

Natalie Allen

Hog Creek Review

Artists and their Art: Imagination a Central Component in Human Development

While most references to art in literature are symbolic or implicit of a larger motif or message within the work, the significance of art and artist figures within DeLillo's *Underworld* and Nabokov's *Lolita* can hardly go unnoticed. The portrayal of the aesthetic in the novels may present subtle similarities and convey prominent motifs throughout the work, but once the aspect of art is seriously considered, the disparities between the artist figures of each novel that present themselves are substantial and notable. Not only are they worthy of attention from "the serious reader" (Nabokov 5), a close analysis of the contrasting conceptions of art in both novels ultimately produces theoretically unified examples of how "the role of the imagination exemplified in art becomes in fact a central characteristic of the human process of development" (Vygotsky qtd. Lima 422).

The long, heated debate of psychological importance within the realms of art, creativity and imagination is one that will seemingly never cease as humankind continues to develop. There are multiple theories that could be applied to any and all aspects of art, but the argument of this essay will focus around the ideas of the late Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky and his work *The Psychology of Art*. Vygotsky claims that "psychological investigation reveals that art is the supreme center of biological and social individual processes in society, that it is a method for finding an equilibrium between man and his world, in the most critical and important stages of his life" (qtd. Mortenson 94). Vygotsky's idea goes on to stress that "the central aspects and the role of artistic procedure or technique in art need to be explained and understood in all their complexity...and that requires a psychological approach to aesthetic experience" (Lima 414). In other words, the creation of art can be an essential method for humans to cope with the life they find themselves forced into.

According to Vygotsky, not only is it necessary to understand the importance of art to humans as a developing species, but it is also necessary to understand how an artist comes to use a certain approach. When applying this concept to the two novels in question, the reader will see that, indeed, the artwork each has produced is central to very personal elements of their own life. Vygotsky's theory could even potentially be applied to the authors themselves, but that idea will be discussed later in the essay.

One must first consider one of the more prominent artists in *Underworld*. In Part 1 of *Underworld*, not only does the reader meet the protagonist of the story, Nick Shay, but they also meet the famous artist, Klara Sax. Long lost friends, the two exchange a few words about their past with each other, but the focus is on Klara and her current project; painting abandoned B52s and strategically placing them in the desert. While Nick is there, Klara is being interviewed by someone from French Television. The interviewer asks her to discuss why she "want to do this thing" (DeLillo 75). Klara's response is complex, but her answer begins with a memory; "I used to spend a lot of time on the Maine coast" (75). The introduction of her explanation alone reveals that the idea of the painted B52s birthed from something she had experienced in her own life. Klara continues by saying that, on clear nights, her and her second husband would occasionally see "a kind of halo moving across the star fields and we used to speculate what is this...I decided this is the refracted light from an object way up there...I wanted to believe that's what we were seeing. B52s" (75). For Klara, and many other artists in the novel, objects of warfare were obvious symbols of the Cold War time period that this novel is based in and represented the destruction and the waste that war covered their society with - a major theme in *Underworld*.

In context to the theories of Vygotsky, the reasoning and motivation behind Klara's art makes sense. Her specific collection of memories pertaining to B52s were moments in her life that she clung to subconsciously, moments that she experienced, that were real to her. The human memory plays an important role in the development of the human mind and, according to Nabokov, the imagination; "I would say that imagination is a form of memory...an image depends on the power of association, and association is supplied and prompted by memory" (qtd. Appel 140). It can hardly be argued that memories are specific

instances that an individual, or a collection of individuals, remembers and pertain to a particular moment in time, thus becoming a congenital part of said person(s); memory is how one strings together all the significant moments of one's life. If memory then develops the imagination, which in turns is the nucleus for a work of art, then the fact that Klara associated a memory to the idea of B52s leading her to the conceptualization of painting the bombers a myriad of colors and purposefully placing them throughout the desert is hardly surprising. Klara is at the height of her career at this point in the story and the fact that she can pinpoint a single moment back to the genesis of her most evocative work of art exemplifies the importance of art and how art works in the progression of a human's life that Vygotsky's theory explains.

Herein lies one of the discrepancies between artist figures of the two novels; while the fundamental aspect of art is described explicitly throughout *Underworld*, the larger motif that DeLillo uses art and artist figures to convey in the novel is not as obvious. With a little digging and analysis, though, the reader is capable of interpreting the significance of artists like Klara Sax, Lenny Bruce, and Moonman 157 in relation to key themes throughout the novel. However, in *Lolita*, the use of art and artist figures is apparent from the very beginning and is used as a distraction from the grotesque content of the novel. Humbert Humbert's, the main character and artist figure of *Lolita*, lawyer's friend, Dr. John Ray Jr. states in the Foreword, quite overtly that the "remarkable memoir" of "H.H." (Nabokov 3) is a "bizarre cognomen [of Humbert's] own invention" while still declaring the fictitious account "as a work of art" (5). Yet, as Dr. Ray describes the function of H.H.'s "work of art" as an explanation for being convicted of murder, John says almost in agreement with Vygotsky, "a great work of art is of course always original" and that a "desperate honesty...throbs through his confession" (5). John Ray also has no problem declaring Humbert's eloquent account of his experience with Lolita as "nothing less than a moral apotheosis" (5), or in other words, a divine piece of work in the art of literature. While this passage does not explicitly call H.H. an artist, John Ray's description of H.H.'s confession as a work of art and as a memoir connects to the point made previously in this essay about the importance of memory to the process of imagination in relation to Vygotsky's theory

concerning psychology and art.

The reader does not even necessarily need Dr. Ray to title Humbert as an artist for Humbert does that himself; as he describes how to distinguish a “nymphet” from a crowd of young girls, Humbert says one must be “an artist and a madman...” (Nabokov 17) and later, “the artist in me...” (71). Humbert goes on to claim that even doctors have called him an artist as well; as H.H. describes his stay with Dr. Byron, he writes that the doctor gave him a sleeping pill that was “only for great sleepless artists” (94). Not only does Humbert declare himself an artist, but Nabokov also defines, implicitly, that H.H. is an artist as Nabokov criticizes “old rigid rules” narration; “stories where, if you do not watch out, the real murderer may turn out to be...artistic originality” (313). While the point of H.H. as an artist seems redundant in the essay, one must come to understand the importance of the reader being reminded of that point throughout *Lolita*.

Art and artist figures in Nabokov’s *Lolita* function in an immensely different way than that of DeLillo’s use of them. While *Underworld* discusses wounds of American history that are still raw and scabbing, *Lolita*’s subject matter is the type that undoubtedly caused an uproar among American citizens. To describe a child molester’s fancy in an eloquent and pedantic language, Nabokov successfully “entrance[s]” the reader and *almost* allows them to believe that Humbert’s perversion is acceptable (5). Yet, it is unquestionable at this point that the technique that Humbert uses to express himself and create his “art” is central for his development as a character and refreshingly imaginative and original. Even though the sincerity of H.H.’s repentance and guilt for what he did to Dolores throughout the novel is questionable, Humbert provides the reader with an exaggerated example of how therapeutic art can be for a person. The idea of art being therapeutic only continues to support Vygotsky’s idea of how “art is a... therapeutic process for the expression and manipulation of inner conflicts” (Lima 417). When considering the inner conflicts of Humbert Humbert, it is safe to make the assumption that the character of H.H. dealt with many deep conflicts within himself and Humbert no doubt manipulated those conflicts to better suit the situation he found himself in. The manipulation that H.H. expressed were nonetheless of an artistic genius, of someone who is incredibly imaginative.

One might even go so far as to apply Vygotsky's theory to the authors of these artistically abundant novels. For DeLillo, there is an obvious "personal element" that permeates through his writing (Ch  netier 103); when asked about the development of *Underworld*, DeLillo said that it was "a pleasure to write, exploring all those memories" (McCrum). It is also important for one to understand how DeLillo views his own work; "I'm just translating the world around me in what seems to be straightforward terms...But I'm not trying to manipulate reality. This is just what I see and hear" (McCrum). Clearly, the connection to Vygotsky's theory of psychology and art becomes even more satiated through not only DeLillo's artistic characters in *Underworld* but also through his own personal beliefs about the development of a novel and how he uses his own life experiences and memories to cultivate and elaborate on his literary ideas.

Nabokov on the other hand is not as compliant as DeLillo in the terms of Vygotsky's theory. When asked about autobiographical influences in *Lolita*, Nabokov replied "there is nothing autobiographic about *Lolita*" (qtd. Appel 140). One mustn't forget the appended section of *Lolita* titled "On A Book Entitled *Lolita*" where Nabokov adamantly denies any autobiographical truth to the content of *Lolita*; his opinion of critics associating a fiction to the life of the artist is made blatantly obvious; "it is childish to study a work of fiction in order to gain information...about the author" (Nabokov 316). Nabokov's statement drastically clashes with Vygotsky's theory and even with Nabokov's own statement that "imagination is a form of memory." If memory is a part of the human mind and experience, and imagination is a form of memory and also the tool in which an artist creates, then would there not be some small form of "personal element" in *Lolita*? Of course, one could argue that, stylistically, Nabokov is present in *Lolita*, but the explanation of where the idea for *Lolita* came from is still elusive. Even as Nabokov negates any possibility that the story behind *Lolita* holds any truth value to his own life, one thing can be certain, Nabokov exerted the same amount of effort and imagination that any artist would into an original work of art; when asked if he had one novel towards which he felt the most affection, Nabokov replied, "The most affection, *Lolita*" (qtd. Appel 152); it is hard to care about something that you have not spent time and energy on.

A strange parallel can be drawn between the way each author uses art and artist figures in their novels to how they feel about the idea of personal influence in each of their novels. DeLillo's artists, obviously aware that their art will have some implications on society, are often seen as self-figurations of DeLillo; while one character artist from *Underworld* may not embody all aspects of DeLillo's own personality, it seems as though each potentially represents something immensely personal to him. One can never surely know because DeLillo hardly ever discusses his work; "When you try to unravel something you've written, you belittle it in a way... There's an element of tampering" (LeClair 20). Even while DeLillo does not discuss his work, he seems to always be open to the idea that his life personally influenced *Underworld*, just as the artists he created in the novel are well aware that their own experiences and memories have a very heavy hand in their own creations.

Nabokov's artist, H.H., seems to be in a type of denial, just as Nabokov seems to be about what influenced him to write *Lolita*. Throughout the entirety of *Lolita*, while it seems as though H.H. tries to take responsibility for his actions, he actually pushes off the blame onto other things; he refers to himself as crazy and insinuates his unreliability; he constantly accuses Lolita of seducing him; instead of trying to change the situation he continues to act of his own volition and because of his sick perversion, murders a man who is just as sick as H.H. How ironic that Nabokov does almost the exact same thing in the appended "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*." Not only does Nabokov deny any connections of Humbert Humbert to himself, he insists in the formerly cited interview that there is absolutely zero autobiographical content within *Lolita* (Appel 140).

The parallel between each author and the artist figures within their novel seems to endlessly support Vygotsky's idea that "art is the social technique of emotion, a tool of society which brings the most intimate and personal aspects of our being into the circle of social life" (Lima 421). Whether an artist adamantly rejects this theory (like Nabokov) or not (DeLillo) does not dismiss the fact that, through the analysis of artist figures in *Lolita* and *Underworld*, one is able to see the correspondence between Vygotsky's theory and the textual evidence surrounding artist figures and art within both novels. Through the imagination of these authors literary works of art were produced and one can hardly deny that because of

their artistic expression, they prospered internally as artists, important figures in culture and society, and as human beings.

Works Cited

- Appel, Alfred Jr.. "An Interview with Valdimir Nabokov." *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 8.2 (1967): 127-152. Print.
- Chénetier, Marc, and François Happe. "An Interview with Don DeLillo." *Revue française d'études américaines* 87 (2001): 102-111. Print.
- DeLillo, Don. *Underworld*. New York: Scribner, 1997. Print.
- Eaglestone, Robert. "One and the Same? Ethics, Aesthetics, and Truth." *Poetics Today* 25.4 (2004): 595-608. Print.
- LeClair, Thomas. "An Interview with Don DeLillo." *Contemporary Literature* (1982): 19-31. Print.
- Lima, Marcelo Guimaraes. "From Aesthetics to Psychology: Notes on Vygotsky's 'Psychology of Art.'" *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 26.4 (1995): 410-424. Print.
- McCrum, Robert. "Don DeLillo: 'I'm not trying to manipulate reality – this is what I see and hear.'" *The Observer* (2010): 18. Print.
- Mortenson, Robert. "The Psychology of Art by Lev Vygotsky." *College Composition and Communication* (1972): 93-94. Print.
- Nabokov, Valdimir. *Lolita*. 1955. New York: Putnam Publishing, 1958. Print.