

On Humbert Humbert's Mental Disease in Nabokov's *Lolita*

In this paper, I would like to discuss how the protagonist's sickness features in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*.

1. Introduction

The "sickness" features prominently in *Lolita*. Here I have used double quotes. This is because in this case it is neither an epidemic nor a pestilence, nor the bubonic plague which occurred in Europe during the Middle Ages such as the Black Death or the Great Plague.

In a way, though, it may be denounced as a "pestilence," which denotes something morally corrupting. The protagonist's sickness is, in a word, pedophilia, which belongs to the category of psychiatry. The infected area, therefore, is not throughout Europe but merely inside the hero's body and mind. It is true that it sounds, in that case, as though the problem were quite personal. In a literary sense, however, this is rather of utmost importance: in the course of making several excuses for his "sorry and sordid" (p. 4)^[1] disease of the mind, the character's discourse begins to assume a less ordinary aspect, which is, for example, schizophrenia or split personality. Moreover, in order to lead a seemingly normal, pacific life, the leading character and narrator inevitably has to conceal his "degrading and dangerous desires," (p. 24) the attempt of which brings yet another onset of sickness such as neurasthenia or melancholia. What is going to be dealt with in this article is the sickness in this psychiatric sense. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to reread *Lolita* with the key word, "mental disease," and, by doing so, to examine what kind of different complexion it will wear.

2. The Schizophrenic Origin of "Humbert Humbert"

Lolita has, according to "John Ray, Jr., Ph.D.," the fictitious editor of *Lolita* who writes the "Foreword," a subtitle which goes, "the Confession of a White Widowed Male." John Ray is a

putative psychotherapist and psychiatric specialist who has recently been awarded a prize for his scholarly work (“Do the Senses Make Sense?”) “wherein certain morbid states and perversions” are discussed. (p. 3) Considering that *Lolita* is a statement written by an accused pedophile, it is only

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natural that the sick man’s first-person apologia should have been entrusted to the alleged psychiatric authority.

As John Ray says, “its author’s bizarre cognomen is his own invention,” (p. 3) the main character’s name, “Humbert Humbert,” is not a real one, but a pseudonym picked up deliberately by “H. H.” himself from the shortlist including “Otto Otto,” “Mesmer Mesmer,” and “Lambert Lambert.” In Humbert’s own words, “for some reason I think my choice expresses the nastiness best.” (p. 308) The pseudonym also suggests his “duality,”^[2] or his split personality, as well as the “nastiness.” In retrospect, he says:

“ . . . soon I found myself maturing amid a civilization which allows a man of twenty-five to court a girl of sixteen but not a girl of twelve.

No wonder, then, that my adult life...proved monstrously twofold. Overtly, I had so-called normal relationships with a number of terrestrial women having pumpkins or pears for breasts; inly, I was consumed by a hell furnace of localized lust for every passing nymphet whom as a law-abiding poltroon I never dared approach.... My world was split. I was aware of not one but two sexes, neither of which was mine.... Taboos strangulated me.” (p. 18) (*Italics mine.*)

He then explains that the fact that to him “the only objects of amorous tremor” were those chosen little girls called “nymphets” appeared “at times as a forerunner of insanity.” In fact, he suffers from “a dreadful breakdown” (p. 33) and goes in and out of sanatoria throughout the novel. “The reader will regret to learn that soon after my return to civilization I had another bout with insanity (if to melancholia and a sense of insufferable oppression that cruel term must be applied). (p. 34)

3. Five Reasons for Writing

Why did Humbert Humbert write this “sinister memoir?” (p. 259) According to Parker (1987)^[3], there are four reasons: (1) to prepare a defense for his murder trial; (2) to explain his special type of passion; (3) to attempt to expiate his sins; (4) to immortalize his beloved Lolita. In addition to these, I would like to suggest one more motive: (5) to cure his mental sickness. Let us

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now examine the above five points in more detail.

(1) To prepare a defense for his murder trial

Humbert Humbert is in jail now. (“I am writing under observation”) (p. 10) “When I started, fifty-six days ago, to write Lolita,” he says, “I thought I would use these notes in toto at my trial.” (p. 308) In fact, he often hails to the jurors throughout the book in such ways as: “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns.” (p. 9) or “Frigid gentlewomen of the jury! I had thought that month, perhaps years, would elapse before I dared to reveal myself to Dolores Haze; but by six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers. I am going to tell you something strange: it was she who seduced me.” (p. 132) What he intends is to justify his criminal acts^[4] and perhaps make an appeal for clemency. (“I am opposed to capital punishment; this attitude will be, I trust, shared by the sentencing judge.”) (p. 308) He says;

“You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine (oh, how you have to cringe and hide!), in order to discern at once, by ineffable signs—the slightly feline outline of a cheekbone, the slenderness of a downy limb, and other indices which despair and shame and tears of tenderness forbid me to tabulate—the little deadly demon among the wholesome children; she stands unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power.” (p. 17) (The italics, a madman, mine, and she, in the original.)

Here Humbert’s sick self plays an important role, for being non compos mentis, or a weak-minded person, is considered diminished responsibility and is recognized as grounds to reduce the charge.

(2) To explain his special type of passion

This is practically equivalent to displaying Humbert's major mental sickness, that is, "nymphet-love." He does not use the psychiatric term, pedophilia or pederosis. First, his definition of "nymphet" is as follows:

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"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."

...Between those age limits, are all girl-children nymphets? Of course not... [Nymphets have] certain mysterious characteristics, the fey grace, the elusive, shifty, soul-shattering, insidious charm that separates the nymphet from such coevals of hers as are incomparably more dependent on the spatial world of synchronous phenomena than on that intangible island of entranced time where Lolita plays with her likes." (pp. 16-17)

Here he distinguishes clearly between pederosis and his "nympholepsy." In short, just "beautiful" or "attractive" is not enough to be the primary source of his morbid desire which is thus subtle and complicated.

Next, Humbert Humbert also establishes a distinction between ordinary sexual intercourse and his relationship with nymphets. While he describes the former in such a roundabout phrase as "normal big males consorting with their normal big mates in that routine rhythm which shakes the world," (p. 18) suggesting that he despises it and that what he caught glimpse of is by far better than that, as for the latter he calls it "an incomparably more poignant bliss." (p. 18) Again, he calls out to the jurors:

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the majority of sex offenders that hanker for some throbbing, sweet-moaning, physical but not necessarily coital, relation with a girl-child, are innocuous, inadequate, passive, timid strangers who merely ask the community to allow them to pursue their practically harmless, so-called aberrant behavior, their little hot wet private acts of sexual deviation without the police and society cracking down upon them.

We are not sex fiends! We do not rape as good soldiers do. We are unhappy, mild, dog-eyed gentlemen, sufficiently well integrated to control our urge in the presence of adults, but ready to give years and years of life for one chance to touch a nymphet. Emphatically, no killers are we. Poets never kill.” (p. 88) (Italics mine.)

“We lone voyagers, we nympholepts” (p. 17) could be quite happy without having any sexual intercourse in a general sense with nymphets. “How marvelous were my fancied adventures as I sat on a hard park bench pretending to be immersed in a trembling book. Around the quiet

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scholar, nymphets played freely, as if he were a familiar statue or part of an old tree’s shadow and sheen.” (p. 20) Why, then, could Humbert not avoid proceeding from passive to active, observation to violation? That was because it was his “lifelong dream,” (p. 140) and, as I quoted above, he was “ready to give years and years of life for one chance to” realize it. He just could not resist.

(3) To Attempt to Expiate his Sins

As mentioned above, *Lolita* is a confession as well as a memoir. Needless to mention Aurelius Augustinus, a confession is a form of autobiography, where one admits with repentance and desire of absolution that one is guilty of a crime. It is, therefore, quite logical to think that Humbert Humbert wrote *Lolita* to expiate his sins.

At the very opening, he murmurs, “*Lolita*, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul.” (P. 9) He tries, by alluding to numerous writers in English literature, especially Poe, to explain the kind of sin he committed, or in Pifer (1995)’s words, “the disease of Humbert’s imagination.”^[5] (Italics mine) That way, Humbert aims at sublimating his sins in a work of art. True, children have time and again provided an artistic motif to romanticists, Wordsworth’s *Intimations of Immortality*, Blake’s *Songs of Innocence*, to name but a few. Humbert’s sin, however, is that he, as opposed to other artists, did bring his imagination into effect. “Whether or not the realization of a lifelong dream had surpassed all expectation, it had, in a sense, overshot its mark – and plunged into a nightmare.” (p. 140)

“Had I come before myself,” he says, “I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years

for rape, and dismissed the rest of the charges.” (p. 308) He is thus not only aware of his sins but ready to serve his sentence, so that he would expiate them.

(4) To immortalize his Beloved Lolita

Humbert began writing Lolita “first in the psychopathic ward.” (p. 308) Although, when sent into jail, he cried in despair, “Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!” (p. 32) Humbert, at the same time, thought that he could immortalize his Lolita with the help of that very “words,”

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again, in the realm of art. He talks to Lolita from his seclusion:

“... 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... 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.” (p. 309) (*Italics mine.*)

Thanks to his psychopathic hand, later readers can appreciate Lolita, which is the proof of his succeeding in immortalizing Lolita.

(5) To Cure his Mental Sickness

Humbert went in and out of hospital, as I mentioned above. That was simply because he had no will to recover from his mental illness on his part; he did not dare look to the fundamental problem, remove or sublime it, until he, by writing the memoirs, thinks back to the past and at long last notices by himself his misdeed: “the simple human fact that whatever spiritual solace I might find, whatever lithophanic eternities might be provided for me, nothing could make my Lolita forget the foul lust I had inflicted upon her. (p. 283) He, then, finally reaches “the awful point of the whole argument,” that is; “even the most miserable of family lives was better than the parody of incest, which, in the long run, was the best [he] could offer to the waif.” (p. 287) Now, desperate Humbert mutters to himself, counting on art for the self-healing;

“Unless it can be proven to me—to me as I am now, today, with my heart and my beard, and my putrefaction—that in the infinite run it does not matter a jot that a North American

girl-child named Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac, unless this can be proven (and if it can, then life is a joke), I see nothing for the treatment of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art.” (p. 283) (Italics mine.)

Now that he has come to the conclusion that nothing can cure his sickness other than art, Humbert, more than ever, throws himself on the charity of “words,” which he only has to play with, and attempts to transmute his experience and imagination, in which his Lolita lives, into art.

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4. Discussion

As Eisinger (2000) [6] points out, when reading *Lolita*, we are only able to come closer to the real subject, transcending the superficial, erotic content, by perceiving that Humbert’s passion, a morbid one, or his “sickness,” is his prison and his pain, as well as his ecstasy.

“Sex is,” Humbert says, “but the ancilla of art,” (p. 259). “I moved toward my glimmering darling, stopping or retreating every time I thought she stirred or was about to stir. A breeze from wonderland had begun to affect my thoughts, and now they seemed couched in italics, as if the surface reflecting them were wrinkled by the phantasm of that breeze.” (p. 131) He, subsequently, maintains that the gentle and dreamy regions through which he crept were the patrimonies of poets—not crime’s prowling ground. (Italics in the original)

The reason Humbert submerges himself into, or indulges in, art is, as we have seen above, that it is the only “refuge.” It can be said, therefore, that, as Lolita, after she lost her mother in a car accident, “had absolutely nowhere else to go,” (p. 142) Humbert also had nowhere else to pacify his sick self than in art.

5. Conclusion

We have seen and discussed how Humbert’s “sickness” features in *Lolita*, as above, and understood that his sickness becomes the medium with which the whole story flows, by sublimating itself into art. Nabokov introduces himself this way: “Now, I happen to be the kind of author who

in starting to work on a book has no other purpose than to get rid of that book.” (p. 311) “For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm.” (pp. 314-315) For Nabokov, therefore, “sickness” in *Lolita* is a device with which he invents a kind of art as he defines it.

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Notes

- [1] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York, NY: Vintage International, 1997). All page references to Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* are placed in the text.
- [2,3] Stephen Jan Parker, *Understanding Vladimir Nabokov* (University of South Carolina Press, 1987), P. 74
- [4] Lucy B. Maddox, ‘Necrophilia in *Lolita*’, in *Lolita*, ed. by Harold Broom (Chelsea House Publishers, 1993), p. 80
- [5] Ellen Pifer, ‘*Lolita*’, in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. by Vladimir E. Alexandrov (GARLAND PUBLISHING, 1995), p. 317
- [6] Chester E. Eisinger, ‘*LOLITA*’, in *Reference Guide to American Literature*, ed. by Thomas Riggs, 4th edn (St. James Press, 2000), p. 1013

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