create no further than the bubble of his own fabricated reality. At the core, Humbert's aesthetics are morally reprehensible because they stem from his solipsistic wish to create an artistic end by means of a human life.

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