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# The Other and Narrative Framing in Nabokov's The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Lolita, and Pnin

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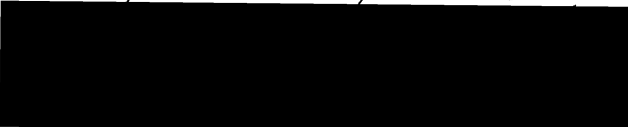
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The Other and Narrative Framing in Nabokov's  
The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Lolita, and Invitation to a Beheading

BY

Stacey Vivian Overend

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

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1998  
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## Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov is often noted for his portrayal of controversial characters, isolated from the real world. These characters, known as Others, are shunned by society because of their socially unacceptable or inappropriate behavior. However, in order to understand fully the Other and his motives, readers must evaluate the Other's behavior within the context of his alternate existence, an isolated existence created in response to the threat common society imposes on his Self. Focusing on three of Nabokov's novels, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Lolita, and Pnin, this thesis examines the character of the Other through two approaches: a psychological approach, delineating the character's development as an Other with regards to psychotherapist R.D. Laing's theory outlined in The Divided Self, and supported by a technical approach, detailing the narrative strategies--especially in terms of frameworks--Nabokov employs to further his presentation of the Other. These two approaches work from an existential basis, evaluating the other in terms of a "being-in-his-own-world" existence. Much of what Nabokov does, as revealed by these two approaches, places his works within the postmodern movement in literature. Overall, the effect Nabokov achieves in these novels is a presentation of the ontological insecurity of the Others and a shift in the ontological security of the readers.

## Dedication

For David, light of my life, fire of my heart. My sin, my soul. Thank you for letting me be part of your Davidian world.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my thesis director, Professor John Guzlowski, for his guidance and support in writing this thesis. I would also like to thank Professor Fern Kory for her dedication and confidence and Professor Anne Zahlan for contributing a fresh perspective. Each member of my committee contributed valuable input to the project. Additional thanks goes to Professor John Martone for his encouragement throughout the entirety of my studies.

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## Introduction

Russian-born author Vladimir Nabokov entertains through his portrayal of atypical and often controversial subject material. He spotlights characters consumed by taboos, obsessed with adultery, incest, and pedophilia. But rather than condemn these socially outcast characters, the reader is manipulated, eventually sympathizing with them and their motives. How does Nabokov tear readers away from conventional morals to accept these despicable characters? Some critics deem these tactics “textual games” (Wood 103). Others see his structures more positively as artful, as “fluid and expandable because [they are] determined by memory and imagination, which unwind time and space as a spiral” (Paine 51). Nabokov admits that, “The design of my novel is fixed in my imagination, and every character follows the course I imagine for him. I am the perfect dictator in that private world in so far as I alone am responsible for its stability and truth” (qtd. in Jonge 59). We see Nabokov maneuvering his readers to accept the novels’ truth and stability, despite their sometimes outrageous forms. Through careful character development and complex technical narrative approaches, Nabokov introduces the character of a moral Other, conquering the challenge Linda Hutcheon said postmodernists are called to answer: “Let us inscribe and then challenge totality; let us (re)present the un(re)presentable; let us activate differences and admit that we thus create the honor of the name and the



name itself' (Hutcheon 55). Nabokov fashions his narratives in order to present the unrepresentable: Others and their respective alternate worlds.

Focusing on three of Nabokov's novels, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Lolita, and Pnin, this thesis examines Nabokov's presentations of these Others through two approaches: a psychological approach, delineating the character's development as an Other with regards to psychotherapist R.D. Laing's theory outlined in The Divided Self, supported by a technical approach, detailing the narrative strategies--specifically in terms of framing--Nabokov employs to further his presentation of the Other. Both these approaches evaluate the Other in an existential context, looking at the Other within his own world.

The character of the Other is one talked about frequently from a variety of perspectives, literary, psychological, and social. However, there is some common agreement as to what this character looks like. The Other stands apart from the masses. He is an outsider, one who does not fit into society. He represents what Ihab Hassan calls "radical innocence":

Radical ... because it is inherent in his character, and goes to the root or foundation of it. But radical, too, because it is extreme, impulsive, anarchic, troubled with vision ... His innocence ... is a property of the mythic American Self, perhaps of every anarchic Self. It is the innocence of a Self that refuses to accept the

immitigable rule of reality. (6)

The radical innocence of the Other can be seen in characters throughout Nabokov's novels. Of primary concern here are Others in his novels The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Lolita, and Pnin. These Others range from writers to pedophiles to professors, all of whom have distanced themselves from the real world to live an Other existence. Chronologically, the Others in Nabokov's novels enact a sort of progression, moving from the most dependent characters like V who look to others to define their existence to a more independent character like Pnin, trying to break free of the imposition another character imposes.

As the Others vary in character, so does their presentation. Nabokov works with a variety of narrative techniques and rhetoric to introduce the others. As Wayne Booth explains in The Rhetoric of Fiction, "We have seen that the author cannot choose to avoid rhetoric; he can choose only the kind of rhetoric he will employ. He cannot choose whether or not to affect his readers' evaluations by his choice of narrative; he can only choose whether to do it well or poorly" (149). Varying the relation of the Other through narrational frameworks, each of these novels provides new and unique perspectives on the Other, presenting him and his creation of himself in different ways.

The way Nabokov's novels examine the Other can be understood within what psychotherapist Laing, in The Divided Self, calls "existential

phenomenology.” Laing defines this as “an attempt to characterize the nature of a person’s experience of his world and himself” (Laing 17). The Nabokovian Other is a social Other, living an awkward existence as a masked member of society, deceiving both others around him and himself. The Nabokovian Other wears masks to fit in. While he may not intend to, the Other challenges cultural values because he lives either at the fringes of or completely segregated from the rest of the culture.

Often times, the Other is seen as mad, because he certainly lives in a reality different from the social norm. Laing talks of this kind of Otherness in terms of the “schizoid.” The schizoid, like the Other, is an “individual the totality of whose experience is split in two main ways: in the first place, there is a rent in his relation with his world and, in the second, there is a disruption of his relation with himself” (17). Nabokov’s presentation of the Other, in fact, illustrates both aspects of the split. He demonstrates the Otherness of the character within himself through the story and then demonstrates his Otherness within society through the structure of the text. As madness can be seen in degrees, so too can Otherness. Some of the Others subtly slip in and out of society almost unrecognized because they can function within day to day reality. And like the “insane,” the Other usually does not recognize his own Otherness; he may recognize that he does not belong, but not why he does not.

What ultimately calls attention to the Other are his actions. When he acts outside of social norms the focus is shifted to him. Sometimes these actions are seen by members of society as deliberate challenges to social norms, while others are criminal acts. Thus, the Other's conflict revolves around his attempt to function in a world filled with morals, ethics, and laws that rarely correspond to his own beliefs. As a result, he is marginalized and shunned. For instance, Humbert Humbert, narrator and main character of Lolita, becomes obsessed with twelve-year-old "nymphet" Lolita. Because of deep feelings this man has for Lolita, society deems him a criminal, a pedophile. Another instance is Pnin, a quirky Russian professor in love with his native language and heritage. His colleagues ridicule him and his superiors deny tenure.

In general, there is a cultural advantage in belonging to the dominant culture. Acting within it ensures an individual's acceptance. But, it also imposes restrictions on people. The Other is one who does not adhere to the restrictions, and, from the point of view of the dominant culture's beliefs, this seems to be done out of defiance. Consequently, the dominant society's view of the Other is as an adversary. He threatens the norm because, rather than contend with the dominant culture and an existence as an adversary, the Other simply dismisses it. Meanwhile, members of society criticize him and his actions, basing judgement according to their own beliefs and how he measures up against them.

In reaction to the actual culture, the Other creates his own alternate culture to survive because to attempt a life in the shadow of another's beliefs would be detrimental to his Self. Laing supports this theory, suggesting that the Other exists in an alternate world developed as a reaction to and protection from the common society, or "shared world." He states, "The self, in order to develop and sustain its identity and autonomy, and in order to be safe from the persistent threat and danger from the world, has cut itself off from direct relatedness with Others, and has endeavoured to become its own object: to become, in fact, related directly only to itself" (Laing 137). It is only in this alternate society that the Other is safe from the imposition of common social norms. In his alternate world, the Other establishes the rules he lives by, and avoids the societal suicide life within the norm would be. The alternate world provides "the geography where absurd questers make absurd quests" (Kuehl 179). Pnin can live happily within his Russian paradise without the interference of American ways. For Humbert, the pursuit of a young girl of twelve is "permissible" (*Lolita* 135).

This is not to say the alternate world exists totally separate from the shared world. On the contrary, the alternate world is very similar to the norm, overlapping in many areas because it is a part already in existence in the norm, but controlled by the Other. In Nabokov's fictions, that means that rather than be swept away to a distant past or alien galaxy, readers are allowed the comforts of

their home base in the reading because the alternate world exists within the shared world, as a single room exists within a house. However, there are fundamental differences which prescribe a very different existence for the Other. Morality and ethics are not based upon or evaluated by any commonly accepted principles. Instead, they depend upon the individual, with certain variations from one to the next.

The overlapping portions of social norms society serve as Nabokov's invitation to the reader first into his works and then into the Other's alternate society. Nabokov creates "fictional landscapes" for the reader that "though often remote, exotic, and vague, . . . are seldom fantastic because they arise from the actual world directly apprehended" (Kuehl 173). Like the "antirealistic writers," who are interestingly known for their admiration of Nabokov's writing<sup>1</sup>, Nabokov works from what is known, the real world, to transport readers into an unknown alternate world. His antirealistic landscapes "combine familiarity with unfamiliarity," overlapping with social reality in almost every particular except for those that define the character as other (173). From this strategy we see that, despite the variation of the narrative forms Nabokov uses to present the Other, a commonality exists among his works. Each form uses the notion of a touchstone

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<sup>1</sup>John Kuehl, in Alternate Worlds: A Study of Postmodern Antirealistic American Fiction, remarks on how so many antirealistic writers, such as John Hawkes, look to Nabokov as a model for their own creation of "fictional landscapes" (173).

for the reader, operating from the overlapping elements between societies. The touchstone is the shared world. Nabokov's narrational structures always contain that touchstone to act as a bridge, transporting the reader from societal norms into the alternate world of the Other. More often than not, though, the steps leading the reader across this bridge are so subtle the reader is rarely aware of the change of locale. The reader is, in a way, duped. Nabokov's transportation of the reader into the Other's alternate world is a tactic forcing the reader's complete rendering of himself to the text, which in turn opens up the doors for acceptance of the Other and his actions. As I will demonstrate, instead of writing as more traditional realistic authors do, openly guiding us into these worlds, Nabokov lets us fall into his traps; he tricks us into these worlds. Reality as we know it becomes the illusion, and the alternate world becomes our new reality.

To evaluate the Other in terms of character, Laing's paradigm suggests that the reader needs "a capacity to know how the [character] is experiencing himself and the world, including oneself" (Laing 34). The reader needs to not only acknowledge, but also understand the existential sphere of the Other. We need to "reconstruct the patient's [Other's] way of being himself in his world" rather than on the "patient's way of being-with-me" (Laing 25). We must recognize both ontologically insecure Others, those who do not recognize their Otherness or alternate worlds, and the ontologically secure Others, those who recognize their

alternate worlds and can negotiate their positions within the dominant society.

Therefore, Nabokov's strategy for creating a reader who comes to understand these characters works from our comfort zone, catering to the reader's desire for a familiar landscape.

This stress on society and how a character acts within or reacts to it differs from that of more traditional literature, which is concerned with portraying stories of characters within society, not with how characters develop their own alternate "societies" in reaction to common society. Nabokov's works are not only exemplary of Lain's theory of the Divided Self, but also illustrative of the postmodern awareness of society and the corresponding self-consciousness of the characters. Charles Russell argues the following regarding the postmodern stress on society: "Postmodern literature recognizes that all perception, cognition, action, and articulation are shaped, if not determined, by the social domain" (qtd. in Hutcheon 51). The social domain, in Nabokov's works, functions on two levels simultaneously: first, is the interior level of the Other and his functions within society as depicted in the novel, and second, the exterior level of the reader's notion of society and how that potentially affects their reactions to the characters in the novels. Not only does Nabokov undertake to construct the characters' worlds, but he also shows awareness of the reader's notions of society. The Other develops psychologically through the text as well as through the presentation, or



frameworks, of the novel, which to some extent are dependent upon reader participation for their effects. As we will see, Nabokov sets boundaries for both levels.

Readers enter the writer's world with baggage: preconceptions and ideologies. The author must anticipate those preconceptions to know how he can manipulate them to produce the desired effect of the fiction on the reader. Successful manipulation of the reader will temporarily allow them to lose their baggage, be tricked by irony, held in suspense, or entertained by humor. In order to achieve suspension, Nabokov uses various structural techniques. He plays with the active perception of the readers. Sylvia Paine, in Beckett, Nabokov, Nin: Motives and Modernism, notes the following regarding Nabokov's art:

Perception is ... active, for it grows from a multiplex participation by the perceiver -- in his own sensory experiences, in the things-in-themselves which make up the world, in his insights into and arrangements of those things so that they make sense, and in the transmission of his sense of things to others. ... the principle of perception enables Nabokov to develop a radical thesis in his novels.

(Paine 59)

And, given the taboo nature of the Other and his actions in the three Nabokov novels analyzed in this study, Nabokov must manipulate the perceptions of the

readers so they become receptive readers who react to the fiction as is intended by the author.

In his memoir Speak, Memory, Nabokov offers insight to his intentions when he speaks about his chess strategies:

Deceit, to the point of diabolism, and originality, grading into the grotesque, were my notions of strategy, and although in matters of construction I tried to conform whenever possible to classical rules, such as economy of force, unity, weeding out of loose ends, I was always ready to sacrifice purity of form to the exigencies of fantastic content, causing form to bulge and burst like a sponge-bag containing a small furious devil.

It should be understood that competition in chess problems is not really between White and Black but between the composer and the hypothetical solver (just as in a first-rate work of fiction the real clash is not between the character but between the author and the world), so that a great part of a problem's value is due to the number of "tries" -- delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray. (219-220)

The "classical form" Nabokov conforms to is the idea of the novel. He chooses

this medium to explore his ideas. However, he “sacrifices purity” when he twists the form, constructing novels without attainable truths, as in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, or with twisting moral codes, as in Lolita. He deceives his readers when he takes them through journeys to end only at anticlimactic endings or witness false epiphanies. My thesis, then, is an attempt to uncover the deceit and analyze the “clash between the author and the world.” Where does Nabokov use “delusive openings” and leave “false scents?” How does he “lead the would-be solver [reader] astray?”

As we will see, as the Other creates his alternate world, so does Nabokov through his textual form, a “construction” which sometimes represents the “classical” and other times represents the “fantastic.” The forms utilized by Nabokov twist common features of the novel form. While these works are deemed “novels,” they are actually reactions to the novel form, and this self-referential reaction is postmodern, as well. The narrative frameworks contribute to the presentation of the Other’s character.

Nabokov looks at his characters in certain ways. He breaks down traditional notions of character, creating his Other by parodying, exaggerating, and distorting traditional characters. The purpose of highlighting the Other in this way is not to simply entertain, parody, or satirize society. Leading the reader through an evaluation of social norms from an alternate view invites examination, rather

than blind acceptance, of the socially prescribed belief system. In an interview given in 1973, Nabokov said that he does not “give a damn for the group, the community, the masses and so forth” (Strong Opinions 33). He constantly preached revolution and rebellion against the accepted norms of society. Earlier, in his 1966 interview with Alfred Appel, Jr., Nabokov said, “I have despised ideological coercion instinctively all my life” (“An Interview”21).

Perhaps this distrust of is best illustrated when Nabokov reveals his inspirations. Nabokov describes a story to which he attributes one inspiration of Lolita. The story also illustrates Nabokov’s aversion for what he calls “ideological coercion.” Nabokov read an article in 1940 while in Paris. The story was of an ape who, after much human coercion, sketched the first picture any animal had ever produced. What the animal had drawn were the bars of its cage. This prompted Nabokov’s first 30 page draft of Lolita (Strong Opinions 15). There is much in the story that illuminates Nabokov’s ideas. The ape was only able to see and reproduce the bars that held him captive, much like people are limited to reproducing the ideologies holding people captive. The ape instinctively despised the bars that unnaturally limited his life. Nabokov instinctively despised ideologies which limit other peoples’ views and lives. Lolita, and his other novels, were written to help other people temporarily break free of the bars. By making the reader understand the Other, despite their socially unacceptable behavior,

Nabokov forces the reader to oppose the masses and their ideologies and thus achieves his goal. The following pages will demonstrate how Nabokov achieves this in the works The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (1945), Lolita (1955), and Invitation of a Small Evening (1957). They will also detail some of the ways these works illustrate a postmodern way of thinking in two ways; through Nabokov's representation of the Other's psychology and his non-traditional ways of presenting the characters to the reader.

## Chapter 1

Trying On the Other:  
The Real Life of Sebastian Knight

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, the first of Nabokov's novels composed in English, like many of Nabokov's works preys on readers' response to the text to develop characters and twist plots. While the title promises the truth behind the life of the late fictitious author Sebastian Knight, the novel actually only reveals the process V, Knight's half-brother and narrator of the book, follows to find out about Knight's real life; it is a book about the process of gathering facts to write a book. As one critic describes it, "it is the story of a biographer's quest into the private history of the fictitious author, Sebastian Knight; but as we accompany the narrator on his search for knowledge both he and we learn less and less about its subject, until it becomes apparent, finally, that Sebastian's 'real life' will never be known" (Stegner 64). What we are told and not told by the narrator, V, paradoxically creates a distance between the ostensible subject of the book, Sebastian and the narrator, the author, and, consequently, the reader. By rendering only partially the story of Knight, the narrator sets up an appropriate stage for Sebastian Knight to play the Other. We are as removed from Knight as the rest of the world was.

To exaggerate this distance, Nabokov constructs several layers of framework which the readers are required to peel away to understand the meaning

behind the text. We are asked to delve into the text and sort out the several worlds which lay within the novel. These fictional worlds include The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, written by Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, written by V, and the *real* real life of Sebastian Knight, which turns out to be an unattainable truth as we are provided only fragments of his life and works. Such constructions for a novel demonstrate three elements of postmodernism: the focus on the art itself, the writer's playing with narrative expectations, and the postmodernism concern with ontology. Brenda Marshall, in "Nabokov's Authority in Sebastian Knight," says the concern with ontology is "a description of various, simultaneously existing world, whether they be the concrete world of what we try to call 'reality' or worlds within minds or worlds of words"(Marshall 214). Working from the inner-most part of the story involving Sebastian, to the narrator V, and then to the outside frameworks displayed for readers, we can see the establishment of these distancing layers.

Sebastian remains a mystery to people: both outside readers and inside characters. V's mother says, "I never really knew Sebastian, I knew he obtained good marks at school, read an astonishing number of books, was clean in his habits . . . I knew all this and more, but he himself escaped me . . . he will always remain an enigma" (The Real Life 29). Later, Sebastian comes to visit his half-brother V and his mother while in Paris. Upon his arrival V was "struck by his [Sebastian's]

foreign appearance” (29). After the death of his mother, V visits again with Sebastian, who is “kind and helpful in a distant vague way” (29). Sebastian is always withdrawn from people, even family members; he separates himself from those around him. Cambridge, we learn, may be all Sebastian dreamt it would be; however, this is not enough to bring Sebastian into the dominant world. V tells us Sebastian is still out of place while at college: “he himself, or rather still the most precious part of himself, would remain as hopelessly alone as it had always been” (The Real Life 42). Additionally, one of his mistresses, Clare, regards him as a complete Other: “Sebastian? ... Sebastian has gone mad. Quite mad” (108).

Sebastian is unable to conform, to the conventions family or to the wills of people within the outside world, as well. In a letter to his publisher, Sebastian writes of how he will never change his style: “But even if there were such a thing as a ‘literary career’ and I were disqualified merely for riding my own horse, still I would refuse to change one single word in what I have written” (The Real Life 53). His sensitivity and extreme attachment to his written words gives us a clue as to the meaning of his works. Writing allows him the freedom and power to create, which stands in opposition to his place in the real world, over which he has little control. Sebastian’s writing functions as a barrier behind which he may hide.

Identity, for Sebastian, is secure in a Laingian sense; however, he is only secure in a false identity. As early as childhood, Sebastian withdraws from his real



identity, denying his native language and heritage, and becoming what Laing calls “unembodied.” The unembodied self “experiences his self as being more or less divorced or detached from his body . . . Instead of being the core of his true self, the body is felt as the core of a false self” (Laing 69). Sebastian denies facts associated with the truth about himself to take on the attributes of a self-created being. He refuses to speak in anything but English, and even when confronted, he denies his native Russian, often going to great lengths to cover up the fact. This is illustrated in his interactions with his tutor, a linguist named Mr. Jefferson, who “insisted upon considering Sebastian as a Russian” and often attempted to converse with Sebastian in Russian: “One day, at last, Sebastian blurted out that there was some mistake -- he had not been born in Russian really, but in Sofia. Upon which, the delighted old man at once stated to speak Bulgarian” (49). In reply, Sebastian says that he was not familiar with the dialect the tutor used and rattles off an imaginary dialect.

Again and again characters testify that Sebastian wishes for the destruction of his past and any remnant revealing the past. When an old friend from college tries to find old poems of Sebastian’s and fails, the narrator remarks, “I know Sebastian would have applauded their loss” (The Real Life 47). This attempt to ignore the past is an effort to keep his self hidden. As Laing puts it, “if the self is not known it is safe” (163). Sebastian keeps his true self hidden by both

destroying his past and remaining aloof in the present. He is unattainable and removed. According to Laing, this too is a defense for the Other's survival: "to be a potentially seeable object is to be constantly exposed to danger . . . The obvious defense against such a danger is to make oneself invisible in one way or another" (109). And in being inaccessible, Sebastian gains some freedom from outside persecution.

Julia Kristeva, in Stranger to Ourselves, remarks on Sebastian's destruction of his past: "there is no doubt that Sebastian is one, on account of that fragmented memory--it is his own or his brother's?--which does not succeed in reconstructing a continuous, compact past, for exile has shattered all sense of belonging" (Kristeva 34). Sebastian is a foreigner who has lost his woman, land, and language, but from a Laingian perspective we see that in doing this Sebastian believes himself to be safe from outside persecution (36).

As much as Sebastian denies his true self, he does have a secure alternate self. He exists in the real world, but refuses to play by the rules. He may live autonomously, but he does not fully recognize how his autonomous life does not fit in the larger scheme of the world. The single piece of evidence the text provides, which may attest to some realization of how he does not belong, is from Sebastian's fiction: "In my disastrous attempt to match the colour of my surroundings I would only be compared to a colour-blind chameleon" (The Real

Life 65). Because of this false security within his own world, we may view Sebastian as an “ontologically insecure” being, “differentiated from the rest of the world in ordinary circumstances so clearly that his identity and autonomy are never in question” (Laing 41-42). Although we, the readers, see contradictions in Sebastian’s character, he firmly believes in the person he has created for himself.

Despite the obvious detachment between V and Sebastian, V clearly idolizes Sebastian. All his life V has been living in the shadow of Sebastian. He consistently yearns for Sebastian’s attention, as Sebastian becomes the sun in V’s world. As a result, V models his life after Sebastian and justifies this because he believes he and Sebastian are similar in character. After Sebastian’s death, V sets out to write his biography propelled by his curiosity regarding Sebastian’s life. As the novel progresses, V begins to imitate Sebastian, attempting to relive part of Sebastian’s life. The first step in this is V’s desire to write. Knowing he is not as talented as his half-brother, V enrolls in a “be-an-author course buoyantly advertised in an English magazine” (The Real Life 32). This desire, for both Sebastian and V, illustrates what is lacking in their selves: certainty of identity. As a result, the tendency is to “rely on spatial means of identifying oneself” often shown in a person’s desire to be seen (Laing 109). Writing, for these two Others, gives that spatial confirmation, allowing them to identify themselves through the written word and create their own worlds. At the same time, the writing provides a

mask under which both may hide. Both Sebastian and V use writing to conceal themselves: Sebastian from the world within the novel, and V from the readers outside the novel.

Likening himself more and more to Sebastian, V claims to have an “inner knowledge of his character” (The Real Life 31). V claims to be intuitively connected with Sebastian’s actions:

Yes, this was a thing I possessed, I felt it in every nerve. And the more I pondered on it, the more I perceived that I had yet another tool in my hand: when I imagined actions of his which I heard of only after his death, I knew for certain that in such or such a case I should have acted just as he had. (32)

Writing the biography of his distant brother becomes an all-consuming task, transforming V’s reasons for living. According to V, Sebastian and he had “some kind of common rhythm,” and the novel brings us along on a journey during which V searches for that rhythm (32). As a result, he becomes distanced from himself. V, we now see, is experiencing life “detached” from his body; he too is what Laing would call an “unembodied self” (66). He relies on the life of Sebastian for meaning, and feels through him. He is the “vehicle of a personality that is not his own” (Laing 58). Ironically, it is Sebastian’s, which is a false self.

Consequently, V is personally offended by anyone who criticizes Sebastian,

as such critics are essentially criticizing V and his life's quest, threatening V's purpose in life. When confronted with negative aspects of Sebastian's character, V dismisses them. For example, when Mr. Goodman, another biographer of Sebastian, makes a negative assumption about Sebastian's life, V identifies it as a "grotesque misconception" (The Real Life 24). Instead of calling Goodman's biography *The Tragedy of Sebastian Knight*, V renames it *The Farce of Mr. Goodman*.

Seeing how obsessed V is with Sebastian's life and his entire being and seeing how V is personally offended by remarks to Sebastian, point us to the identity crisis of V. He essentially tries on Sebastian's identity, becoming so consumed with his life that V begins to live vicariously through Sebastian. In a drama-like existence, V has taken on Sebastian's being for his own. This is confirmed by the ending scene in the novel. V comes to a personal revelation:

I have learnt one secret too, and namely: that the should is but a manner of being--of a constant state--that any should may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations . . . Thus--I am Sebastian Knight. I feel as if I were impersonating him on a lighted stage . . . They move round Sebastian--round me who am acting Sebastian, . . . And then the masquerade draws to a close. The bald little prompter shuts his book, as the light fades gently. The end, the end. But the

hero remains, for try as I may, I cannot get out of my part:

Sebastian's mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off. I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows. (The Real Life 202-3)

And, while this philosophical revelation confirms V's sense of self (based on another being who is an Other), it is also a falsehood. This revelation comes after he supposedly hears Sebastian's breathing in a nearby room: "But those few minutes I spent listening to what I thought was his breathing changed my life as completely as it would have been changed, had Sebastian spoken to me before dying" (The Real Life 202). However, this was not the real case, as Sebastian had actually passed away the day before, and the life-changing breathing he heard was that of a stranger. V, then, comes to a false epiphany. Rather than experience the cleansing realization traditional characters have in traditional or even modern novels, he has an Other epiphany, pointing to his creator's postmodern world view.

Reflecting on the events leading to V's identity "confirmation," one realizes that his identity is in question throughout. V's identity is only revealed in regards to his half-brother. We never hear his full name. In fact, the initial V is only provided because it is Sebastian who offers it: "'Oh, hullo, V.,' he said looking up" (The Real Life 69). But then Sebastian continues with "This is my brother" (69). In introducing himself to others V refers to himself as "Sebastian Knight's

half-brother” (55). In other meetings, where the readers know V gives his name, the name is pointedly censored by Nabokov. During Mrs. Helene Grinstein’s meeting with V, the narrator relays the scene as follows: ““But what is *your* name,’ she asked . . . ‘I think you mentioned it, but to-day my brain seems to be in a daze . . . Ach,’ she said when I had told her. ‘But that sounds familiar’” (134). To the nurse who attended to Sebastian on his death bed, V says “We are half-brothers, really. My name is [I mentioned my name]” (202). Adding to the identity crisis for V, as well as Sebastian, is the suspension of the half-brothers’ Russian surname. Mr. Goodman’s attempt at their “simple Russian name” is given to the readers only as “Mr. . . .” (56). Additionally, V’s identity is in question to himself. V notes that in Goodman’s biography, he is not mentioned at all “so that to readers of Goodman’s book I am bound to appear non-existent--a bogus relative, a garrulous imposter” (4). Without these names, V seems inaccessible, not only to himself, but to the readers as well.

Like Sebastian, V is “ontologically insecure,” not experiencing his being as “real, alive, or whole” (Laing 41). His identity and his experiences are felt only in relation to another being. In the early years of his life, V pines for Sebastian’s attention. He acts childishly, attempting to spit on his brother, “not because I want to annoy him, but merely as a wistful and vain attempt to make him notice my existence” (The Real Life 14). Sadly, Sebastian often disregards V, either quickly

and impatiently spending required time or avoiding him altogether, but still V tries countless times to win his attention (14-15). When referring to himself, V can relate himself in terms of Sebastian's life, as "Sebastian's brother" or as a nameless being, still suspending his identity from the readers. Additionally, V is so consumed with his biography of Sebastian that all his life's experiences happen because of the quest for truth behind Sebastian's life. Laing would classify V as having a false self: "Everything he is comes by definition, therefore under the scope of his false-self system" (Laing 168). V can only live through his brother, hiding behind his brother's existence where the "self feels safe . . . in hiding, and isolated" (76). In doing this he can avoid who he really is, as the false self is "one way of not being oneself" (94).

V functions as an Other on two planes. He lives his life vicariously through Sebastian, taking on the "mask" of Sebastian, and consequently Sebastian's Otherness. In addition to the mask of the Other he wears, he is an Other because of his unembodied self. However, taking on the mask was inevitable, according to Kristeva. She notes, "No one could turn it [The Real Life of Sebastian Knight] into a 'biography' -- not even his half brother -- without mutilating or betraying it by projecting oneself into the place of the writer, as is expected from the fierce fondness of all interpreters and readers" (Kristeva 33). Working on the assumption that readers expect V to try on the mask, Kristeva points out that "mutilation" of



the text, and reality within the text, is unavoidable.

Still, as readers, we are never allowed the freedom to truly know these characters, which is a major contrast to more traditional novels where we are expected to come to know our characters. In the traditional realistic novel, authors play into the illusion that we may know our characters; whereas in Nabokov's works we are not allowed any illusions. Rather than rendering the truth of the characters, the text renders the absence of truth. So many filters are established, creating a distance between the readers and the characters, that readers know that we cannot know the truth. As readers, we are continuously shuttled between reading The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, as written by Nabokov, and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, as created by the narrator, V. Compounding this is the center of the framework, the *real* real life of Sebastian Knight. A direct command to be aware of the two is outlined for us in Chapter Six by V: "Remember that what you are told is really threefold: shaped by the teller, reshaped by the listener, concealed from both by the dead man of the tale. Who is speaking of Sebastian Knight?" (50). Narrationally, these suspensions help in the creation of the character of the Other. Such bracketed bits of text, addressing the readers directly, alert the readers to the distance at which we are held. As one critic says, the narrator V "is anxious not to obtrude, and his anxiety is what makes him so obtrusive" (Wood 34).

Unsurprisingly, the question of narrational reliability recurs throughout the novel. While V is supposed to be on a journey for the discovery of the “real life” of Sebastian, all solid clues are either destroyed or out of reach and V burns correspondence letters which would have given him truthful insight into Sebastian’s life (36). He disregards other biographies of Sebastian, despite their research having been done while Sebastian was alive. Those acquaintances of Sebastian’s who are alive are not pursued completely, and others who are unattainable are obviously not helpful. The reader is taken into the story, traveling along with V through his discoveries and assumptions. We must take an active role in the story, as the narrator takes an active role in reconstructing Sebastian’s life. As Paine says, Nabokov’s readers are moved into a “perception and vision” of the artist, creating an “organic link between the body and the world, the world and art, art and the body” (51,55). However, despite the proximity we share with the narrator on his quest for clues to Sebastian’s life, we are held at a distance from the narrator, only getting to know him as a person in relation to Sebastian and the task at hand.

Reality is never certain, for all presented to us is based on hearsay and the assumptions and conjectures of our narrator. It is these assumptions, though they may be false, which are essential to the novel: “Mistakes - ones which are only mistakes and ones which are blunderings into insight - are absolutely central to

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight” (Wood 50). These mistakes poke the readers, nudging us to ever changing “facts” and “falsehoods.” One critic remarks on the reality in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight: “The real for Nabokov is always refracted. There are no bare facts ... The real is not less real because it is refracted, that is the way it comes to us” (32).

Moving outside the text to analyze V’s role as a narrator we discover how very unreliable he is. While he is not intentionally deceptive, V “believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him,” and, according to Wayne Booth, author of The Rhetoric of Fiction, this is trait of an unreliable narrator (Booth 159). V believes he has inherent characteristics enabling him to interpret and relay Sebastian’s life, but in actuality these qualities are merely intuition and a kind of supernatural connection with his half-brother, which Nabokov demonstrates as being off target and incorrect.

Additionally, the layers of framework create distance from the heart of the story. But, once we reveal the inner most aspect of the story, attempting an understanding of the *real* Real Life of Sebastian Knight, only artifice and intangible evidence remain; truth is absent. Viewing this under a postmodernist’s light, we see this as a reflection of V’s reliance on the artifice of the world Sebastian created for himself. The postmodernist “distrusts” the “symbolic mode” of language, and realizing that the clues to Sebastian’s life are contrived, the reader

can only depend on the fact that there is nothing to depend upon (Marshall 216). This, compounded by an unreliable narrator and characters without true selves contributes very little to the story in terms of solidity. Readers are left grasping at illusions and facades.

What is the point of creating a text based with nothing solid at the center? By presenting this story about the attempts at a story which can never be discovered we can only focus on one thing: not the heart of the story, but only the idea of the story. We have only the act of creation to examine. The Real Life of Sebastian Knight represents therefore a shift in the focus of traditional novels. Because we have no stable referent, we cannot read the novel so much for the story, but only for the art of the story. Nabokov takes a postmodern path to the novel.

Rather than create a work of literature in the traditional, realist sense, Nabokov invents a “work” of literature in the postmodern sense. He disregards conventions and dismisses the meaning of novel, forcing upon the reader only motions of a work in progress with nothing tangible to grasp. As Linda Hutcheon states in The Politics of Postmodernism:

Postmodern representational practices [of reality] that refuse to stay neatly within accepted conventions and traditions and that deploy hybrid forms and seemingly mutually contradictory strategies

frustrate critical attempts to systematize them, to order them with an eye to control and master -- that is to totalize. (37)

Nabokov's work allows readers no firm grasp on anything but textual levels. We can never totalize reality. And, what this type of metafiction does is "cast doubt on the very possibility of *any* firm 'guarantee of meaning'" (Hutcheon 55). And, rather than simply leave the text within the epistemological modernist concerns of a reality separate from illusion, as Marshall notes the text leans toward the postmodernist strategy to "go beyond the oppositional paradigm of illusion versus reality, to an acknowledgment of unknowable realities" (214). The unknowability of reality is the root of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight.

Nabokov's overall accomplishment is in providing the reader with the ontological security his characters are lacking. We recognize both the real, shared world and the world of artifice clearly demonstrated in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. Nabokov gives us the privileged seats of psychoanalysts, so that we may take Sebastian, and especially V, in their "being-in-the-world" sense. We see how the characters live within their own world while functioning in the real world. While we are not given explicitly the heart of the characters' lives, we are given the boundaries of their false selves. Nabokov's fictional world does not function in the traditional way by merely presenting the story. Instead, he works in a kind of negative space, playing against the conventional development of characters to

provide lack of development. We witness no rise or fall for these two Others and we are allowed no personal connection to them. That is, both Sebastian and V are very flat and static characters, rather than well-rounded and dynamic characters functioning in the spotlight of the novel. However, this distance lends to the suspension of character evaluation so that we may truly analyze their selves without an underhanded set of narrational taints. We are given the opportunity for an evaluation because of our ontological security, having nothing but our own reactions to base judgement upon.

## Chapter 2

## The Other vs. the Real World:

Lolita

There has scarcely been such a controversial novel before or since Nabokov's Lolita. With pedophilia, murder, and sex, Lolita dares readers' morals from the outset. Admittedly, Nabokov intends to raise eyebrows at his taboo subject matter. According to Nabokov, there are three taboos for an author to write about in the literary world: a successful Negro-white marriage resulting in many children and grandchildren; an atheist who lives a long, happy, and useful life and then dies peacefully in his sleep; and thirdly, the taboo Lolita contains - pedophilia (Centerwall 470). And, it is this novel which Nabokov says, in a 1964 interview, left him with "the most pleasurable afterglow" which he credits to its purity and its being "the most abstract and carefully contrived" (Strong Opinions 47). Such an admitted contrivance invites a closer look to the approach the work takes. What are we to make of the perpetrator of the crime, Humbert Humbert? He is a pedophile by societal standards, but this is because we are not evaluating his behavior according to his criteria within his world. To understand his behavior, we must, as Laing suggests, place his behavior in the "context of his whole being-in-his-world" (Laing 17). This task is what Lolita bravely tackles, both internally in character development, and externally in presentation.

Humbert Humbert is the Other most obviously outside of society of all

Nabokov's characters. As Colin Wilson, author of The Outsider, suggests, an outsider is "at first sight . . . A social problem. He is the hole-in-corner man" (11). Humbert represents the social problem to which Wilson refers. Rather than let society dictate rules, he lives impulsively, pursuing what he needs and disregarding the legality of these needs. Wilson says the Other is not concerned with looking civilized and rational, as he does not see himself as part of the civilized and rational world (13). In fact, it is those who are concerned with looking civilized that the Other attempts to combat. Wilson says, "The outsider's case against society is very clear. All men and women have these dangerous, unnameable impulses, yet they keep up a pretense, to themselves, to others" (13). Humbert remarks on the same ideas when he expresses his distaste for society

who did not notice the falsity of all the everyday conventions and rules of behavior, and foods, and books, and people . . . like a musician who may be an odious vulgarian in ordinary life, devoid of tact and taste; but who will hear a false note in music with diabolical accuracy of judgement. (Lolita 86)

He is aware of the conventions of normal society, but refuses to conform to them. Nabokov, himself, says in his post script to Lolita, "My creature Humbert is a foreigner and an anarchist" (Lolita 317). However, living as a foreigner and anarchist invites another kind of existence. As an Other, Humbert would rather



live for the reason of living and for the truth (Wilson 13). The truth for Humbert is acting on his most basic instincts, and that was following through on his love for Lolita, and doing all he could to keep her.

Eventually, Humbert becomes so consumed with the quest for his nymphet Lolita he gives up his own identity, much like V does in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, and lives his life only to be near Lolita, eventually murdering the man who takes her away from him. Lolita gives meaning to his life, and he is willing to act irrationally to maintain that meaning. This belief leads Humbert to child molestation and murder; however, in Humbert's terms, he is only doing what is necessary for his mask of the other to survive. But, as Laing predicts this keeping up of appearances will eventually destroy: "The more he keeps his true self in hiding, concealed, unseen, and the more he presents to others a false front, the more compulsive this false presentation of himself becomes" (Laing 114). Humbert loses sight of any outside meaning for existence he may have once had, and the mask he takes on is created from his denial of a life meaning prior to Lolita. Eventually he becomes so far removed from his true self that his only emotions or remorse come out of respect for Lolita.

Humbert clearly started his life as a secure person. His childhood was, for the most part, pleasant. He says, "I grew, a happy, healthy child in a bright world of illustrated books, clean sand, orange trees, friendly dogs, sea vistas and smiling

faces” (Lolita 12). However, this changed abruptly when Humbert’s first young love dies suddenly. Humbert is on the edge of a realization of this event’s significance: “I . . . keep asking myself, was it then, in the glitter of that remote summer, that the rift in my life began; or was my excessive desire for that child only the first evidence of an inherent singularity?” (15). And we see that Humbert “surrender[s] to a sort of retrospective imagination which feeds the analytic faculty” (15). Demonstrated here is the transition to an unembodied self which exists “outside everything. All being is *there*, none is *here*” (Laing 168). Humbert’s being is with Lolita, rather than in the real world.

Humbert is a handsome, well-educated man, “a great big handsome hunk of movieland manhood,” one who would seemingly have no problems being part of the shared world (Lolita 41). However, his nymphetic pursuits split him in two, separating his desires into a false self and locking away his rationality away from common society. Part of the progression of the novel is coming to terms with the pure need Humbert has for Lolita. He sees her as essential to his survival. He has centered his life around her; he is psychologically dependent on her. This situation parallels V’s in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. Sebastian is central to V’s life and Lolita is to Humbert’s. And, just as V becomes more dependent on Sebastian’s life, Humbert becomes steeped more deeply into living in pursuit of Lolita. At first, Humbert merely fantasizes about Lolita. For the ontologically

dependent psyche, these fantasies are “a defense against the dread of being alone” (Laing 57). Humbert is fighting the feelings of abandonment left first from his mother’s sudden death, and second from the brief romance with Anabel, which ended only because of her tragic death. Neither of these events gave Humbert closure. Continuing through his life with this sense of abandonment, Humbert endeavors to find replacement loves. However, despite his aging, Humbert’s ideal image of a young love does not. As a result, when Humbert finds willing participation on Lolita’s part, their relationship becomes increasingly important in giving validity and significance to Humbert’s life.

Humbert suffers from what Laing calls a “lack of ontological autonomy” (56). His life is completely dependent on Lolita. Humbert’s opening address, the very first words of the novel, explains just how essential she is to his life: “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul” (*Lolita* 11). After the first meeting with Lolita, Humbert is overwhelmed by emotions, unable to address his readers: “I find it most difficult to express with adequate force that flash, that shiver, that impact of passionate recognition . . . the vacuum of my soul managed to suck in every detail of her bright beauty”(41). Humbert, clearly feels he would be empty without Lolita. However, even when Humbert “has” Lolita, he is still lacking autonomy because with her he feels a false sense of autonomy. It takes the notion of Lolita to complete his existence; he cannot exist without the idea of her.

Therefore, he even delivers himself in connection to Lolita. For instance, when he is without her, he is “Lo-less” (64).

It is no surprise, then, when we hear of how he supposes his judges to take his experience, “as a piece of mummery on the part of a madman with a gross liking for the *fruit vert*” (*Lolita* 42). He is aware that these experiences do not fit into the acceptable labels we have for those welcome in our society. Instead, we convict him either legally or psychologically. Here, he calls himself a madman by *our* standards.

For Humbert to survive as the ontologically insecure person he has become, he needs someone else to believe in his existence (Laing 56). Any threat to the person he depends on is a threat to his self. Laing says that for such a person the “ordinary circumstances of everyday life constitute a continual and deadly threat” (Laing 42). Lolita’s mother, for example, represents a huge barrier in that she is Lolita’s mother and keeper, and she encroaches on their time. And ultimately Clare Quilty, the lover for whom Lolita leaves Humbert, poses such a threat that Humbert kills him.

In reaction to these deadly threats, the other creates his own world, a world in which Lolita is the center, and pedophilia and murder are not wrong. This world is created “in order to develop and sustain . . . identity and autonomy” (Laing 137). Before Lolita, Humbert was indeed a vacuum, in Laing’s terms,

nearing “implosion.” In reflecting on his life, Humbert is barely able to recall much of it. Only a few brief pages are devoted to his retrospection, and he admits the details are not as clear as they were pre-Lolita. He admits when remembering his first young love, “I remember her features far less distinctly today than I did a few years ago, before I knew Lolita” (*Lolita* 13). She is his touchstone to his alternate world, and all of his alternate self exists in relation to her, her influence going so deep as to taint memories from before Lolita even existed. Being without her, Humbert’s world was “liable at any moment to crash in and obliterate all identity . . . The individual feels that, like the vacuum, he is empty” (45). The use of the term “vacuum” in *Lolita* and Laing demonstrates the aptness of the application to this theory of Humbert.

When Humbert’s alternate world envelopes readers, and they become subject to the constant shifting of morality rules, Nabokov earns negative reactions from readers who are disgusted with themselves when they step back into reality. Nabokov plays on set notions of morality prescribed by the masses by allowing Humbert to present himself as an almost likable child molester and murderer. Nabokov provides Humbert the chance to present himself with a positive slant, providing evidence to justify his actions. In doing this, Nabokov forces the reader to enter, understand, and thus to sympathize with the polluted mind of Humbert. Nabokov tries everything to shift the reader’s own senses by leading the reader to

excuse, possibly even accept, Humbert's pedophilia. Humbert slips us into his "brand new, mad new dream world, where everything was permissible" (*Lolita* 135).

Seeded within the plot are excuses for Humbert--presented by Humbert--which attempt to keep the readers from condemning him. The first is the fact that, at their first sexual encounter, Lolita seduces Humbert. While lying in bed, Lolita leans over to suggest to Humbert they play the sex "games" she had learned at camp that previous summer (*Lolita* 134). Even though Humbert obviously agrees to this, and he has been fantasizing about it since he met the nymphet Lolita, in his account she initiated their first encounter. When Humbert retreats a bit, claiming ignorance of what she suggests, Lolita takes on the directive role in the encounter, literally telling Humbert, "here is where we start" (135). Humbert also tells us that Lolita is not a virgin. It was not Humbert who takes her virginity, but a boy from camp who soils the child: "Did I deprive her of her flower? . . . I was not even her first lover," says Humbert to his audience of jurors and readers (*Lolita* 137).

Also, Lolita is presented as indifferent to the sex, never showing emotional or physical distress because of it: ". . . I held her in my lap. There she would be, a typical kid picking her nose while engrossed in the lighter sections of a newspaper, as indifferent to my ecstasy . . ." (167). Humbert is the one relating the story, and

consequently does not describe any harmful elements in the sex between the two. Lolita is not described as suffering emotionally or physically on account of Humbert's copulation with her. In fact, outside of sex, Humbert does everything he can to please Lolita. While on their road trips, Humbert buys many gifts for Lolita. An additional reason for withholding condemnation is Humbert's eventual loss of Lolita when she runs off with another man, Quilty, and then marries a younger man. Nabokov uses his atypical plot twists in the novel to challenge conventional associations reader have about characters in this situation ("Lolita: The Springboard" 117).

In attempting to make readers understand the disturbed mind of the pedophile Humbert, readers are thrown off balance because we are caught between the text's defense of pedophilia and society's condemnation of it. As a result of our condemnation, Humbert writes Lolita as a confession from jail. By creating the narrational frame, Nabokov works to disassociate readers from their environment by isolating them in a new one, devoid of typical ideologies. Nabokov forces the reader to examine the common moralities of communities which are accepted without question or evaluation.

While the novel is shunned for its content by much of society, sex in the novel is understated and rarely described. However, it does come into play, but not for the reasons readers usually assume. Appel notes the following:

Nabokov is very much concerned with it [sex], but with the reader's expectations rather than its machinations. "Anybody can imagine those elements of animality," he [Nabokov] says, and yet a great many readers wished that he had done it for them. ("Lolita: The Springboard" 123).

Most readers of this novel are already tainted by hearsay regarding the novel. We enter into the reading expecting an explicit sexual scene, described in detail for us. However, sexual acts are only implied and alluded to, never fully described. What we may recognize, though, is the importance of sex in Humbert's world. Laing explains how "sexual life and phantasies . . . are efforts, not primarily to gain gratification, but to seek first ontological security" (57). Humbert's treatment of these scenes supports this. Rather than explain the act itself, he demonstrates the importance it has in Humbert's world.

The sexual content is presented by brief references, showing how the text's careful construction controls readers' perspectives. Nabokov simply does not allow other characters' opinions of Humbert and Lolita's affair to influence the reader. The story is written in the first person, and therefore only the narrator's view is accessible to readers. There are no references to what other people think of the relationship; therefore, readers are left to draw their own judgement. We never see disapproving glances or harsh words from others. Humbert keeps the



relationship a successful secret and isolates it from society in and out of the book. By setting up the readers' thoughts independent of society's influence on such a relationship, the text stands as a challenge to mass ideals. That is, Nabokov introduces a twisted moral sense to readers and then allows them to compare it to the set notions with which he is brought up. *Lolita*, then, is the confrontation of the Other with the real world.

Those readers who are offended by the material attempt the same "depersonalization" the first person narration attempts to combat. This depersonalization is "a technique that is universally used as a means of dealing with the other when he becomes too tiresome or disturbing" (Laing 46). Humbert becomes disturbing, and therefore readers attempt to "negate" his autonomy (46). As Laing says often happens to the psychotic, one "ignores his feelings, regards him as a thing, kills the life in him . . . One treats him not as a person, as a free agent, but as an it" (46).

Because of the confessional framework of the narrative, readers become witnesses to legalistic strategies used by Nabokov to attempt an understanding of he who is on trial. The primary legal tactic is, in fact, the *personalization* of Humbert. Nabokov allows Humbert to create himself a defined, tangible personality. The novel walks us along the trials of Humbert's life with Lolita, and readers are completely enveloped by his perceptions, the overall goal being to win

sympathy for Humbert. The narration presented as a confession takes the story into legal realms, and the readers are presented with the role of Humbert's jurors.

Here, the narrational framework of the novel comes into play. Part of Nabokov's narrational strategy is the exact depiction of Humbert's alternate world. We receive the "rules of the game" so to speak through the narrator. For example, the term "nymphet" is defined, and the rules of the nymphet love affair are explained in explicit detail, as if he were the teacher outlining the syllabus of a class:

since the idea of time plays such a magic part in the matter, the student should not be surprised to learn that there must be a gap of several years, never less than ten I should say, generally thirty or forty, and as many as ninety in a few known cases, between maiden and man to enable the latter to come under a nymphet's spell. (Lolita 19)

To so clearly define the world is to welcome a member into it, as if the rules are necessary to participate.

Instead of a complete absence of a name for the Other, as in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Nabokov drives this Other's name deeply into the reader's mind. When he is admitting to a guilty role in the affair, Humbert refers to himself in the third person, using a name redundant in its fullest form. Early on he

attempts to tell the jury he tried to resist his obsession with nymphets: “Humbert Humbert tried hard to be good. Really and truly, he did. He had the utmost respect for ordinary children, with their purity and vulnerability, and under no circumstances would he have interfered with the innocence of a child, if there was the least risk of a row” (*Lolita* 22). After meeting Lolita, he describes part of his attraction to her in the third person: “Humbert Humbert is also infinitely moved by the little one’s slangy speech, by her harsh high voice” (44). And, when he begins to tease Lolita, inviting physical contact for his pleasure, he says, “Humbert Humbert intercepted the apple” (*Lolita* 60). Humbert’s referral to himself in this way shows a brief split from his Other self, as if talking in the first person would lift the mask of the innocent older man seduced by a nymphet. However, the view of himself from the shared world is so far removed from that from his alternate world, his references to himself are awkwardly detached.

Nabokov’s choice of narrator and narrational framework is done to establish an ontological security for readers. By delineating his world according to the shared world’s values, we are privileged to a view of both the shared world and Humbert’s alternate world. In addition, the first person narration, with its complex frameworks of a contrived confession built around a truth unavailable to the reader, attempts to demonstrate the “disruption of his [in this case, Humbert’s] relation with himself” (Laing 142). We are already inside the alternate world of

his existence. But, with the confessional narrative, we are engulfed in Humbert's thought processes.

In Lolita, Nabokov is like the lawyer, "advising" Humbert on the correct rhetoric to use to sway his jurors, the readers. This type of rhetoric is as Booth notes regarding unreliable narrators: "full of traps for the unsuspecting reader" (239). Naturally, Humbert can be seen as an unreliable narrator, as the framework so subtly reveals him as a confessor, recapitulating in his own words and his own memories. But, between both the heart wrenching confession of Humbert, with its carefully contrived rhetoric, and Nabokov's quiet construction of the narrative framework, the readers are temporarily duped. While Humbert is constantly admitting that his behavior is wrong, readers find themselves incapable of completely criticize him. We are ontologically secure on the outset because we know the limits of the narration, but we are still drawn into the confession for the length of the novel. As Humbert calls himself a monster and a criminal, readers agree with him less and less (Boyd 230). As a reaction to his confessions, readers are not likely to completely condemn the crime. Humbert "confesses frankly to unequivocally vile behavior . . . yet somehow almost inveigles us into acquiescing in his deeds" (227). In the end, we receive the final blow, Humbert's own admission of his guilt in refusing to use the "confession" before the jury. However, by this point the readers are near finished. And, after the 300 pages of

the confession, we are left with the moral question, throwing both our and Humbert's morals off center. While we do not transfer this forgiveness outside the text, the ambiguity persists. Booth notes, "Our life is morally ambiguous; this book [Lolita] makes it seem even more so -- it throws us even more off balance, presumably, than we were before -- and hence its very lack of clarity is a virtue" (Booth 373).

While Booth praises Lolita for the effective creation of an unreliable narrator, Hutcheon would praise Nabokov's act of throwing the reader off balance, as it parallels a tenet of postmodernism. Hutcheon's defines postmodernism as when "actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody. At this juncture, a study of representation becomes, not a study of mimetic mirroring of subjective projecting, but an exploration of the way in which narratives and images structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self" (7). Differing from Booth, Hutcheon says that it is the creation of an unreliable narrator which works to not only tell the story, but to recreate itself as well.

As in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, the art of the work, rather than the story itself, is central. Through art Humbert captures immortality for Lolita and their relationship. Rather than admit to the murder, Humbert claims that another "one" made this decision to allow Humbert to immortalize Lolita, as all art immortalizes its subjects:

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. (Lolita 311)

Between the focus on the story and its foregrounding of the creation of the story within the text, we see a demonstration of the “self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining” mode of postmodernism (Hutcheon 1). As Hutcheon says, the postmodern effect is “to highlight, or ‘highlight,’ and to subvert, or ‘subvert,’ and the mode is therefore a ‘knowing’ and an ironic--or even ‘ironic’--one” (1). Lolita presents a story within a story. We become self-conscious of our place as the jurors to whom Humbert writes as Humbert is self-conscious of his creation of the confession. Simultaneously, Humbert undermines himself by letting slip comments on himself, in the third person, about his guilt for the pedophilic relationship. And the story itself is contradictory; while it is meant to be a confession in the innermost story, the outer framework clues the reader in on how contrived the confession is. The postmodern dependence upon and awareness of society and the recreation of society by an individual is clearly illustrated in Lolita. The premise of a confession relies on an audience, and the outcome is the

participation of the audience.

## Chapter 3

## Secure in His Own World: Pnin

Social reservation and withdrawal mark Professor Timofey Pnin, the most subtle and pitiful of Nabokov's Others. As early as the first physical description of Pnin, we see how he does not fit in

Ideally bald, sun-tanned, and clean-shaven, he began rather impressively with that great brown dome of his, tortoise-shell glasses (Masking an infantile absence of eyebrows), apish upper lip, thick neck, and strong-man torso in a tightest tweed coat, but ended, somewhat disappointingly, in a pair of spindly legs (now flanneled and crossed) and frail-looking, almost feminine feet. (Pnin 7)

Although Pnin's initial presence is "impressive," he lacks completion in this, failing to be a wholly "normal" adult male. Adding to this scene's description is the fact that Pnin, unknowingly, is on the wrong train heading to present the wrong lecture (13). This opening scene, including Pnin's physical description and misguided direction, actually represents Pnin's whole self and his place in society. Initially he is potentially impressive, being a well-educated foreigner teaching at a university. However, his many short-comings, particularly in social skills, and his quirky mannerisms detract from his overall presence and cast him outside the realm of social normalcy. Pnin is, as the narrator calls him, a "sad case" (13). His



life is classified by a series of accidents and ineptitudes, ridicules and incongruencies.

As an Other, Pnin is seemingly lost in reality, unable to recognize the boundaries we do. Laing attributes this to a lack of “unified experience” (197). As an Other in an alternate world Pnin only experiences through his Other self, through his masked identity. He never experiences life as his true self. Therefore, boundaries are absent. Without experiencing life as a whole being, there is no point “on which to base a clear idea of the ‘boundary’ of . . . being” (Laing 197). Because of this phenomenon, Pnin doesn’t understand much of the world as we understand it. The simple task of reading a magazine, for example, is difficult for Pnin. In Joan Clements’ attempt to cheer up Pnin she offers to look at magazines with him. Pnin responds, “You know I do not understand what is advertisement and what is not advertisement” (Pnin 60). Pnin is also endlessly curious about simple modern instruments, though never quite understanding them fully. For instance, Pnin mounts a pencil sharpener on the side of the desk. He regards it as “that highly satisfying, highly philosophical implement that goes ticonderoga-ticonderoga, feeding on the yellow finish and sweet wood . . . He had other, even more ambitious plans. . .”(69). Simple mechanisms mystify Pnin because he is ignorant about them. Consequently, all things, despite their simplicity in the shared world, are fascinating to him.

From the perspective of other characters, Pnin is an outsider. Other characters identify him as something other than human, as they cannot reconcile his place in the shared world with his existence in an alternate world. One colleague, in response to the suggestion of inviting Pnin over, replies, "I flatly refuse to have that freak in my house" (Pnin 32). His landlord initially refers to Pnin as a "pathetic savant" (35). The cleaning lady, Desdemona, "happened to glimpse Pnin basking in the unearthly lilac light of his sun lamp, wearing nothing but shorts, dark glasses, and a dazzling Greek-Catholic cross on his broad chest, and insisted thereafter that he was a saint" (40). The role of teacher is, perhaps, the closest he comes to a usual part in society. However, this too is slightly askew. The narrator tells us he is "not altogether miscast as a teacher of Russian" (11). However, Pnin does not exactly fulfill the role completely. The material he teaches is of little interest, or use, to his students: "He was beloved not for any essential ability but for those unforgettable digression of his" (11). Sometimes he reads to his students from a Russian literature book, though not for their sake: "the performer would be alone in enjoying the associative subtleties of his text" (12). Of course, each character sees Pnin through different eyes, never really showing a consensus on exactly what kind of an outsider he is, but nevertheless, each recognizes his Otherness. And, because he is an Other, colleagues often imitate Pnin: "Jack Cockerell . . . was entertaining Mrs. Hagen and Mrs. Blorengé with his

famous act--he being one of the greatest, if not the greatest, mimics of Pnin on the campus” (36). People regard him, separately, as an Other.

We see how out of touch Pnin is in his wanderings. He never has a true home. Not only does Pnin leave his own country to become a foreigner in a country whose language he barely speaks, but he then staggers from residence to residence, renting single rooms in which to live. During his eight years at Waindell College he “had changed his lodging . . . about every semester” (Pnin 62). Pnin’s place in the world parallels his residences. He resides in a single room of a home belonging to someone else like he resides in an alternate world within the real world the rest of us exist in.

This Otherworld is a very real place for Pnin, a place isolated from the world in which other in society live. The narrator, a nameless “old acquaintance” of Pnin’s, gives us a picture of Pnin as an ontologically insecure person. The narrator demonstrates how Pnin has shut down certain aspects of his self, causing a split in his personality. Laing suggests this is the act of disembodiment of the self. When the image of Mira Belochkin, a lost love of youth, is brought up and threatens his state, Pnin’s escape from reality is articulated:

In order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten year, never to remember Mira Belochkin--not because, in itself, the evocation of a youthful love affair, banal and brief, threatened his

peace of mind . . . but because, if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible. (134-35)

Pnin "turns the other person into a thing and depersonalizes . . . his own feelings toward this thing" (Laing 76). We are shown Pnin's desire to escape in this disembodiment of his self. As Wilson suggests, the Other (outsider) is "not sure who he is" (147). While Pnin may not be sure who he is, he is presented as being quite oblivious to the fact that his world is not part of the shared world. He lives on the fringes and pockets of our world, experiencing it only from a distance. He is removed, his emotions "detaching him, as it were, from reality" (19). Consequently, the outsider is lost in the shared world (Wilson 147).

In response to this alienation from the real world, Pnin creates his own world, therefore also creating what Laing would call a false self. The false self affords Others like Pnin "reassurance in the consideration that whatever he was doing he was not being himself," and consequently no one could harm him (Laing 71). And, though he consorts with members of the real world, he is still left on the outside. His alternate world is the only one in which he may exist successfully; the real world is a "world that threatens his being from all sides, and from which there is no exit" (79). Pnin's world is a retreat, giving him a reprieve from the threats

reality imposes on his life. Page Stegner, in her book Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov, claims this escape is Pnin's only redemption from his victimization by members of the real world. She states, "Pnin finds redemption from his suffering and loneliness through an adopted style, through a blotting out of the incredible inhumanity of a world in which he is a perpetual exile" (90).

Making up the primary aspect of Pnin's world is his obsession with Russian, and language serves as a demarcation of Pnin's world. The narrator begins ascribing aspects to this world to signify its boundaries. "Pnin" becomes more than a name; it becomes a term, signifying and defining the realms of Pnin's world. It takes on adjectival, adverbial, verbal and noun forms to identify, for the reader, boundaries of this alternate world. We see the "Pninian craving" and the "Pninian quandary" (Pnin 15). After moving into a new residence, Pnin "applied himself to the pleasant task of Pninizing his new quarters" (35). He is regarded literally in his own terms, having "unique Pninian worth" (39) speaking in a language infused with "Pninian terms" (41). At first, it is only the narrator who uses these terms. However, we later see the Clements recognizing Pnin's own world, and they, too, identify Pnin at his "Pninian worth."

Leona Toker says that the language in Pnin, puns among other parts, demonstrates how "characters continually re-appropriate the words of other characters so that language is always being uprooted from its original intention"

(qtd. in Burns 109). The narrator, in this case, is playing with Pnin's name to disallow certainty. In postmodern terms, this relates to the way photography works. Hutcheon argues, "If the postmodern photographer is more the manipulator of signs than the producer of an art object and the viewer is more the active decoder of messages than the passive consumer or contemplator of aesthetic beauty, the difference is one of the politics of representation" (45). The representation of Pnin's world in this case is in language. The Pninian language invites the reader to become an "active decoder" to decipher the meaning behind his language.

Pnin has a passion for the Russian language, lore, and way of life. In contrast to Sebastian Knight's complete refutation of the past, Pnin slips into the past and blurs past with present. Often while giving lectures he sees apparitions of people from his past in the audience (Pnin 28). The digressions Pnin takes in class illustrate his mixing of past and present: "He would remove his glasses to beam at the past while massaging the lenses of the present. Nostalgic excursions in broken English" (11). While thumbing through Russian magazines he "suddenly saw, with passionate and ridiculous lucidity, his parents . . . sitting in two armchairs, facing each other in a small, cheerfully lighted drawing room on Galernaya Street, St. Petersburg, forty years ago" (76). He escapes into his "paradise of Russian lore" (73). Even his actions illustrate this. He has, what the narrator calls, a "Russian-intelligentski way . . . of getting into his overcoat" (Pnin 65).

Pnin's separation and foreignness parallels Laing's theory in The Divided Self. For Pnin, living in the real world is a threat. As Laing notes, the threat to this kind of person is "petrification and depersonalization" (46). This is the process where an individual faces the "possibility of being turned, from a live person into a dead thing, . . . into a robot, an automaton without personal autonomy of action, an *it* without subjectivity" (Laing 46). While at the dinner party, we hear Professor Hagen touch on this idea briefly. Hagen, in response to Pnin's dismissal from the university, asks, "'Who, for example, wants *him*'--he pointed to radiant Pnin--'who wants his personality? Nobody! They will reject Timofey's wonderful personality without a quaver. The world wants a machine, not a Timofey'" (Pnin 161). This depersonalization is "a technique that is universally used as a means of dealing with the other when he becomes too tiresome or disturbing" (Laing 46). The Clements are the only ones who eventually accept Pnin--this is because they begin to regard Pnin in terms of his own world: "'Our friend,' answered Clements, 'employs a nomenclature all his own. His verbal vagaries add a new thrill to life. His mispronunciations are mythopeic. His slips of the tongue are oracular. He calls my wife John'" (Pnin 165). The Clements are seeing Pnin from the ontologically secure standpoint, recognizing the parallel worlds which exist simultaneously. The Clements achieve what Nabokov wants us to achieve as readers of Lolita. As the Clements are able to regard Pnin in his world, we readers

are called to regard Humbert within his world.

The overall impression one gets is that Pnin is incomplete. In every aspect of his life we see a lack of full development or closure. Descriptions given of him show only partial development. As mentioned earlier, his physical being starts out impressive, but ends “disappointingly” as if his creator lost interest in the project. His set of teeth are incomplete (Pnin 11). In terms of personality, Pnin has many qualities which would add to his place in society, such as intelligence and compassion; but again, the narrator describes Pnin with an almost unidentifiable quality making him seem ignorant of the normalcy of many situations. The narrator shows Pnin not recognizing himself as being on the outside. While he interacts with others socially, it is not in an effort to fit in--actually, he is ignorant of the fact he does *not* fit in. In this respect, Pnin’s niche in the real world is as the Other. He simply does not ever find his niche within the real world. Other defines the norm, as he represents that which the norm is not.

In her article “The Art of Conspiracy: Punning and Paranoid Response in Nabokov’s Pnin,” Christy Burns focuses her study in part on the metafictional elements of Pnin. She remarks about the narrator’s entrapment of Pnin, and how at the end of the novel is his escape. David Richter supports this reading, noting “the more attentive the reader is, the more the narrative threatens to dissolve into a ‘dreadful invention’ on the part of the dramatized narrator” (qtd in Burns 104).



The constraints of the text demarcate the alternate world in which Pnin lives. However, Pnin does what V and Humbert could not: he escapes--literally fleeing the alternate world by fleeing the novel itself. He escapes the Pninizing our narrator has been forcing on Pnin since page one by driving off into the sunset before the narrator is able to complete the story. This encompasses the postmodernist's notion of de-naturalization, "the simultaneous inscribing and subverting of the conventions of narrative" (Hutcheon 49).

It is not until the final chapter of the book that the mysterious first person narrator uncloaks himself as an "old friend" of Pnin's, and overtly shifts the narrative to include himself as an agent, a dramatic participant, when before he functioned only as an "observer" providing "commentary" on Pnin (Booth 153, 155). In retrospect we see the masks he has ascribed for Pnin. He labels him with several titles: "benevolent Pnin" (Pnin 11); "poor Pnin" (44); "old fashioned, humorless Pnin" (80). Such editorialized comments on behalf of the narrator color our perception of Pnin. But, more interesting is the recognition on Pnin's part of the label, which this metafictional novel allows.

Until the final chapter we see Pnin through the eyes of a distant narrator. Therefore we assume he is reliable and, for the most part, objective. However, this suspension of narrational identity warps our sense of Pnin. When taking the narrational framework into account, readers can see how Pnin is actually

ontologically secure (Laing 39). He sees his life as being “differentiated from the rest of the world in ordinary circumstances so clearly that his identity and autonomy are never in question” (41). That is, Pnin’s security is not in question except by the narrator. Rather than look to others to define his existence, Pnin does it himself. He realizes how others define who he is, as well as how they do not define his self. For instance, when Pnin is preparing a guest list for his dinner party he considers all of his acquaintances. Of those he likes are the Clements, whom “he was tremendously fond of” (146). To Pnin the Clements are “real people--not like most of the campus dummies” (146). This admission demonstrates how Pnin is aware of those who accept him in his world, for they are the real people. The others are labeled “dummies,” suggesting his recognition of their way of viewing Pnin, and his realization that those views are incorrect. He also realizes how the rest of his dinner guests are “nothing extraordinary, nothing original,” showing lack of respect for their presence, and thus, opinions.

Pnin reconciles the alternate world as part of the shared world, and sees the boundaries of each, moving between the two throughout life. For instance, while he does teach his passion, which sometimes sucks him into his own world, he is doing this in the realm of the real world. Perhaps his foreignness provides the awareness of being on the outside. As he learns English, makes friends, and generally attempts the American way of life, he is crossing over into the shared

world by his own volition. He secures residence at a rental home, instead of merely a room, where “The sense of living in a discrete building all by himself was to Pnin something singularly delightful and amazingly satisfying to a weary old man of his innermost self, battered and stunned by thirty-five years of homelessness” (Pnin 144). In breaking away from dependence of others’ homes, Pnin begins to revitalize an awareness of his true Self.

It seems all along Pnin was described according to someone casting Pnin in a slanted role, placing a mask onto his self so that the initial evaluation of Pnin is as an ontologically insecure person. The other characters, and consequently the readers, ascribe attributes to Pnin. Despite our lack of inner knowledge of him, we place Pnin in a context not within his own being-in-the-world, rather we placed him in the being-in-the-narrator’s-world. We have become the Vs in Sebastian Knight’s life. We assume Pnin is detached from his experiences, that he is disembodied and removed. During the suspension of the narrator’s identity, the readers feel Pnin truly is inaccessible and foreign. But, this shifts when the narrator steps onto the stage. Then we sense Pnin’s misrepresentation. Here again, Nabokov has played with the reader’s sense of reality. In Pnin, we are allowed a false sense of security--thus we are put into the ontologically insecure role, defining all of our experiences because of someone else, in this case an unidentified narrator. We are slipped into an unembodied self, experiencing Pnin

through unrecognized filters.

Laing, here, could deem Pnin having reached a goal. He achieves a sort of “Personal unity . . . a prerequisite of reflective awareness, that is the ability to be aware of own’s own self acting relatively unselfconsciously, or with the simple primary non-reflective awareness” (Laing 197). In coming to realize his boundaries, such as the boundaries others have imposed on him at Waindell, Pnin is able to escape them, leaving the college and ultimately leaving the context of the text, which had ascribed so many masks to him. While this does not indicate a full sense of ontological security, Pnin comes farther than V or Humbert. He realizes that he is living in an alternate world, but his fleeing from the alternate world shows his inability to reconcile its place within shared reality.

## Conclusion

Vladimir Nabokov is as much of an Other as the characters he creates. Again and again critics have attempted to define his works, trying to force labels upon his structures, material, or techniques. However, these attempts are largely futile as his works resist the labels as much as his characters do. His fiction is of the Otherworld, and he is an Other in the realm of more traditional realistic writers because he creates such extreme works of fiction, like other writers who are considered postmodern and metafictional, John Hawkes, Thomas Pynchon, and John Barth, for example<sup>1</sup>. Techniques vary from novel to novel, and to say Nabokovian style conforms to other writers' styles is to defy the writer himself. Nabokov expressed certain distaste for mass ideals and conformity. As I quoted him as saying before, "I don't give a damn for the group, the community, the masses, and so forth" (Strong Opinions 33). His fiction resists the labels, therefore conformity. He wanted his work to be regarded not for "its social importance but its art, only its art" (33). Jean-Francoise Lyotard maintains that this desire is a tenet of the postmodernist:

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Scholes examines these, among other writers, in his book The Fabulators, New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.

determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. (Lyotard 81)

Despite the evidence illustrated in this paper, critics still waiver in labeling Nabokov a postmodernist. Critics such as Maurice Couturier, however, demonstrates, in "Nabokov in Postmodernist Land," that Nabokov was only "marginally a contemporary of the postmodernists; he knew little or nothing about them, whereas they knew much about him and often were afraid of being eclipsed by him. Yet, as we now will see, he probably deserved as much as many of them to be called a postmodernist" (254).

Rather than conform to traditional ways of writing, the postmodernist explores them, attempting each time to bring the focus of the novel onto the novel itself, not the place the work may have within society. Nabokov's concern with the Other is a way in which he may bring the attention to the novel. Because readers enter the fictional world with their morals, the choice of an Other worldly perspective provides a shift for the focus. The Other hardly represents ideals of society. He is outside of society, in his own world, not within ours and therefore not upholding any of those ideologies. Having that kind of boundary established between the reader and the text affords Nabokov the opportunity to carry on with the story without overt social interference. These characters do not even fit into

the traditional notions of fictional characters. Nabokov presents flat characters, lacking development throughout the novels, never coming to truthful conclusions, escaping the rises and falls of traditional characters. They are difficult to categorize as either saints or sinners, good or bad. While the initial urge is to place such a label on them, once they are taken as beings in their own worlds the label begins to seem inappropriate. Humbert serves as a prime example here. Because most readers enter Lolita with a common moral stance against pedophilia, we find it difficult to accept Humbert's action. In response to this, Nabokov sets out to create a narrative framework to first establish an alternate world without those commonly accepted morals. Once inside the framework we may evaluate Humbert within his alternate existence. Nabokov weaves a story, through Humbert's narration, of an Other who desperately wants our sympathy and understanding. And, given all the evidence presented, we lean toward forgiveness of Humbert. After backing out of the framework, though, we are shocked at our approval of such a vile man. We are left to then ponder how it is that we were able to set aside universal values while reading this novel, bringing our focus to the art of the literature. The character has not changed, but we have. Nabokov is able to develop his readers through a lack of development in his characters.

Couterier picks various Nabokovian characters, such as Humbert Humbert, who "do not believe in the real as guaranteed by strong values and referents; they

only believe in their desires” (258). Courterier illustrates that while Others may not be able to fulfill their desires, they still have some means of fulfillment: an artistic one. For instance, Humbert Humbert desires Lolita, but when he cannot have the eternal dream he resorts to the art of writing: “while bearing witness to [his] failure to satisfy [his] desires, [he] fulfills a more exalted form of desire, the artistic one, and gives birth to something intensely real, a work of art” (258). V’s desire is to find a mask for his self, a self which was never allowed truthful recovery, is realized in the false mask of Sebastian he takes on. Further illustration of the usefulness of Courterier’s theory is Pnin, the latest of these novels. Pnin realizes a desire to stay within his world untainted by the narrator of the story. While Pnin escapes the narrator to experience a reality of his own away from the narrator, the reader, on the other hand, is left with an unavailable reality. We are left with only the art of the unfinished story to satisfy our desires. In this case, there is “no pre-textual reality to be hunted down by a sleuth or analyst, even though the text teems with elements of our everyday reality” (259). All three of these works leave us with no “truth” to ground ourselves in. Instead we can only find the text itself. The novels “project an unheard-of reality and only indirectly induce us to reassess the basis and functioning of the universe of discourse we live in” (259).

Nabokov’s narratives place the reader in a kind of liquid position, changing



with the stories. He empowers his readers, making them responsible for giving meaning to the text because of their awareness of worlds as afforded by Nabokov. The focus of Nabokov's novels is on the ontological states of his characters and his readers. He develops the awareness of society in his readers by demarcating boundaries of each type of society. Such nontraditional ways of showing characters and narrating stories alter our perspectives on the novel as a whole. By reconstructing the alternate reality of the Other, a reality similar to our shared reality, Nabokov makes us aware of the times we permit our socially constructed views to color the worlds of Others.

Taking The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Lolita, and Pnin, we see not a progression, but a series of experiments. On the inside of each story the character of the Other moves from a completely dependent, ontologically insecure human to a human nearing a form of security, losing dependence on anyone but himself. Simultaneous to the ontological evolution of the Other is an ontological de-evolution of the reader. In an inverse relationship to the Other, the reader initially becomes more ontologically insecure. At first, Nabokov grants and maintains a clear ontological security for the reader. In The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, we are aware of the situation of the characters, though not necessarily of the characters themselves. We see the various alternate worlds in which both Sebastian and V operate and are given a perspective of how characters base their lives on facades,

living under masks. We know for certain that we will never know things for certain. Thus, we are secure at the end of the novel. Moving to Lolita, we see how Humbert has taken us into his world through his confession. While we are given the outer most framework of Humbert's written confession, and are thus given ontological security, we are in danger of slipping almost completely into Humbert's alternate world and forgetting the shared world. Not until the book is finished does Humbert leave us with his final words to close the framework and return us back to reality. But, pulling the readers' security almost completely out from under them is Pnin. While reading this novel we barely recognize the narrator's controlling presence. While he is an agent in the final chapter, he has no catalytic qualities during the novel. We are unknowingly sucked into the narrator's world, believing what he says as the truth, and not recognizing the alternate world in which we are operating while meeting Pnin. However, when Pnin literally escapes the narrator we realize how we have been duped. Instead of grasping Pnin's place in *our* reality, we are manipulated to grasping his place within the narrator's reality, the reality of the fiction. Consequently, we are temporarily ontologically insecure, moving full circle into the position in which our first characters V and Humbert started, until the end of the novel when realization is given to us and security returned.

Liar, psychotic, criminal, these are the labels we may want to impose on the

Others within Nabokov's novels. However, there are layers of narration we must peel away to reach a place where using these labels is appropriate. Because of Nabokov's depiction of characters with alternate values, we may find ourselves setting aside our own values, consciously or subconsciously. By doing this we are practicing ontological security. We are willing to temporarily accept his deceptive prescription of values despite their obvious fraudulence. Obviously, the translation of these mores and values does not blend with those of the real world, so that all we are left with is the ways in which Nabokov does this, the art with which the Others are presented.

During his 1962 interview with the BBC Nabokov calls attention to his deceiving ways when he said that "all art is deception" (Strong Opinions 11). Yet deception seems the only real way to portray his reality. Just as we can never get to the truth behind deception, we can never actually get to the truth behind reality: "You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable" (11). Readers' critical analyses of Nabokov's works are much like the Other's lives within alternate existences. We search for the most truthful pieces of the puzzle, but may only find artifice at the core. We allow ourselves an alternate world of our own in which we may survey works. And despite our awareness of the truth's inaccessibility, we are willing to

try on masks, those of literary theory, in attempts to find a truth which never existed within the texts. We grasp for meaning and motives, but the deception is all that is left.

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