

The Viability of Narration in Nabokov's *Lolita*

Kaushal Kishore Sharma

Abstract— Both famous and infamous *Lolita* remains the most important work of Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov. Regarded as one of the finest achievements of twentieth century *Lolita* has attained the status of classic. Amidst kaleidoscopic themes including prison, psychiatry, culture and narration it's the last one which serves the food for thought in the present research paper.

The quandary of Humbert's narration in *Lolita* has been discussed and debated by critics and scholars ever since its publication in 1955. An inherent abundance of lengthy redolent passages about young girls incited more than a few to wonder whether Nabokov shared some of Humbert's obsession. In order to face such allegations Nabokov added an afterword to the American edition, "On a book entitled *Lolita*", attempting to clear up several misconceptions about the book. He plainly states that he does not share Humbert's morals and disagrees with him on several other subjects (315). Pifer notes that despite this statement many critics were still not convinced. They claimed that Nabokov's praise of "aesthetic bliss" in fiction shows that the style of *Lolita* encourages the reader to sympathize with Humbert rather than *Lolita*. Pifer argues that these critics have missed the many signals, embedded in the discourse, with the purpose of having the reader break identification with the narrator (186).

Index Terms— Unreliable, *Lolita* Narration, Reader.

I. INTRODUCTION

That the author himself feels compelled to intervene in the debate proves something about the narrative journey which *Lolita* arguably is. The intrinsic complexity ever present in Nabokov's oeuvre is very much noticeable in *Lolita*. The numerous layers in it make it a challenging prospect to analyze Humbert's narration. Moreover, its narrative has divided researchers into two distinct camps, those who consider Humbert unreliable and those who do not. It is arguably more relevant to research the issue of Humbert's reliability as narrator because of the overwhelming amount of signs of unreliability the reader perceives when reading *Lolita*.

In this paper an attempt is made to focus on the narration in *Lolita*, emphasizing on Humbert's unreliability. In order to do this a definition for the term 'unreliable narrator' is discussed. The term unreliable narrator was famously given by Wayne Booth in his seminal *Rhetoric of Fiction*. It has been of paramount importance in narratological studies ever since its introduction. In *A Companion To Narrative Theory*, Ansgar Nünning urges that Booth's definition of the unreliable narrator is the definition given in the majority of

scholarly articles and narratological works (89). Booth defines the reliable and unreliable narrator in the following way: "I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not" (158-59). In other words, when a narrator expresses values and perceptions that strikingly diverge from those of the implied author he is deemed unreliable (Olson 93).

The author is able to include as well as exclude readers in a unique manner. The readers who are in possession of the necessary information to understand the irony enter into secret collusion with the implied author against those who do not get the point. Putting this into the context of unreliable narration, the narrator himself is excluded from the ethics and understandings between the implied author and the reader. The aforementioned distance is thereby established (Olson 93; Booth 304).

In order to detect unreliability, the reader has to adopt an interpretive strategy which involves reading against the grain and assuming the understanding of the unspoken values that are communicated by the implied author. This strategy includes the detection of textual signals (Olson 93).

Booth argues that the version of the author that is projected onto the text is in a sense more genuine than the flesh and blood of author. In the process of writing the author actively erases the parts of himself that he does not like, resulting in a sublime version of himself - free from faults in character (*Narrative Theory* 85). Booth admits that the actual text is separated from the creator in that it is always subjected to different readings. Yet he contends that at the time of writing, the text and the real-life author are identical; thus he assigns importance to the implied author (*Narrative Theory* 86).

The present paper accepts the concept of the implied author and the definition of unreliable narrator as given by Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (158-59). Unreliable narration occurs when there is a rift between the values of the narrator and the implied author (Olson 93). This rift is put into context by irony, by which the implied author is communicating unspoken points over the head of the narrator to readers (thereby excluding the narrator) (Olson 93). There are three sources of unreliability, limited knowledge, personal involvement, and questionable morals (Rimmon-Keenan 100-101). Furthermore, detecting textual signals is a method for the reader to identify an unreliable narrator (Olson 93). The list of textual signals, devised by combining Nünning's and Booth's research, is the preferred means of identifying

unreliable narration in *Lolita*. Not all of the signals are applicable to *Lolita*, but a few have been used in the study.

The insanity of the protagonist Humbert Humbert

That Humbert Humbert is a deeply disturbed character is quickly understood by the reader. He can undoubtedly be held accountable for a wide variety of crimes, ranging from kidnapping of children to cold-blooded murder. The aim of this part is to discover the connection between Humbert's unreliability and his mental health while ascertaining whether Humbert uses insanity as a means to mitigate his crimes. Humbert's strange comments on his ability to retell memories provide textual evidence of his unreliability. He describes himself ambiguously as "a murderer with sensational but incomplete and unorthodox memory" (217) when trying to recall the first instance where he notices that he and Lolita are being pursued on their second trip through the States. This self-confessed fallacy of memory can further be observed in the arbitrary rearrangement of events, such as the instance where he mixes up two separate visits to Briceland with Rita. He defensively ascribes an importance to this mix-up by noting that "such suffusions of swimming colors are not to be disdained by the artist in recollection" (263), perhaps arguing that mishaps are sometimes to be expected when creating art. Furthermore, in his final reflections on his work he describes the elusive nature of the narrative with the claim that he feels his "slippery self eluding [him], gliding into deeper and darker waters" (308). This slipperiness can be interpreted as a decision by the narrator consciously to present the facts of the story in a crooked manner. It is pointing to an unwillingness to reveal the more real version of himself that can be found in the "deeper and darker waters" (308).

Standing in contrast to the aforementioned examples is the instance where Humbert refers to himself as "a very conscientious recorder" after telling Lolita about his plans to marry Charlotte over the telephone (72). He maintains that it is his "artistic duty" to have the passage covering his marriage to Charlotte in the same style as his journal from that time in order to avoid biased remarks (71). Besides,, he is able to recall certain happenings with unsurpassed clarity. Chapter eleven includes several pages of diary writing which he manages to include in their entirety by claiming to have a photographic memory (40). Similarly, he remembers the confessional letter Charlotte wrote to him verbatim, despite presenting only half of it, leaving out a lyrical passage about Charlotte's brother and possibly adding the part about the letter going into "the vortex of the toilet" (68-69). Thus Humbert can be considered unreliable on the grounds that he considers himself to have a duty to retell events with accuracy at the same time as admitting to having incomplete memory. Despite being able to recall diary writings and letters verbatim, he mixes up other events. Revising parts of Charlotte's letter and omitting other parts does not imply Humbert being a "very conscientious recorder". The revision

of the letter raises the question whether this altering of facts is limited to Charlottes' letters only.

Humbert's insane character is also reflected in his interactions with other characters. He is undeniably no stranger to lying. Several pressure-filled situations throughout the novel prove him to be remarkably adept at subverting the truth. In the scene where the Farlows visit the recently widowed Humbert he makes up a story about having met the then married Charlotte on a business trip to the USA and commencing a love affair with her.

Conclusively,, Humbert is inclined to deceive in order to reach his goals. The reader receives the first hints of Humbert's mental instability when "John Ray", the author of the fictional foreword, suggests that the kidnapping and its subsequent murder might have been avoided if only Humbert had gone to a psychiatrist in the crucial summer of 1947 (5). Contending this statement is the fact Humbert makes several visits to sanatoriums throughout the novel with no noticeable improvement on his psychological health (in this regard). Namely, these visits did not affect his deep obsession with under-age girls nor his murderous thoughts.. To what extent he actually is insane is quite uncertain. He credits his restoration to the enjoyment gained by deftly tricking the psychiatrists into making erroneous analyses of his sexuality, which does not indicate insanity (34).

It might therefore be argued that the references to insanity and sanatoriums are part of a ploy with the intent to win over the reader. These allusions are methods for Humbert to continuously remind the reader of his mental sickness.

In summary, textual signals that point to Humbert being an unreliable narrator are the following: (1) accepting his fallible memory; (2) claiming to have a duty to reproduce texts according to their original state yet making biased revisions to them; (3) implying the possession of photographic memory yet mixing up the order of past events; as illustrated by several examples he makes use of lies to obtain his goals; (4) reiterating 'Lolita' which denotes high emotional involvement; (5) attempting to influence the reader by emphasizing his alleged insanity. The purpose of his memoir is definitely to gain sympathy and understanding from the reader. In order to do this he overplays his insanity with several mentions of visits to sanatoriums and a passage including a mental breakdown. He wants to convey to the reader that he has no control over his fate; insanity and obsession have taken over. This is possibly one of the distinguished methods he uses to shift focus from the fact that he is a murderer, pervert, and a kidnapper of children.

Direct addresses to the reader

Though Humbert is the narrator is deceitful and surreptitious in his ways of trying to attain the sympathies of his readers. Yet he does use a more conspicuous approach throughout the book as well. The reader is directly addressed numerous times in the discourse. The amount of instances of what happens is notable and thus creates incentive for a more in depth analysis

of this aspect of Humbert's narration. In this section I will, therefore, scrutinize the methods Humbert applies when addressing the reader. The reader is repeatedly encouraged to take note of different observations that Humbert makes in the discourse. The suggestions to "mark" certain notions are fairly innocent in comparison to the more overt attempts Humbert makes to draw the reader in. Early in chapter eleven, which consists of a collection of reproduced diary entries spanning almost two weeks, the reader is encouraged to "check the weather data in the Ramsdale Journal for 1947" (40; italics original). The suggestion to check up on facts in fictional journals implies a degree of assuredness in Humbert. He is confident enough to offer an opportunity for the reader to verify his claims, prompting the reader not simply to take note but actually to take action. There seems to be a desire in Humbert to engage the reader, make him a participant in the story, not merely be an observer. This is further illustrated by the following comparatively lengthy passage clearly addressed to the reader:

I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay; I want them to examine its every detail and see for themselves how careful, how chaste, the whole wine sweet event is if viewed with what my lawyer has called, in a private talk we have had, "impartial sympathy." So let us get started. I have a difficult job before me. (*Lolita*57)

This passage appears in chapter thirteen, acting as a prelude to a scene where Humbert manages to surreptitiously please himself while having an incognizant Lolita sitting close beside him in a couch with her legs on his knees. Interestingly, Humbert is putting himself at risk here by asking the reader to be especially observant. This display of confidence is arguably unwarranted, however, since despite Humbert's eloquent descriptions of the subsequent scene it is anything but innocuous. Put more succinctly, he gains pleasure at the expense of Lolita's innocence. To conclude, both these instances of addressing the reader are indicative of Humbert being very conscious of his readership and the reactions he wishes to provoke. Humbert consistently ascribes good qualities to the implied reader throughout the discourse. Several instances of addressing the reader as "learned reader" imply that he likes to think of his readership as part of an intellectual group. Humbert, with his air of European sophistication, is trying to find common ground with the reader. He wants the reader to identify with him. An additional example of intelligence assigned to the reader can be traced.

In chapter twenty-nine Humbert meets with Lolita again after her disappearance three years earlier. She is heavily pregnant and quite reluctant to impart the name of the man with whom she disappeared. When, after some persuasion, she finally mentions the name Humbert points out that it is "the name that the astute reader has guessed long ago" (272; italics added). This expectation on the reader to have deduced the identity of Quilty long before Humbert himself does so is no

weak praise of the reader's mental capabilities. A similar method of affecting the reader can be felt in chapter thirty-two. After missing a few erotically charged moments with Lolita, Humbert launches a short criticism of the psychological ideas about child-parent relationship in the mid-twentieth century and ends the comment noting that he hopes his readers are unbiased on the issue (285). The purpose of calling the reader "unbiased" is that he wants the reader to be open-minded to the sort of relationship he enjoys with Lolita. It can thus be understood that what he seeks are not open-minded readers but rather like-minded readers.

The implied reader is not limited to intellectual qualities; he reacts and performs several actions in response to comments made by Humbert in the discourse as well. By creating reactions in the reader and having him perform actions similar to that of a character, Humbert takes the familiarity with the reader to a new level. The interplay between narrator and implied reader deepens when the reader takes such an active part in the discourse, especially when this is done in a humorous way. It is not uncommon for the implied reader to be assigned the action of laughing at Humbert. At the end of chapter twenty-five Humbert is ecstatic with the accidental death of Charlotte, the removal of an obstacle in the way of acquiring Lolita. When ordering a room at the hotel with the name of The Enchanted Hunters, Humbert stresses on his distinctive witty wordplay, pondering whether to sign the telegram .

"Humbert and daughter", "Humberg and small daughter", "Homberg and immature girl" or "Homburg and child" (109). Prior to this wordplay the reader is invited to share the joke when Humbert expresses his expectations of making the reader laugh at his antics (109). Furthermore, in chapter thirty-two, when Humbert and Lolita are on their first cross-country trek, the reader is ironically described as being patient and in the possession of mild temper in comparison to Lolita (139). Although this description might seem quite innocent at first it serves as a reminder of Lolita's faults of character. By doing this comparison Humbert tries to undermine Lolita's character with the purpose again being to win over the reader. This method of gaining familiarity with the reader is similar to the previously mentioned way Humbert encourages the reader to check up on facts and attentively examine scenes. They both seem to have the purpose of drawing the reader in.

It must be stressed that the reader mentioned in *Lolita* is not a homogeneous entity. A narrator can also be distinguished in the discourse, the jury. The appearance of the different signals in the discourse depends on what point Humbert wants to illustrate. In contrast to the jury the features of the intellectual are described albeit always with a tinge of humor.

The addresses to the Jury are perhaps the most important facet of Humbert's communication to the reader. The issue of Humbert's guilt is the pivot in the novel as he arguably tries to avoid taking full responsibility for his actions. Throughout

the novel there are several instances where Humbert addresses himself to a jury. In chapter twenty-eight just before the novel's climax, Humbert's first intercourse with Lolita at The Enchanted Hunters, Humbert expresses regret at starting the relationship with Lolita. He exclaims "that nothing but pain and horror would result from the expected rapture", and then ends the passage with: "Oh, winged gentlemen of the jury!" (125). Humbert is blaming Lolita for his miseries, implying that Lolita generated pain and horror for him. The addition of "winged" is interesting since it suggests a celestial quality which reinforces the narrator's position as a judge of Humbert's crimes, since the reader is thus held above Humbert. A notable difference between the jury and the intellectual is that the female members of the jury are sometimes addressed:

I have but followed nature. I am nature's faithful hound. Why then this horror that I cannot shake off? Did I deprive her of her flower? Sensitive gentlewomen of the jury, I was not even her first lover (135) This passage appears in chapter thirty-three, a short chapter which can be interpreted as a defense speech. Humbert, mentioning a horror that he cannot rid himself off, is perhaps feeling guilty after having sex with Lolita. He defends his actions by claiming to follow nature and tries to excuse his actions by mentioning that he was not her first lover. He seems to expect the female jury members to make the harshest judgment of his actions which is why the chapter ends with a plea aimed at them. By addressing the jury Humbert puts himself in a position to be judged, explicitly by the jury, the narratee, implicitly by the reader. His defense speech is thus not only aimed at the jury, but also at the reader. (*Lolita*, 135)

To round off, it can be said that, these different methods of addressing the reader are an indication of the narrator's subjective involvement in the story. Humbert wants to make the reader sympathize with him by drawing the reader's attention to his arguments and making him a participant in the story rather than an observer. Additionally, by ascribing different attributes such as intellectuality and physical features to the implied reader, Humbert seeks to familiarize himself with the reader. He also seems to want to avoid harsh judgment by the reader by addressing a jury and subsequently defending his actions. Lastly, the steady accumulation of addresses to the reader throughout the novel and the conscious attempts to gain the reader's sympathy are distinct textual signals of unreliability.

Linguistic artistry in *Lolita*

Nabokov has filled *Lolita* to the brink with exquisite metaphors, intricate wordplay, puzzles and allusions to other authors and their works. The pervasiveness of different workings of the English language makes its importance to the novel undeniable. Nabokov has been considered a master of prose by critics and I would argue that the depth present in *Lolita* supports this notion. This depth is especially

distinguished in his choice of imbuing the novel's narrator, Humbert, with a faculty for using literary devices and rhetorical ploys. Ellen Pifer notes in *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov* that readers are warned of Humbert's duplicitous nature from the outset (187). On the opening page of his memoir Humbert announces, "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style." (9). He acknowledges his ability of distracting readers from the fact that he is a murderer with the evocative power of his language. I will thus, in this last part focus upon the ways Humbert uses language to conceal his designs from the reader throughout *Lolita*.

The concept of the nymphet is introduced by Humbert in chapter five and is thereafter referred to many times. He explains that nymphets are girls only between the ages of nine and fourteen, and possess certain characteristics that separate them from other children: "the fey grace, the elusive, shifty, soul-shattering, insidious charm" (*Lolita* 17). Humbert adopts a certain tone when discussing the concept in these passages, making his nymphets seem otherworldly, magical and rare. The nymphet is described as "fey", a "demon" in contrast to normal "human" girls, and males risk falling under her "spell". Moreover, he notes that "time plays a magic part", the nymphet is something ephemeral, something that can only be experienced during a limited period of time (17; italics added). The discussion of nymphets in these passages can be interpreted as Humbert trying to romanticize his attraction to young girls. By adhering to the sublime otherworldliness of nymphets he wants to create a justification for his actions. If Humbert would have opted to exclude the concept of the nymphet in his discourse it would have affected his portrayal in the novel. Lacking this excuse he would have seemed even more monstrous than he is in his pursuit of *Lolita*.

A similar otherworldliness to that of nymphets can also be distinguished in another concept, the enchanted hunter. In addition to elevating the objects of his attraction, the nymphets, Humbert also seeks to raise his own level, as the pursuer of said object – the enchanted hunter. It first appears in the novel as the name of the hotel where Humbert first has sex with Lolita at the novel's midpoint, "The Enchanted Hunters". It is also the name of the school play Lolita had a part in during her time at Beardsley. The expression being in the plural in these two instances is important plot-wise since it arguably does not only refer to Humbert Humbert, it also includes his counterpart, Clare Quilty. The hotel serves as a background to the events leading up to the novel's climax, Humbert finally obtaining Lolita. Interestingly, Humbert is not the only enchanted hunter in the place; in one scene he unwittingly runs into his nemesis, (mentioned as under)

Quilty:

"Where the devil did you get her?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said: the weather is getting better."

"Seems so."
"Who's the lassie?"
"My daughter."
"You lie — she's not."
"I beg your pardon?"
"I said: July was hot. Where's her mother?"
"Dead."
"I see. Sorry. By the way, why don't you two lunch with me tomorrow. That dreadful crowd will be gone by then."
"We'll be gone too. Good night."(Lolita127)

The playful inclusion of some sounding words in Quilty's replies in this exchange is an example of Nabokov's inclination for word games.⁴ Michael Wood in *The Oxford Companion to Nabokov* describes the scene as "Humbert's anxiety getting into the sound of Quilty's words" (125). Humbert's unconscious is signaling the moral turpitude of sleeping with Lolita. The meeting proves to be fateful since from this point Humbert is not the only pursuer of Lolita's affections. The antagonist of the novel is thereby established. The presence of this antagonist is again noted when Humbert asks Lolita about the author of the play in which she participates, to which query she answers:

"Some old woman, Clare Something, I guess" (209). Quilty being the author of the play with the same name as hotel, further linking Humbert to Quilty, the enchanted hunter is a complement to the concept of the nymph. The intention is the same; Humbert seeks to defend his attraction to young girls. This is done by ascribing otherworldly, magical attributes to himself, being "enchanted". The implication is that his actions are guided by the nymph. He is not in full control of himself, having lost himself in his obsession with Lolita.

This obsession of Humbert's gives the novel thrust as it governs his every action. She is the reason he murders Quilty at the end of the novel and ultimately meets his demise in prison. She is also the reason why he marries Charlotte, and almost goes through with murdering her. In Humbert's life Lolita is "above and over everything there is", none of the other people he starts relationships with seems to compare to her (45). Charlotte is scornfully referred to as the Haze woman. This way to avoid the first name serves to create a distance to Charlotte in contrast to Lolita, who is almost always referred to on a first name basis. Even Humbert's first love, Annabel, does not compare to Lolita in Humbert's mind as she does not gain the same status, being referred to as a "faunlet" as opposed to nymph (16-17). Moreover, in *The Self-deceptive and The Other-deceptive Narrating Character*: Amit Marcus argues that Humbert creates his own fantasy version of Lolita, reducing her to an aesthetic object. This reduction enables him to take advantage of Lolita without feeling much guilt, since she has become a mere artistic representation (187). His callousness is exemplified in chapter three where Lolita breaks down and cries after having

sex with him. He exultantly refers to her bursting into tears as "a salutary storm of sobs" (169) showing no regret whatsoever. Humbert is, however, not wholly unable to feel guilt as is illustrated by the previously mentioned run in with Quilty at *The Enchanted Hunters*.

Humbert acknowledges the injury he caused Lolita at times. This acknowledgement becomes gradually more explicit in the second half of the novel. Marcus argues, however, that he never fully realizes the harm he has done to Lolita (187).

Finally, Humbert uses the concepts of the nymph and the enchanted hunter to glorify his attraction to young girls. He admires the magical properties of both in an attempt to cover his motives. The enchanted hunter concept is also used to connect Humbert to his enigmatic counterpart Quilty, who is the antagonist of the novel. Furthermore, Humbert is able to feel guilt to some degree. His reduction of Lolita to an aesthetic object works, however, to the detriment of the child as he never becomes fully aware of the degree of harm he has inflicted. Lastly, two types of textual signals are explicit in this aspect of Humbert's narration. First, there is an admitted lack of reliability in that Humbert admits to being able to distract the reader with his language. Second, the descriptions of the nymph and the enchanted hunter concepts denote subjectivity. The reader is exposed to Humbert's personal view of his love for young girls in several passages.

CONCLUSION

Humbert's unreliability is established by his personal involvement in the story and his questionable morals. He is constantly trying to gain the reader's sympathy throughout *Lolita*. His motivation for this is an initially slight sense of guilt for using Lolita, which grows and becomes more and more vocal and visible during the course of the novel. He wants to avoid taking responsibility for his actions, more specifically the eventual murdering of Quilty and perhaps most significant, for robbing Lolita of her childhood.

As an unreliable narrator Humbert employs several different methods in attempting to affect the reader. Overplaying his insanity in several instances, he implicitly tries to convey a sense of loss of control over his life and thereby shunning responsibility. While being somewhat unstable, his mental health is arguably better than he wants to admit. Moreover, his duplicitous nature is explicitly exemplified by his direct addresses to the reader. By addressing the reader directly he wants to make the reader into more of a participant in the story, attempting to draw the reader's attention to ideas he wants to illustrate in the discourse. Additionally, ascribing the implied reader with attributes and actions can be interpreted as an attempt to familiarize himself with the reader. By referring to a jury, the narrator of the novel, he puts himself into a position where he can be judged, but this is also a position from where he defends his actions. Lastly, he uses language subjectively in order to affect the reader. Humbert's introduction of the concepts of the nymph and the

enchanted hunter (into his story) can be interpreted as an endeavor to distract the reader by glorifying both himself and his attraction to young girls. The reduction of *Lolita* to an aesthetic object, the nymphet, enables him to take advantage of her without feeling much guilt in the first half of the novel. The main function of Humbert, as an unreliable narrator, is arguably to break identification with the reader. The many textual signals embedded in the discourse create a distance between narrator and reader, and between narrator and implied author. They provide the means for the observant reader to obtain a clear insight into Humbert's motivations, thereby hindering the reader to identify himself with Humbert. Furthermore, these signals can be considered as communication from the implied author to the reader. The purpose of the signals in this sense is to emphasize the difference in morals between the narrator, Humbert, and the implied author, Nabokov. By receiving these textual signals, the reader is able to distinguish between the narrator and the implied author.

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