

“Dolorès Disparue”: Reading Misogyny in *Lolita*

By Sarah Herbold

In our post–John Ray, Jr. enlightened age, we teachers of literature may laugh at the “philistine[s]” (Nabokov, 4) who would question whether *Lolita* belongs in the American literary canon. In particular, we might be tempted to scoff at feminist critics who accuse admirers of *Lolita* of turning a blind eye toward the novel’s misogyny. Most obviously, that misogyny takes the form of anathematizing adult women and turning the sexual exploitation of pubescent girls into a joke—or a romance. Less obviously, it takes the form of scorning and excluding the female reader, for Nabokov appears to direct his novel toward a male audience, whom he invites to join him in a literary “sexcapade” that is naughty and exhilarating partly because it seems to exclude women as readers (and writers). While experienced readers may have trained themselves to overlook *Lolita*’s hostility to women, students are likely to feel troubled by it, and to worry (as they should) about whether enjoying the novel makes them complicit in it.

One way to foreground (rather than minimize) this issue is to offer the perspective of critics who argue that reading *Lolita* is tantamount to reading pornography (e.g., Blum, Kennedy). Such critics contend that just as pornography works to unify a male pornographer with a male viewer and empower them through the medium of a victimized female body, so Humbert seeks to entrap and dominate a victimized Lolita while Nabokov seeks to subjugate the female reader. He does so by entrapping her in a sadistic interpretive rite in which his purpose is to show her how powerless she is to do anything but meekly follow his lordly

textual commands. Although this view might seem to be merely special-interest criticism, it is not, for the text explicitly raises the question of how gender and genre are related and what the implications of such relations might be.

Moreover, claiming that *Lolita* is offensively pornographic does it less injury than a pedagogical approach that allows students to fall back on *Lolita's* status as a “masterpiece” as a way of dodging—and therefore foreclosing—its difficult interpretive challenges, including the issue of its misogyny. A pedagogical short-circuit occurs when the teacher informs students that through narrative irony, Nabokov clearly distances himself from Humbert, whom he indicts of child abuse, misogyny, and narcissism while embracing his poetic gifts (for examples of this view, see, e.g., Alexandrov, 163; Boyd, *American Years*, 232ff.). This “solution” to the novel’s ambiguities doesn’t really work, for reasons I shall elaborate below. More important, a teacher who deprives students of their opportunity—and responsibility—to decide for themselves whether, and how, Nabokov differentiates himself from his narrator may succeed in de-fanging the novel, but only by destroying much of its power as a teaching text. For Nabokov skillfully exploits ambiguous representations of narrative point of view and of the text’s imagined audience to place readers in interpretive quandaries that have serious moral implications and no easy solutions, and that evoke intense pleasure and anguish. In so doing, he challenges students to read more skillfully as they try to extricate themselves from *Lolita's* narrative and moral ambiguities.

Thus, I would define my topic not as whether *Lolita* is misogynistic, but rather, what purpose is served (or what effect is produced) by the misogyny that is unquestionably present in some form. I believe *Lolita* can demonstrate the mistaken assumptions that underlie a kind of misogyny that is cultural, and not simply individual, as well as its negative consequences.

Moreover, the novel offers students the chance discover that its imagined female reader is not only implicitly excluded (and perhaps belittled); she is also the hidden fulcrum of meaning. Indeed, only after they account for the role of the female reader can students fully appreciate the profound and irresolvable ambiguities that make *Lolita* worthy of serious consideration—and of a place on universities' (or anyone's) reading lists.

As I noted earlier, many critics (including some feminists) try to render *Lolita*'s problematic depictions of women unproblematic by claiming that Nabokov dissociates himself from Humbert's misogyny. In their reading, Humbert is clearly a villain and Lolita an innocent victim. American undergraduates (who are often excessively docile and—as Humbert expresses it—“standard-brained” [14]), will likely be only too willing to go along with this view, since it makes *Lolita* morally intelligible along conventional lines. But it is a gross oversimplification, which does little to make the novel less misogynistic, for Nabokov's ostensible disavowal of Humbert's flaws can easily be seen as too little, too late.

Admittedly, the standard interpretation does have some support, for Nabokov does seem ultimately to characterize Humbert as a criminal, and Lolita as a victim. In summing up his tale, Humbert says he deserves to be sentenced to thirty-five years in prison for rape (308). He also acknowledges that Lolita's loss of her childhood is more “hopelessly poignant” than his own sorrow at having lost her (308). More generally, the Coalmont section of the novel seems to present a transformed Humbert who no longer simply lusts for Lolita but genuinely loves her. Humbert declares,

What I used to pamper among the tangled vines of my heart, *mon grand péché radieux*, had dwindled to its essence: sterile and selfish vice, all *that* I

canceled and cursed. . . . I insist the world know how much I loved my Lolita, *this* Lolita, pale and polluted, and big with another's child, but still gray-eyed, still sooty-lashed, still auburn and almond, still Carmencita, still mine . . .

(278)

Humbert claims that he is no longer driven simply by sexual desire ("sterile and selfish vice"). Instead, he has learned how to love Lolita more profoundly: he adores even her "womanish" cleavage (273) and "adult, rope-veined narrow hands and gooseflesh white arms, and her shallow ears, and her unkempt armpits" (277). Similarly, Lolita herself is also transformed in the Coalmont section. No longer a devious nymphet, she is now (paradoxically) a Virgin mother. Safely married off to a Joseph-like stand-in, she is "frankly and hugely pregnant"; her sexy, Annabel-like tan has given way to "apple-freckled cheeks" and "watered-milk-white" arms (269–70). Lolita has even been sanctified: her baby, ostensibly a boy, is due at Christmas (266), and she stands "crucified" in the doorway as she admits Humbert to her humble home (270).

But Humbert's references in this scene to "my Lolita, . . . still Carmencita, still mine" undermine critics' claims that Humbert is morally transformed. For even though Lolita has declared her independence from him, Humbert still insists that she belongs to him and remains what he has made of her in his mind ("Carmencita"). Nor does he truly abjure his "crime"; he still wants Lolita to leave her husband and come away with him (280). Moreover, Humbert's apostrophes to Lolita make it impossible to draw a clear line between Nabokov and Humbert, because from the novel's opening phrases ("Lolita, light of my life . . .") to its last words ("And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita"),

Nabokov's voice and Humbert's are conflated in such a way as to foreground the identity between both men's claims that they own Lolita, whom they have invented. We could call this aspect of Humbert's/Nabokov's relation to Lolita the Pygmalion theme: male artistic subject/female aestheticized object. Coupled with the formal issue of the unstable relation between author and protagonist-narrator, this theme has led feminist critics to ask whether there really is a woman in the text, since Lolita exists only as Humbert's representation of her. But since Nabokov and Humbert cannot be clearly distinguished, it cannot be merely Humbert (as critics such as Kauffman argue) who is "misappropriating" Lolita. By implication, Nabokov, too, is guilty ("Quilty") of usurping and exploiting the Lolita whom the novel invites us to imagine as existing in her own right.

It is important to see, however, that Nabokov does not conceal this "entrapment" of Lolita within the fiction that bears her name. He emphasizes it in passages such as those just cited, in which "I" refers to both Nabokov and Humbert. Similarly, "*Dolorès Disparue*," a mock-title Humbert gives his narrative after Lolita has vanished [253], refers to Proust's *Albertine disparue*, which chronicles the disappearance of the similarly autobiographical first-person narrator's lover. In using this allusion, Nabokov implies that a (male) writer who claims to possess the (female) character he has created is as deluded as a man who claims to possess wholly the woman he loves. Nabokov implies, that is, that once created, "Galatea" has a moral and existential integrity of her own, and "Pygmalions" who fail to recognize and respect that autonomy are mistaken in thinking they can fully claim—or even know—the object of their desire. As Humbert will discover, this mistake is a factual error as well as a moral one: Lolita will turn out to have had a life of her own, of which Humbert only caught glimpses. Given that Nabokov acknowledges this truth, by identifying his authorial voice

with Humbert's narrative voice, we can say that there *is* a woman in the text, if only in the form of a trace of the woman (or girl) who was—or could have been—present, but can no longer truly be made present, either to author, narrator, or reader.

Even if it is true that Lolita is present only in the form of a trace, however, *Lolita* should not be presented to students as “a case study in child abuse” (Boyd, *American Years*, 227) that describes only Humbert's obsessional version of “an entirely ordinary child” (Wood, 116) who is Humbert's victim (see also Kauffman). Because the novel is a first-person narrative, and especially because Nabokov often blurs the distinction between author and narrator (presumably, as I've suggested, in order to make the moral and formal complexities of *Lolita* an order of magnitude greater), there is no objective reality in *Lolita* with which the reader could compare Humbert's possible distortions. This epistemological no-exit is especially notable in the later sections, where, as critics have pointed out, Nabokov almost taunts readers with their inability to tell what is Humbert's fantasy and what is “real” (see Connolly; Boyd, “‘Even Homais Nods’”; Dolinin). The Lolita we see may not be the “real” Lolita, but we have no access to any other Lolita than the one Humbert (or Nabokov) conveys. Therefore, the Lolita we see is both provisional *and*, de facto, “real.” But what is revealed about her (or what she reveals about herself) is that she is a “layered” character: levels of illusion and reality shift in her just as they do in the play Humbert and Lolita see in Wace, in which “a living rainbow” composed of “seven . . . pubescent girls . . . rather teasingly faded behind a series of multiplied veils” (220–21). From the beginning, the reader is given conflicting information at various times concerning whether Lolita is dumb or smart, a virgin or sexually experienced, powerless or powerful, and students can readily understand that these ambiguities have significant interpretive value. It may be harder for them to see

that they cannot—and need not be—resolved, but that is one of the things *Lolita* can teach them.

Students can most easily be helped to articulate Lolita's "duplicity" in scenes such as the one on the "candy-striped davenport" (Part One, chapter 13), or in relation to *The Enchanted Hunters*, the play in which Lolita participates at Beardsley in Part Two. In these sections, two quite different versions of Lolita reveal themselves: in one, she is the "ordinary child" so beloved by critics, who is all the more innocent, pitiable, and adorable because she mistakenly believes she is sophisticated. But the other Lolita really *is* sophisticated, sexually and intellectually, so much so that she manages to be more ingenious in her plots than Humbert is in his. Moreover, this Lolita is depicted not simply as Humbert's equal or superior, but as Nabokov's own. Indeed, Lolita's special skill is the same as Nabokov's: she excels in creating fictions.

In the davenport scene, for example, students can be encouraged to see that it is not simply Humbert who turns Lolita into a series of virtuosic literary allusions (Eve, Snow White, Beauty, Emma Bovary, etc. [Couturier, 410]); Lolita is "herself" donning these guises, and using them to seduce Humbert/ Nabokov/the apparently privileged male reader. When Lolita draws Humbert's attention to a magazine photo showing a version of Pygmalion and Galatea, she alludes to her role as an object of representation and desire. In so doing, she demonstrates her own ability to represent—and slyly comment on—that representation. The photo is a humorous *mise-en-abyme*: it shows "a surrealistic painter relaxing, supine, on a beach, and near him, likewise supine, a plaster replica of the Venus di Milo, half-buried in sand" (58). The fact that Lolita herself makes this coy reference to the Pygmalion theme reverses its apparent meaning. "Venus" becomes a "dummy" who is only pretending to be

inert, while the “surrealistic painter” is shown to be deceived in thinking that he is her lord and master. Naturally, Humbert’s response is to “whisk the whole obscene thing away” (58), for he does not want to realize the double implication of the image: first, that in appropriating Lolita to his own uses he is “mortifying” her, and second, that she is neither unaware of the power dynamic between them nor as powerless in it as he imagines. Instead, Lolita is here appropriating Humbert to her own uses—one of which is to make him believe he is all-powerful. (Even Charlotte Haze, the most obvious target of Humbert’s misogyny, is much more powerful than she seems; see Herbold.)

Similarly, while rehearsing *The Enchanted Hunters*, Quilty’s play, at Beardsley, Lolita succeeds in creating a fictive illusion that completely “enchants” Humbert. With the help of Quilty and other “actors,” such as Mona Dahl (“my doll”), Lolita enacts a scenario of deception and betrayal whose real victim is Humbert. Thus, she is depicted not only as naïve and pseudosophisticated, but also artfully so. Students should be encouraged to articulate the paradox of Lolita’s “duplicity,” and to confront head-on its confusing implications. While Lolita can be seen as a victim, she must also be seen as a powerful agent, in whom erotic desire and creativity are as closely intertwined as they are for Humbert (and Nabokov) himself.

I have been describing a related paradox: if we let students focus on Lolita’s victimization to the exclusion of her agency, she becomes more of a victim of misogyny as well as less so. Similarly, if we do not invite students to discuss how Nabokov constructs readers according to their gender, or how a female reader might react differently to the text than a male one, they may well see *Lolita* as more misogynistic than it is. We should encourage students to notice, therefore, that Nabokov often signals that *Lolita* was written for

men and seems to imagine female readers at best as trespassers on masculine territory. For example, Humbert/Nabokov sometimes specifically addresses a male reader (e.g., “himself,” 4; “his bald head,” 48; “a blond-bearded scholar,” 226). More generally, Humbert’s/Nabokov’s frequent allusions to other male writers’ paeans to their beloveds suggests that *Lolita* is meant to be seen as the latest entry in a long line of literary contests between male poets, for whom the lady in question is only a pretext for a Harold Bloomian struggle with poetic tradition. The “subplot” involving Clare Quilty (which turns out not to be a subplot after all) corroborates the impression that the most important transactions, both within the text and outside it (that is, between its author and his audience), occur between men. Moreover, even when Nabokov does address female readers, the latter seem to be characterized as one-dimensional: they are principled citizens who will judge, but could not possibly derive pleasure from, Humbert’s story (e.g., “ladies . . . of the jury,” 9, 87).

But we should also draw students’ attention to the fact that Humbert/Nabokov sometimes addresses women readers specifically when embarking on an erotic scene, such as the one at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel (“Gentlewomen of the jury,” 123), or when revealing a shocking sexual revelation, such as that Lolita seduces Humbert rather than vice-versa (“frigid gentlewomen of the jury,” 132). In addition, women are implicitly included—though not explicitly acknowledged—in frequent gender-neutral apostrophes to the reader. Here is one example:

Knowing the magic of her own soft mouth, [Lolita] managed—during one school year!—to raise the price of a fancy embrace to three, and even four bucks. *O reader! Laugh not, as you imagine me, on the very rack of joy*

noisily emitting dimes and quarters, and great big silver dollars . . . (184,
emphasis added)

The mock-elevated style and sentimental affect of “O reader!” cite the romantic fictions of an earlier era, which were typically addressed to a female readership and/or depicted a “feminized” hero. By adopting this persona, and by *not* limiting his “joke” to an explicitly male reader (as he has sometimes done before), Nabokov hints that he imagines a female reader, too, laughing—and probably cringing—at the image of Humbert disgorging money as Lolita performs oral sex on him for ever-higher prices. By asking students how Nabokov “cues” the female reader here, we can help them see that the female reader is characterized as duplicitous: on one hand, absent, or, if present, in a state of moral outrage or sentimental grief (“gentlewoman of the jury”), and on the other, present and slyly appreciative. Because she is represented even more schizophrenically than the male reader, her role is key to understanding how *Lolita*’s textual dynamics intersect with its themes. That is, just as Lolita appears in alternate and conflicting guises, so the female reader periodically surfaces in alternative impersonations, in a text that mostly conceals her participation altogether. The female reader thus at once helps Nabokov distinguish between and confound the licit and the illicit. This double role is central to the text’s moral and interpretive cruxes and thus a key to its “meaning” (I construe *meaning* here not as a static “message,” but as “what happens when author and reader meet in a complex and unstable textual encounter”).

As Nabokov himself hints by referring to a famous line in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Lolita*’s ambiguous use of conventions of gender and genre to subvert literary and social norms that are based on those conventions gestures toward an alluring—but

terrifying—state of freedom in which “everything is permitted” (133; Dostoevsky, 764).

Lolita challenges students not to shy away from exploring this enfranchisement, which is extended not only to man, but also, half-covertly, to woman. Because woman’s textual power is partially concealed, it may seem inferior to the male narrator’s, or author’s, or reader’s, but it is not. The veiled figure of a “Galatea” who is also a “Pygmalion” is the nexus for the formal and thematic ambiguity that is integral to Nabokov’s most provocative novel.

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