The Ethical Content of *Lolita*

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for graduation with research distinction in English in
the undergraduate colleges of The Ohio State University

by

Jacqueline Walsh

The Ohio State University
June 2007

Project Advisor: Professor Jon Erickson, Department of English

Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov's novel, *Lolita*, has been controversial since its original publication in 1958. The book has been called immoral and pornographic, mainly as a consequence of its focus on Humbert Humbert. This narrator and central character is a pedophile and murderer who more than deserves the prison sentence he is serving as he writes the manuscript. The knowledge that he has committed these crimes may not have been enough to earn the novel such a reputation, but Nabokov's decision to closely follow Humbert's sexual relationship with the young Dolores Haze culminating in his murder of Clare Quilty proves too much for many readers. In his book, *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*, James Phelan discusses this point:

> "Because Nabokov has Humbert describe the actions largely from his perspective as character, *Nabokov* not only invites but virtually commands us to "participate in the scene." This invitation/command means that we see the events through the filter of Humbert's attitudes: his pride in his cleverness, his eager anticipation of success, and his ultimate satisfaction. In other words, simply to read the scene is to take on Humbert's perspective, and to take on his perspective means to see his perverse desire from the inside. Furthermore, because Humbert's effort in narrating the scene is to sway us to adopt his attitudes, and because Nabokov gives Humbert formidable verbal skills and rhetorical power, the authorial audience can't help but feel the force of Humbert's appeal" (Phelan 105).

Thus, what makes this novel especially disturbing for many readers is viewing acts they consider immoral from the perspective of the perpetrator, and at times even understanding or sympathizing with him as a result of the power of Humbert's narration. The reader observes as Humbert goes to great lengths to have his way with Dolores, whom he calls Lolita, even marrying her mother, Charlotte, because he believes he can

"blackmail… big Haze into letting [him] consort with little Haze by gently threatening the poor doting Big Dove with desertion if she tried to bar [him] from playing with [his] legal stepdaughter" (Nabokov 71). Conveniently for Humbert, Charlotte is killed in a car accident, and he loses no time in taking Lolita to a hotel where they spend the first of many nights together. While the unfolding of these unsavory events would be disturbing under normal circumstances, what makes them particularly difficult is the first person perspective drawing the reader in as Humbert's confidant and accomplice. Although he claims it was Lolita who seduced him, Humbert himself contradicts this sentiment when he admits the following morning, "It was something quite special, that feeling: an oppressive hideous constraint as if I were sitting with the small ghost of somebody I had just killed" (Nabokov 140). The reader, who has experienced the event through Humbert's eyes, is complicit in his actions and shares responsibility for what has occurred. The reader is also painfully aware of Lolita's plight after she learns of her mother's death, and "in the middle of the night she came sobbing into [Humbert's room], and [they] made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go" (Nabokov 142). Although the reader feels for Lolita, she is separated from her by Humbert's narration, which controls the course of the novel. This knowledge is unnerving and forces many readers to condemn Nabokov for exploring such a perverse topic. However, it is dangerous and shortsighted to dismiss the novel as simply immoral. Rather, it is a complex work that confronts the reader at every turn, inviting him to be empathetic to the narrator, and then reminding him that the man has committed rape and murder. As the writer Bret Anthony Johnston states in his article, "Why Lolita Remains, Shocking, and a Favorite," "More shocking though, is the reaction the author somehow

manages to elicit from his readers: empathy… Even if we would never condone his vain and deadly infatuation, we understand it. We're complicit in his sins, and our complicity is seductive and terrifying" (Johnston). These abrupt changes in perspective are an astounding achievement for Nabokov as they challenge the reader's expectations of how he will react to what he considers right and wrong. The aesthetics of the text combined with Humbert's educated rationalizations of his behavior repeatedly invite the reader's sympathy in the face of the deeds he has committed. However, Lolita's wounded voice can be heard despite these distractions, resulting in a highly ethical work exploring the relationship between a criminal and his victim. This paper will first explore why the book may be considered unethical as a result of the aesthetics that invite the reader's sympathy and Humbert's portrayal of Lolita as a sexual object, and finally delve into Lolita's words and actions to discover how her voice can be discerned beneath the intervening layers, creating the ethical content of the novel.

Chapter 1: The Role of Aesthetics

The question of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics is hardly a new dilemma. It has been contemplated by philosophers such as Plato and continues to be a topic of debate today. Plato believed poetry and stories shape a person's moral judgment and thus advocated censorship, especially in regards to children, because "The young are incapable of judging what is allegory and what is not, and the opinions they form at that age tend to be ineradicable and unchangeable. For these reasons, perhaps, we should regard it as of the highest importance that the first things they hear should be improving stories, as beautiful as can be" (Plato 378e). This sentiment continues to be a common one today as parents monitor what movies, television programs, and video games their children are exposed to. These adults believe the morals surrounding their children will influence what they view as right and wrong. On the other hand, some schools of thought feel art contains no moral content and exists simply for its own sake. The famous aesthete, Oscar Wilde, writes in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all" (Wilde 41). This statement is the familiar definition of aestheticism, encouraging the appreciation of art for its own sake. Nabokov is frequently lumped into this category as a result of his essay "On a Book Entitled Lolita," where he writes "I am neither a reader not a writer of didactic fiction, and, despite John Ray's assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm" (Nabokov 315).

However, as many scholars have observed, it seems inaccurate to define Nabokov as a strict aesthete based on these statements. While he may claim not to have had an ethical agenda in the writing of the book, this assertion does not mean a moral cannot be found within its pages. In fact, even aesthetes such as Wilde seemed to recognize that morality is a part of art in some way as he states, "The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium" (Wilde 41). Thus, even Wilde admits that morality is tied to art in a strong way, forming the subject matter of the piece, although he does not believe the final work can be judged on moral grounds as a result of its subject. In her book, *Nabokov and the Novel*, Ellen Pifer explains how Nabokov differs from aesthetes such as Wilde, "Nabokov disdained the aesthete's suggestion that the values of art may substitute for, or eliminate, the moral imperatives of human existence… Nabokov demands from his readers the same rigorous detachment with which he, as an author, contemplated the special privileges of artistic creation. We are not to be so taken with the cleverness of his charming villains, nor with the beauty of their language, that we dismiss the reality of their deeds" (Pifer 169). Furthermore, his definition of art is not restricted to the work itself, but revolves around the emotions it invokes. Many of these feelings, such as tenderness and kindness, have a clear ethical connotation that aesthetes such as Wilde do not normally advocate. Consequently, even Nabokov creates a link between the aesthetics and ethics of his novel. This connection is especially apparent in the aesthetics of the striking prose and comedic style that entice the reader's sympathy for Humbert, despite his ethical opposition of Humbert's behavior.

The reader is aware of Humbert's skill with language from the first lines of the novel, "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta" (Nabokov 9). These lines are both rhythmic and poignant as they emphasize the beauty of Humbert's nickname for Dolores Haze, as well as what it means to him. She is everything, his "life," "loins," "sin," and "soul," resulting in an immediate emotional appeal to the reader. Humbert is a self-proclaimed poet with "…only words to play with," an exclamation that should make the reader suspicious of his reliability as he manipulates the prose to achieve the desired effect on the reader (Nabokov 32). As Yuval Eylon writes in his article, "Understand All, Forgive Nothing: The Self-Indictment of Humbert Humbert," "The poet's craft is the ability to elicit identification. Therefore, a successful poet is dangerous…" (Eylon). The reader should be wary of Humbert's ability with words, but that very skill is what prevents her from retaining the necessary objectivity. It entices the unsuspecting reader at every turn as she begins to respect Humbert for his skill and appreciate the beauty of his work. It is difficult to judge an artist harshly, and in his defense Humbert declares "Emphatically, no killers are we. Poets never kill" (Nabokov 88). Thus, he sets himself apart as a misunderstood poet with a gentle soul in an attempt to frame his relationship with Lolita as one based on the highly ethical beauty rather than the baser, more sinful lust. He appreciates her in the way one appreciates a work of art, gaining a cultivated pleasure from her appearance instead of mere sexual desire. Pifer emphasizes this point, "By elevating himself to the status of 'pure' poet, Humbert understandably desires to remove his actions from the ethical sphere of life and consider them only as art. But these attempts prove futile;

guilty Humbert must ultimately confront the violence he has wrought upon Lolita" (Pifer 166). On the other hand, he also claims "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style," directly contradicting his own prior claims and making it evident he is fully cognizant of his behavior, resulting in greater responsibility for him and the reader for how he treats Lolita (Nabokov 9). Humbert is well aware of the acts he has committed and the way he describes them, using the beauty of his words to mask the horror of his deeds. Eylon addresses the effect of this knowledge, saying, "Humbert's manuscript is manipulative, and it does echo a hollow aestheticism. He tries to portray his life as a unified and self-justifying whole, but he writes as he lived: ruthlessly manipulating the reader, and molding reality as he pleases whenever he can" (Eylon). Humbert's decision to write his confession in a poetic and aesthetically pleasing manner is one of the methods he uses to gain the reader's sympathy and understanding. It is easy to be charmed by the splendor of his prose, such as when Humbert describes Lolita, "She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita" (Nabokov 9). Humbert's description separates the Lolita with whom he pursues a relationship from the innocent young girl who goes to school and wears one sock, making it somehow seem more acceptable. She is an object he possesses and commands, as opposed to an individual with thoughts, feelings, and desires of her own. His use of a distinct nickname also creates a sense of tenderness; an emotion not normally associated with rape, and invites the reader to become increasingly sympathetic towards Humbert as a result of his writing skills. The philosopher Colin McGinn makes a similar point in his article, "The Meaning and Morality of Lolita," where he writes,

"The sublime sensuality of the prose is what first hooks the reader. It caresses and teases and delights our most sensitive and susceptible parts- our aesthetic organs, our appetite for beauty" (McGinn). The reader is appreciative of Humbert's aestheticism from the beginning of the novel, a sentiment that makes him more vulnerable to moral corruption as the book continues. He finds it difficult to believe that this man is really as immoral as his behavior indicates, and permits the prose to serve as evidence for Humbert's positive attributes. McGinn even describes the narrator as "Humbert the Hypnotist," a man "with designs on our innocence, weakening our moral will with the magic of his words" (McGinn). Humbert is certainly more adept with words than most, enticing the reader's sympathy as he skillfully creates an artistic portrayal of his relationship with Lolita. This perspective allows the reader to gain distance from Lolita as a young girl in an appalling situation and view her as an object in a work of art. Humbert's words create compelling images in the reader's mind, and sometimes make him forget they involve a victimized child. McGinn further argues, "This dream world is the world of the creative artist, the poet, and that is something Humbert certainly qualifies as being. He presents his sexual obsession in radiantly aesthetic terms, informing us that even to identify a nymphet it is necessary to be 'an artist and a madman'" (McGinn). The world Humbert forms for Lolita often seems unreal, populated by nymphets and poets instead of the children and adults the reader normally encounters. Humbert creates a special role for himself as an individual who is gifted enough to realize Lolita's secret identity, implying this talent results in a relationship the average human cannot comprehend. Consequently, the reader gains an appreciation for Humbert as a poet and an artist, who views the world differently than she does and can discern the nymphet in the sea of normal, adolescent, girls. She

finds it more difficult to judge his behavior harshly because it is based on rules that do not govern the world the reader habitates, and Humbert makes the case that only those misunderstood artists who can recognize the nymphet in their midst can truly recognize the value of Humbert's relationship with Lolita.

Another example of Humbert's talent with words is his frequent use of metaphors. While living with the Hazes, he describes himself as "…one of those inflated pale spiders you see in old gardens. Sitting in the middle of a luminous web and giving little jerks to this or that strand. *My* web is spread all over the house as I listen from my chair where I sit like a wily wizard" (Nabokov 49). This description is hardly flattering as it creates a picture of a conniving narrator attempting to trap his prey, but its novelty is seductive as it adds suspense to Humbert's story. He becomes an interesting and intriguing character who is skilled in the art of manipulation, as opposed to the bland, suburban Charlotte. The reader even comes to appreciate the effectiveness of his plotting, which results in a lack of sympathy for Charlotte, who is so easily duped. After learning of her desire to marry him, Humbert claims "In a word, before such an Amazing Offer, before such a vastness and variety of vistas, I was as helpless as Adam at the preview of early oriental history, miraged in his apple orchard" (Nabokov 71). The "Amazing Offer" Humbert is referring to is not Charlotte's marriage proposal, but instead the opportunity to be close to, and hopefully seduce, her young daughter. His use of biblical imagery emphasizes the strength of the temptation and shows he believes he is powerless to resist, just as Adam is incapable of refusing Eve's apple. This metaphor attempts to exonerate him from responsibility for his actions, attributing them to a source stronger than himself. While the reader may not be immediately swayed by these exaggerated comparisons, the

repeated use of them wears him down, leaving him susceptible to Humbert's more persuasive passages. McGinn describes the situation best when he writes, "One has to keep reminding oneself of what is really *happening* here" (McGinn). The web of metaphors and prose creates a distorted version of the actual events, one sympathetic to the artistic Humbert, despite the true nature of his crimes. The reader must wade through the layers of figurative language to grasp the actions beneath them, and is likely to become distracted or swayed in the process.

As the novel progresses, Humbert emerges from behind his poetry to address the reader directly and plead for his patience and understanding, saying "Gentlewomen of the jury! Bear with me! Allow me to take just a tiny bit of your precious time" (Nabokov 123). He places the reader in the superior position of judge and jury, thus flattering her while simultaneously raising the expectation that she be fair and impartial as any good juror would. He goes on to forge a bond with the reader through their common humanity and humor, "Please reader: no matter your exasperation with the tenderhearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect hero of my book, do not skip these essential pages! Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me; try to discern the doe in me, trembling in the forest of my own iniquity; let's even smile a little. After all, there is no harm in smiling" (Nabokov 129). Humbert might claim "there is not harm in smiling," but there is actually a great deal of harm in following his instructions. The simple action of sharing in a joke with the narrator, who the reader may need to be reminded is a criminal, ties the two together and prevents her from maintaining the distance necessary to form a clear ethical judgment. Additionally, he begs the reader to "Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me," forcing her to view Humbert as an actual person as

opposed to a morally corrupt character. He describes himself in sympathetic terms, as "tenderhearted," "sensitive," and "circumspect," inspiring the reader to look for these positive characteristics. The comparison of himself to a doe "trembling in the forest of [his] own iniquity" supports a view of Humbert as innocent and frightened like a helpless deer, yet his use of the word "iniquity" makes it clear that he is aware the situation is the result of his own wickedness. Consequently, the reader, who has been placed in the role of judge, feels obligated to hear what the narrator has to say in his own defense and temporarily put aside her own moral qualms. She may believe she has been too quick to judge Humbert and has perhaps failed to appreciate these artistic traits that have made him so misunderstood. Humbert's use of words to appeal to the reader's emotions continues through the final line of the novel, where he writes, "And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita" (Nabokov 309). It is a compelling response to Humbert's failed relationship with the girl because it reveals his soft, sensitive, and possibly sweet side, leaving the reader feeling that Humbert is the victim rather than the child he has kidnapped and raped. He has devoted this artistic work to preserving his memories of her and their relationship together, a truly romantic gesture. He also seems aware that she is a better person than he is, preventing them from sharing an immortal life after death. Thus, the reader finds him empathetic as a result of this powerful declaration of unrequited love, and discovers it is difficult to believe that a man who can so eloquently express these emotions can also be as immoral as his actions imply.

Humbert's depiction of the other characters in the novel, especially Charlotte, Lolita, and Quilty, also invites the reader to be critical of them and further understand Humbert's motives. Humbert portrays Charlotte as a jealous woman who attempts to

appear more sophisticated than she actually is, “The front hall was graced with door chimes, a white-eyed wooden thingamabob of commercial Mexican origin, and that banal darling of the arty middle class, van Gogh’s ‘Arlésienne” (Nabokov 36). Charlotte lacks the artistic qualities Humbert values, and her efforts to create a cosmopolitan image are comical. Furthermore, she is threatened by his affections for her twelve-year-daughter, who she believes interferes in her attempts to pursue Humbert, stating, “It is intolerable... That a child should be so ill-mannered. And so very persevering. When she knows she is unwanted” (Nabokov 51). She even goes so far as to send Lolita away to camp where she will no longer monopolize Humbert’s attention, saying, “And, you know, I think a summer camp is so much healthier, and- well, it is all so much more *reasonable* as I say than to mope on a suburban lawn and use mamma’s lipstick, and pursue shy studious gentlemen…” (Nabokov 63). Charlotte is aware of Lolita’s interest in Humbert and is as annoyed by it as she is by Lolita’s negative adolescent attitude and attempts to appear more adult by wearing make-up. She fails to find these aspects of Lolita’s personality as charming as Humbert does and is frequently frustrated with her, saying, “Now, at twelve, she was a regular pest,” (Nabokov 46). Charlotte is more than willing to send her away to camp and boarding school so she is no longer competing for Humbert’s affections, yet another strike against her from Humbert’s perspective. Humbert emphasizes Charlotte’s jealousy and negative feelings towards her daughter, claiming he “was aware that mother Haze hated my darling for her being sweet on me,” manipulating both the mother and the daughter while continuing to convey the outlandishness of Charlotte’s behavior to the reader (Nabokov 54). In addition to her desire for Humbert, Charlotte’s attempts to speak French, understand art, and otherwise elevate herself to his level of education and

sophistication result in making her appear ridiculous, and perhaps pretentious, rather than an innocent pawn in Humbert's ultimate scheme. From the moment Humbert meets her, he describes her as "one of those women whose polished words may reflect a book club or bridge club, or any other deadly conventionality, but never her soul…" (Nabokov 37). She stands in stark contrast to the narrator, who spends his time contemplating his artistic nature and reproducing it through his work. Consequently, as the reader gains an appreciation for Humbert's skillful prose, wit, and education, she may lose sympathy for Charlotte, who lacks many of these qualities.

Similar to Charlotte, Humbert's descriptions of Lolita serve to make his actions appear understandable instead of despicable. She is portrayed as a precocious child, who has a girlish crush on Humbert and flirts shamelessly with him. She thrives on his attentions and boldly invites them, even running up the stairs to kiss him before leaving for camp, "Lolita arrived, in her Sunday frock, stamping, panting, and then she was in my arms, her innocent mouth melting under the ferocious pressure of dark male jaws" (Nabokov 66). She initiates this encounter; shocking the reader with her audacity and making Humbert's later descriptions seem more plausible. Lolita is spoiled and self-centered, apparently unconcerned about her mother's condition when told she has been hospitalized and basking in the knowledge that she is behaving in a way in which her mother would disapprove. In fact, after Humbert informs her that her mother is very ill and may need a serious procedure (although in actuality, she is already dead) Lolita insensitively responds, "Stop at that candy bar, will you" (Nabokov 115). By including details such as this one, Humbert creates a young woman who is primarily concerned with her own satisfaction and unable or unwilling to contemplate other people's

experiences, including her mother's. Furthermore, Humbert's prose makes it clear she is already sexually experienced, telling Humbert when he picks her up from camp that she has "been revoltingly unfaithful to [him]," that she is "absolutely filthy in thought, word, and deed," and that she has "been such a disgusting girl" (Nabokov 112,114, 123). Consequently, Humbert attempts to convince the reader he is not the one who destroys her childish purity, that it was gone before their affair even began. Humbert further pleads his innocence by making the case that it is she, rather than he, who does the seducing, telling the "Frigid gentlewomen of the jury! I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me" (Nabokov 132). Once again, Humbert appeals to the reader's sense of fairness and compassion, referring to the "gentlewomen" of the jury rather than the "gentlemen," to address his strongest critics. Women, as mothers and adults who were once girls like Lolita, are his harshest judges and he must win them over if his manuscript is going to be successful in explaining his behavior. His use of the word "frigid" further implies the reader is judging him too harshly and fails to comprehend the situation in the appropriate way. He attempts to escape culpability by placing the blame on Lolita, whose seduction he, once again, was powerless to avoid, ending the passage with "But really these are irrelevant matters; I am not concerned with so-called "sex" at all. Anybody can imagine those elements of animality. A greater endeavour lures me on: to fix once for all the perilous magic of the nymphets" (Nabokov 134). Humbert claims his interests in Lolita are academic rather than physical, indicating it is her "magic" that is at fault for their encounter. As a poet and a scholar, he is able to rise above the "animality" others experience, although he does not make the same point about Lolita. Humbert's prior behavior begs to differ with the portrayal of Lolita offered in this

passage, as it develops an image of an adolescent girl as a mature sexual being who not only engages in this conduct with adults, but is responsible for beginning it.

It is also aesthetics that later results in the reader's sympathy towards Humbert and not towards Quilty. Like Humbert, Quilty has pursued a sexual relationship with Lolita. However, his obvious corruption stands in sharp contrast with Humbert's more subtle version, allowing the reader to justify his lack of sympathy towards Quilty on moral grounds, despite the fact that the narrator's behavior is equally unethical. He attempts to bargain with Humbert, telling him "I can offer you, also gratis, as a house pet, a rather exciting little freak, a young lady with three breasts, one a dandy, this is a rare and delightful marvel of nature" (Nabokov 301). While Lolita may have been little more than a "house pet" for much of her relationship with Humbert, Quilty's bold assertion lacks the elegance of Humbert's prose and offends the reader more than many of his equally unpleasant statements. Quilty's negotiations continue with "a most reliable and bribable charwoman… she has daughters, granddaughters, a thing or two I know about the chief of police makes him my slave," thus targeting Humbert's preference for young girls while protecting him from prosecution (Nabokov 301). However, unlike Humbert, Quilty is not ashamed of this inclination. His blatant proposals are not masked with Humbert's figurative language, and their lewdness is more appalling than any of Humbert's prior confessions. His immorality seems to be all-encompassing as he first mentions "photographs of eight hundred and something male organs," and then telling him, "I can arrange for you to attend executions, not everyone knows that the chair is painted yellow" (Nabokov 302). Quilty's extensive list of services covers the spectrum from sexuality to violence, and, unlike Humbert, there is nothing artistic about their

portrayal. Yet, he is not dissimilar from the narrator in his sexual deviance and some scholars argue he serves as his doppelganger. After all, if Humbert were not a poet and scholar, his account of his relationship with Lolita would more closely resemble Quilty's ramblings than the manuscript serving as the novel. Like Quilty, he has engaged in immoral and illegal behavior with Lolita, but his education and artistry masks it in a way that makes it less repulsive to the reader. Consequently, these similarities further emphasize how the use of prose creates sympathy towards Humbert as it does not for many of the other characters.

The reader's feelings towards Humbert are further complicated by the aesthetics of the murder he commits at the end of the novel. The tone of the scene is set from the moment Quilty enters from the bathroom, where he is described as "leaving a brief waterfall behind him" (Nabokov 294). If the reference to bodily functions is not enough to make him seem absurd, he is also "Gray-faced, baggy-eyed, fluffily disheveled in a scanty balding way… he swept by me in a purple bathrobe very like one I had" (Nabokov 294). Ironically, the nemesis he has been seeking for so long is far from threatening, he is not even fully dressed, although Humbert does acknowledge their similarities as he compares Quilty's robe to his own. Thus, the difference between these passages and the rest of the novel immediately catches the reader's attention. While Humbert's relationship with Lolita is framed in elegant prose and artistic phrases, his encounter with Quilty is simple, straightforward, and entertaining. The difficulties Humbert experiences while attempting to kill his proclaimed enemy are equally comic in nature as Quilty remains unperturbed by Humbert and his weapon, complaining, "I just wanted a smoke. I'm dying for a smoke… You begin to bore me. What do you want?" (Nabokov 296).

Quilty's use of the word 'dying' as Humbert attempts to kill him is a painful pun and creates a clear contrast with the much more serious content of the rest of the book. Humbert proves to be an inept murderer as he shoots the gun "and, with a ridiculously feeble and juvenile sound, it went off. The bullet entered the thick pink rug, and I had the paralyzing impression that it had merely trickled in a might come out again," while Quilty still seems unable to grasp Humbert's true intentions towards him, saying "See what I mean… You should be a little more careful. Give me that thing for Christ's sake" (Nabokov 297). The ensuing series of errors serve as an entertaining distraction from the true events of the scene. The reader is no longer concerned with whether killing Quilty is right or wrong, but instead simply enjoys Humbert's account of wrestling with him for the gun, describing him as "naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us" (Nabokov 299). True to form, Humbert uses word play to evoke emotions in his reader, although in this instance it is one of hilarity as opposed to empathy. The comedy proceeds as he drops the gun, misses his victim, and shoots him several times without doing much damage. Throughout this somewhat slapstick scenario, Quilty fails to take the situation seriously which only adds to the humorous effect. Even as he is finally dying from his many gunshot wounds, he continues to carry on a conversation with Humbert, saying "Ah, that hurts, sir, enough! Ah, that hurts atrociously, my dear fellow. I pray you, desist. Ah- very painful, very painful, indeed… God! Hah! This is abominable, you really should not…" (Nabokov 303). Quilty's lack of fear or acknowledgment of the horrific event occurring allows the reader to view it as entertaining rather than appalling. The ridiculousness of the scenario persists even after

Quilty has been shot countless times and Humbert believes he is dead at last, only to discover that "Quilty of all people had managed to crawl out onto the landing, and there we could see him, flapping and heaving, and then subsiding, forever this time, in a purple heap" (Nabokov 305). The reader should feel sympathetic towards Quilty as the victim of this bloody murder, but instead he shares Humbert's frustration and shock at his resilience. Additionally, his final moment is not portrayed as the tragic death it could be, but is rendered as "flapping and heaving…then subsiding…in a purple heap" (Nabokov 305). This depiction seems more appropriate for the death of an overgrown bird than that of a man, once again relieving the reader of any feelings of sorrow for the victim. The reader is not the only onlooker unperturbed by Quilty's fate, as even his friends remain unconcerned when Humbert confesses, "'I have just killed Clare Quilty.' 'Good for you,' said the florid fellow as he offered one of the drinks to the elder girl. 'Somebody ought to have done it long ago…'" As a result, these aspects of the scene prevent the reader from perceiving the murder as the brutal act it is, but instead add comic relief to the text.

The aesthetics of the text are a powerful tool Humbert employs to gain the reader's sympathy. The beautiful prose, strong imagery, and comedic style all work to make Humbert appear more empathetic, and in some instances, results in a lack of sympathy towards the other characters in the novel, regardless of if they are the true victims or not. Charlotte Haze and Clare Quilty are two such characters. They were each harmed at the Humbert's hands, yet it is difficult for the reader to feel any strong emotions regarding their demise, and in Quilty's case, may even find the event comical. This reaction to the novel's events is a result of the aesthetics of the text, which strongly impact how the reader responds not only to Humbert, but to the other characters she

encounters. Consequently, Humbert's artistic skill allows the reader to identify with him and appreciate his talent, all of which tempts the reader's sympathy and at times even captures it, despite the atrocities he has committed. This sympathy is dangerous and uncomfortable for the reader who has been asked to serve as "judge and jury," by preventing her from remaining objective. However, many of Humbert's arguments for his behavior ring false both by their reasoning and sheer volume. Yet he remains a captivating narrator as he describes his relationship with Lolita and the nature of his love for her, one of the most compelling rationales he provides throughout the text. The next will examine the rationalizations that further tempt the reader's sympathy and how Lolita's voice can be heard despite these intervening layers as she develops into a character with thoughts and desires of her own. These aspects of her character often remain hidden from Humbert, and thus the reader as well, but her words and actions still manage to be indicative of her character and her feelings about the situation.

Chapter 2: Hearing Lolita's Voice

Although Humbert's elegant prose is enticing, and at times even convincing, it is not the only way he attempts to sway the reader. Humbert also offers a series of rationalizations for his relationship with Lolita. He defends the affair on a variety of grounds, looking for the reason that will make the reader understand, and perhaps condone, his actions. Humbert acknowledges their affair may seem wrong to the outside world, but he attempts to show through logical explanations and deep professions of love that his actions are not as immoral as they may appear, and gain the reader's sympathy as a result. However, it is possible to see past all of his excuses and recognize the horror of Lolita's situation. Humbert's role as central character and narrator of *Lolita* gives him a great deal of power over the shape of the novel and how the reader perceives the events in it, including how he views Lolita. This control is one of the main reasons the novel is often perceived as immoral because it may be difficult to move beyond Humbert's elegant prose and strong rationalizations to hear Lolita's weaker, though present, voice. She is often described in physical and sexual terms, and is rarely given an opportunity to express her thoughts and feelings about her situation to the reader. Humbert objectifies her, turning her into an item whose sole purpose is to give him pleasure and consequently prevents her from developing into an individual with a perspective of her own. However, this control is not complete, and Lolita is ultimately able to make her feelings about the situation evident to the reader through her words and actions despite Humbert's interference. Thus, although Humbert attempts to make the reader sympathize with him through his rationalizations and portrayal of Lolita, the reader is able to see through his

excuses and hear Lolita's victimized voice, resulting in an ethical content in the form of an unsympathetic view towards Humbert. This chapter will first examine how Lolita and the relationship she has with him is constructed by Humbert, and then show how her voice is revealed despite the power of his narrative, creating the ethical content of the work.

Humbert's education results in logical explanations that contribute to the reader's moral conflict. He supports his behavior with a series of reasoned arguments, and has even categorized the young girls he finds attractive, a special breed he refers to as "nymphets." According to Humbert, "Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic" (Nabokov 16). These girls are characterized by "the slightly feline outline of a cheekbone, the slenderness of a downy limb, and other indices which despair and shame and tears of tenderness forbid me to tabulate" (Nabokov 17). Additionally, he claims "…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" (Nabokov17). Normally such a large age difference is viewed as inappropriate, but Humbert argues it is necessary because "It is a question of focal adjustment, of a certain distance that the inner eye thrills to surmount, a certain contrast that the mind perceives with a gasp of perverse delight" (Nabokov 17). Humbert's rational explanation of these "nymphets" takes the focus away from him, and attempts to persuade the reader it is something intrinsic about this particular group of girls that draws him to them. This approach removes much of the responsibility from Humbert and makes the connection

seem inevitable. As previously mentioned, he further makes the case that his interest is academic rather than sexual, saying "But really these are irrelevant matters; I am not concerned with so-called 'sex' at all. Anybody can imagine those elements of animality. A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets" (Nabokov 134). Humbert's behavior throughout the novel clearly contradicts this sentiment, but his eloquent and intelligent argument is not easy for the reader to ignore, as well as what he appears to believe is a noble quest. He is also eager to use his persuasive powers to argue for the normalcy of his feelings, claiming "Marriage and cohabitation before the age of puberty are still not uncommon in certain East Indian provinces" (Nabokov 19). If the customs in East India are not enough to prove that his behavior is permissible, then he hits closer to home with, "The stipulation of the Roman law, according to which a girl may marry at twelve, was adopted by the Church and is still preserved, rather tacitly, in some of the United States…" (Nabokov 135). Although these points may appear valid, they are truly a superficial mask for an inappropriate and immoral relationship. As Peter Levin writes in his article, "Lolita and Aristotle's Ethics," "Cultural relativism is a perennial issue for moral philosophy, but Nabokov shows us something that philosophy could never definitively tell us, namely, that Humbert is an evil man, and that his excuses about the contingency or relativity of moral values are irrelevant" (Levine). Nabokov layers excuse upon excuse, from those based on legal issues to the definition of the "nymphet" that he has created himself. The excessiveness of his rationalizations and the broad range of reasoning that they encompass should make the reader wary of his reliability and force her to question the strength of his position. On closer examination it is not clear that Roman law or practices in East Indian provinces

mean that Humbert's behavior is acceptable, and the term "nymphet" is his own invention, further undermining his position as he attempts to rationalize his actions by artistically defining them in an artificial way.

Humbert also addresses the reader as his intellectual equal, proclaiming "I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay; I want them to examine its every detail and see for themselves," thus flattering the reader with the term "learned" while requesting his participation and making him a willing accomplice in the affair (Nabokov 57). McGinn argues Humbert, in using this tactic, is "hoping thereby to secure the esoteric collusion of his intellectual equals- as he also does in turning his snobbery (and ours) against the unfortunate Charlotte and her kitsch pretensions" (McGinn). Thus, Humbert aligns himself with the reader as individuals who rise above the ordinary individual to view the world from a superior, educated eye. Humbert's use of unfamiliar vocabulary and foreign language, particularly French, also influences the reader's perception of him. In one passage he instructs, "Now, in perusing what follows, the reader should bear in mind not only the general circuit as adumbrated above… but also the fact that far from being an indolent *partie de plaisir*, our tour was a hard, twisted teleological growth, whose sole *raison d'être* (these French clichés are symptomatic) was to keep my companion in passable humor from kiss to kiss" (Nabokov 154). If the reader does not stumble over words such as "adumbrated" and "teleological," Humbert's liberal use of French phrases will probably trip her up. These aspects of the prose remind the reader of the narrator's level of education and sophistication. The purpose of education is ostensibly to improve a person both intellectually and morally, so Humbert's status as a

scholar is at odds with his unethical behavior. His intelligence is also evident in these passages, making it tempting for the reader to buy into his explanations for his behavior.

In addition to his case that his relationship with Lolita is not immoral for logical and historical reasons, Humbert also claims he truly loves her. In fact, some scholars believe the final meeting between Lolita and Humbert results in a relatively happy ending as Eylon does, claiming, "Ultimately, [Humbert] is repentant, he truly loves Dolly, and he takes it upon himself to avenge her ordeal at the hands of Quilty. He loves Dolly the person, not the nymphet, and he atones for his sins by killing the evil Quilty and symbolically murdering his former self" (Eylon). The love Humbert feels for Lolita is forbidden as a result of the difference in their ages, and forbidden love is a subject familiar to most readers. It often brings to mind images of classic star struck lovers such as Romeo and Juliet, perhaps making it a more difficult notion to reject than any of Humbert's prior arguments. Many scholars have argued *Lolita* is, in fact, a love story and that Humbert is truly relating his feelings to the reader, as Johnston does when he writes, "for all its controversial subject matter, Lolita is one of the most beautiful love stories you'll ever read. It may be one of the only love stories you'll ever read" (Johnston). A testimony to this point of view is Humbert's madness after she runs away, spending years roaming the country in search of her. After losing Lolita, Humbert frequently testifies to how much he has loved her all along, saying "Did I ever mention that her bare arm bore the 8 of vaccination? That I loved her hopelessly? That she was only fourteen?" (Nabokov 234). Humbert uses his knowledge of the minute details of Lolita's life and anatomy as evidence of the validity of his feelings. However, it is not until near the end of their affair that he becomes aware how little he knows of what she

actually thinks, suddenly realizing that he "simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés there was in her a garden a twilight and a palace gate- a dim and adorable region which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me" (Nabokov 284). Although he may be aware of the location of her vaccination, he has failed to gain her trust and the resulting knowledge of what she thinks and feels. His connection to her is primarily physical, as he admits that "Up to the end of 1949, I cherished and adored, and stained with my kisses and merman tears, a pair of old sneakers, a boy's shirt she had worn, and some ancient blue jeans I found in the trunk compartment…" (Nabokov 255). Humbert has been the perpetrator of many of the crimes against her, yet he seeks sympathy from her and the reader, exclaiming, "I was a pentapod monster, but I loved you. I was despicable and brutal and turpid, and everything mais je t'aimais, je t'aimais! And there were times when I knew how you felt, and it was hell to know it, my little one" (Nabokov 284). The vehemence of his words is compelling, but the reader should question why he would continue to have this relationship with Lolita if he truly loved her, as he claims, and also knew how she felt. However, he does claim to continue to love her when she is an adult and no longer the nymphet he first encountered, "I insist the world know how much I loved my Lolita, *this* Lolita, pale and polluted, and big with another's child, but still gray-eyed, still sooty-lashed, sill auburn and almond, still Carmencita, still mine" (Nabokov 278). Many scholars find this last encounter with Lolita to be the one that finally convinces them of the legitimacy of Humbert's feelings. She is poor and pregnant, but Humbert claims, "I looked and looked at her, and I knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for

anywhere else" (Nabokov 277). It is the deep professions of love such as this one that inspire some scholars to view Lolita as a love story and find a rational for Humbert's behavior based on this perspective. Some also believe he is truly repentant at the end of the novel and reflects on what he has done to the young girl he claims to love, a point Phelan discusses, "One important effect of this layer of the narrative- and Humbert's move toward seeing more- is to make Humbert the narrator more sympathetic and Humbert the character more odious. It makes the narrating-I more sympathetic because it shows him taking responsibility for what he has done, but it makes the experiencing-I more odious because the narration now more clearly reveal the horror of his actions: he was aware of Dolores's pain at the time of the action but refused to attend to it long enough for it make any difference in his behavior" (Phelan 122). Phelan differentiates between the Humbert that narrates the story after it has occurred and the Humbert that commits the actions to make the point that Humbert the narrator has reflected on what he has done and is remorseful, making him sympathetic to the reader. He explains this transition, "Although his self-interest initially overpowers his recognition, regret, and love, the more his narration leads him to re-see the past the more these feelings dominate his self-interest until we get to this passage, which is the most Dolores-centric one in his narration. Just two paragraphs after this passage he confesses that if he were his own judge, he would have given himself at least "thirty five years for rape" (308), a word that he has never before applied to his behavior" (Phelan 126). The passage Phelan refers to occurs while Humbert is looking for Lolita after she has left him and stops to listen to a group of children playing, "I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demur murmur for background, and

then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord" (Nabokov 308). Humbert comes to the realization that he has robbed Lolita of her childhood and seems to regret that decision, a point some scholars think supports his claim to love her, although that love would be far from perfect at its best. Phelan ultimately concludes, "He loves her, however imperfectly, and he has admitted to himself and articulated for his audience how deeply and irredeemably he has hurt her. Furthermore, he recognizes that he cannot do anything to ameliorate his situation or Dolores's; all he can do is to tell the story. The primary agents of Humbert's transformation are his genuine feeling for Dolores and the act of telling itself" (Phelan 129). Although it is debatable how genuine Humbert's feelings for Lolita truly are and whether his purpose for telling the story is to rationalize his behavior or apologize for it, Phelan seems to support the view that Humbert loves Lolita, which results in a more sympathetic character and provides yet another rational for his behavior. Pifer takes a similar perspective, saying "[Humbert] perceives the devastating effects that his solipsistic ardor has had on Lolita's life, and it is this understanding that lends such depth and poignancy to his narration… Humbert's recognition of his culpability is, after all, what makes him so much more sympathetic a character to us" (Pifer 165). Humbert's history of manipulation should make the reader wary of trusting him too much, but his moments of reflection such as the one discussed by Phelan are undeniably compelling. Some scholars think they are further evidence of how much Humbert has grown to love Lolita, which is one of the most powerful arguments in support of Humbert's behavior, although there are multiple interpretation of what sort of love that might be.

In his article, "The Last Lover: Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita," Lionel Trilling takes this view as he argues that *Lolita* is a modern day version of the traditional Renaissance drama based on passion-love, which was scandalous, maddening, and could never result in marriage. He states, "Passion-love was a mode of feeling not available to everyone- the authorities on the subject restrict it to the aristocracy- but it was always of the greatest interest to everyone who was at all interested in the feelings, and it had a continuing influence on the other kinds of love and on the literary conventions through which love was represented" (Trilling). After all, Humbert, an educated scholar, acknowledges at the beginning of the novel that "[he] knew [he] had fallen in love with Lolita forever; but [he] also knew she not be forever Lolita… In two years or so she would cease being a nymphet and would turn into a 'young girl' and then, into a 'college girl'- that horror of horrors. The word 'forever' referred only to my own passion, to the eternal Lolita as reflected in my blood" (Nabokov 65). He never plans on a long-term relationship, and certainly not on marriage, although he believes he will forever love the idea of Lolita the nymphet. Furthermore, Trilling claims the essence of passion-love was that it was forbidden, "For scandal was the essence of passion-love… the extent to which measured the force of the love. Typically it led to disaster for the lovers…" (Trilling). Humbert's affair with Lolita, an adolescent girl who is also his stepdaughter, is scandalous on multiple levels. He has kidnapped her and is raising her as his daughter for all extensive purposes, while at the same time carrying on a sexual relationship. It also leads to disaster as Lolita leaves Humbert for a man even more immoral that he is, and at the end of the novel is pregnant and aged beyond her years even though she is still a teenager. Humbert's experiences are no better as he demonically hunts Lolita, commits a murder,

and finally winds up in prison. According to this reading, passion-love is also a form of insanity like the madness Humbert experiences as he scours the country for Lolita after she has run away, "As I waited there, in prostatic discomfort, drunk, sleep-starved, with my gun in my fist in my raincoat pocket, it suddenly occurred to me that I was demented and was about to do something stupid" (Nabokov 253). Humbert is aware of his madness, even going so far as to tell the reader about it, yet he seems unable to control it. Trilling writes, "The passion-lover was a sick man, a patient. It was the convention for him to say that he was sick and to make a show of his physical and mental derangement" (Trilling). Humbert is clearly irrational as he pursues Lolita long after she has left him, and some scholars believe Quilty is a hallucination stemming from his own guilt rather than an actual character that is perhaps even more immoral than Humbert. At times it appears Humbert may think this is the case, as when he states, "After all, gentlemen, it was becoming abundantly clear that all those identical detectives in prismatically changing cars were figments of my persecution mania, recurrent images based on coincidence and chance resemblance" (Nabokov 238). It is ultimately unclear whether Quilty is an actual person whom Humbert kills to punish him for his wrongs against Lolita, or a figment of his imagination that he murders to atone for his own crimes against her. Although the symbolic murder of his guilt would provide Humbert with some level of morality that the reader had not previously witnessed; Lolita's knowledge of Quilty's identity and Nabokov's choice to include the character in the screenplay he wrote for Stanly Kubrick support the view that Quilty is an actual person. Consequently, the madness resulting from his love for Lolita only drives him to commit further atrocities, thus failing to provide support for his behavior as Trilling suggests.

Through much of the novel, Lolita is seen principally through Humbert's eyes. In his initial encounter with her, he describes her physical assets, comparing them to those of a girl he had loved in his adolescence, "It was the same child- the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair. A polka-dotted black kerchief tied around her chest hid from my aging ape eyes, but not from the gaze of young memory, the juvenile breasts I had fondled one immortal day" (Nabokov 39). Humbert is focused on his attraction to the young girl, and throughout the novel, continues to portray her in this sexual way. He creates a flirtatious young woman who responds, and occasionally initiates, their romantic relationship. He describes her sitting next to him in the car after inviting herself on a trip with her mother and Humbert, "Suddenly her hand slipped into mine and without our chaperon's seeing, I held, and stroked, and squeezed that little hot paw, all the way to the store" (Nabokov 51). He focuses on a specific part of her anatomy, in this case her hand, and describes in great detail how he touches and caresses her, adding the element of secrecy to make their interaction even more illicit. As Pifer states, Humbert "[behaves towards] Lolita as though she were a mere instrument of his will. Like an author dreaming up a character, Humbert despotically transforms the twelve-year old American kid into an aesthetic mirage" (Pifer 164). This objectification of Lolita continues throughout the novel. One example is when he describes her with, "Dorsal view. Glimpse of skin between T-shirt and white gym shorts. Bending, over a window sill, in the act of tearing leaves from a poplar outside" (Nabokov 54). Once again, Humbert is obsessed with her physical appearance and interested in little else. He sees her as on object rather than a person, preventing the reader from understanding her as the dynamic character she is. Humbert

also focuses on his ownership of her, replacing her name Dolores with Lolita, thus giving her a new identity. This new name erases the history of Dolores Haze, a young girl who had a normal life prior to Humbert's arrival, and replaces it with the sexual object of Lolita. Humbert continues to portray her in a sexual way throughout the novel, even while performing seemly innocent activities such as playing tennis, "My Lolita had a way of raising her bent left knee at the ample and springy start of the service cycle when there would develop and hand in the sun for a second a viral web of balance between toed foot, pristine armpit, burnished arm and car back-flung racket" (Nabokov 231). This focus on the physical and sexual aspects of Lolita may prevent the reader from understanding her thoughts and feelings about the situation. She becomes an object that belongs to Humbert and is not given a mind of her own. This lack of a strong a perspective from Lolita may allow the reader to be convinced by Humbert's view of her, and perhaps lose sight of her identity as a young girl and individual who feels trapped, isolated, and abused.

Although Humbert narrates the novel to create a portrait of Lolita as a sexual object, it is possible to hear her voice beneath the intervening layers. At points in the novel, Lolita speaks clearly and precisely, often in direct contradiction with what Humbert has previously expressed. For example, after they spend their first night together, Humbert claims that "Everything was fine" (Nabokov 138). In contrast, "an expression of pain flitted across Lo's face. It flitted again, more meaningfully, as she settled down beside me" (Nabokov 140). Humbert has hurt Lolita, a point she makes clear when she says, "You revolting creature. I was a daisy-fresh girl, and look what you've done to me. I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me. Oh, you dirty,

dirty old man!" (Nabokov 141). Although she seems to be joking with Humbert in these lines, or at least he makes it appear that this is the case, there is also a note of truth in what she says. She is an adolescent girl who has been raped by a grown man, and she should call the police. These moments are jarring for the reader, who may have become comfortable with Humbert's explanations and forgotten that Lolita is a young woman in a horrible situation. They remind the reader of the truth of what is occurring, which is that she has been raped and kidnapped, and force him to question Humbert's behavior from a moral standpoint. Although Lolita makes her voice heard, it does not always result in a positive view of her character. She is often demanding and manipulative, and is eventually corrupted by her environment when Humbert begins to pay her for her services, saying, "you imagine me, on the very rack of joy noisily emitting dimes and quarters, and great big silver dollars like some sonorous jingly and wholly demented machine vomiting riches; and in the margin of that leaping epilepsy she would firmly clutch a handful of coins in her little fist" (Nabokov 184). This scene demonstrates the lengths Lolita will go to regain some power over her life. Pifer discusses how Humbert's control over her affects her, "In the end, Humbert's mental usurpation of Lolita's identity has very real and destructive consequences. As her sole guardian, Humbert uses all the resources at his disposal to control Lolita and hamper her freedom. When bribes and threats fail, Humbert resorts to clandestine raids on Lolita's meager savings, which she attempts to hide from him" (Pifer 164). Although the vision of Lolita attempting to manipulate Humbert into giving her some money is far from pleasant, it is a testimony to her spirit. Despite the horror of her situation, she refuses to adopt the role of a victim and tries to create a way out. However, she also becomes crass and vulgar over the course of

the novel, reveling in the power she has over the men she encounters, a fact Humbert realizes, "I also knew that the child, my child, knew he was looking, enjoyed the lechery of his look and was putting on a show of gambol and glee, the vile and beloved slut" (Nabokov 237). This characterization may make her a less sympathetic character for the reader, who might feel differently towards a more sweet and innocent young woman. Yet, after she leaves Humbert with Quilty, the man who was admiring the spectacle, it could be argued she was using her limited assets as a means of escape. It may be true that Lolita enjoys the attention she receives, but her behavior also shows her own resourcefulness. However, despite Lolita's brashness, it is clear she still feels trapped and abused, "'Pulease, leave me alone, will you,' [she] would say, 'for Christ's sake leave me alone'" (Nabokov 192). Lines such as these contradict Humbert's initial assertion that she began the relationship or that it is reciprocal. In fact, after their first encounter, Humbert no longer argues that she is the one initiating the affair and Lolita's limited voice shows that it is occurring despite her protests. Furthermore, at the beginning of their relationship, Lolita is more innocent than she may initially seem. Humbert claims he has not corrupted her because he was not even her first lover, but Lolita does not appear to comprehend the significance of her previous sexual encounters, "she saw the stark act merely as part of a youngster's furtive world, unknown to adults. What adults did for purposes of procreation was no business of hers" (Nabokov 133). While she may have had sexual experiences prior to Humbert, she did not understand them, and thus was still an innocent young girl. Humbert places the blame on her, but she does not comprehend what she is doing, showing how Humbert manipulates the reader and her to gain sympathy and provide a rational for his behavior. In addition to

the conversations she has with Humbert, Lolita's voice is also heard through the letter she sends him towards the end of the novel. It is one of the only instances where the reader can be certain the words are truly Lolita's, and may be the best way to understand her perspective of the experience, telling Humbert she has "gone through much sadness and hardship" (Nabokov 266). Tragically, Lolita sends the letter to Humbert because she has no one else to turn to for help, asking him for "three or four hundred or even less, anything is welcome, you might sell my old things…" (Nabokov 266). Lolita still refers to Humbert as "Dad" because he is the only person she has left from her childhood. However, she does not give him her home address, afraid that he may try and track her down once more, "Pardon me for withholding out home address but you may still be mad at me" (Nabokov 266). Lolita has obviously been traumatized by her relationship with Humbert, and fears coming into contact with him again, although he is the only family she has left.

Lolita's actions are a further testimony of her feelings about her relationship with Humbert. She repeatedly attempts to distance herself from him by making friends or participating in other activities such as the school play and piano lessons, where "Lo would spin off twice a week" (Nabokov 202). At one point, she even tries to set him up with one of her friends, offering the girl as a substitute for herself, which Humbert quickly realizes, "A sudden odd thought stabbed me: was my Lo playing the pimp?" (Nabokov 192). Lolita is no longer interested in her relationship with Humbert and is even offering him someone else in the hopes he will leave her alone, indicating she wants out of the situation. Finally, Lolita runs away from Humbert in an elaborately planned escape when she is sick in the hospital, where "A bright voice informed [Humbert] that

yes, everything was fine, [his] daughter had checked out the day before, around two, her uncle, Mr. Gustave, had called for her with a cocker spaniel pup and smile for everyone" (Nabokov 246). Thus, Lolita ensures that she has somewhere to go where he will be unable to find her. If she had been happy with her situation, she would not have disappeared without a trace as she does in the novel, and would certainly not have resorted to Clare Quilty, who is also a pedophile and even worse than Humbert in many ways. Humbert visits Lolita years later and once again offers to take her away with him. She turns him down, gently this time, but makes it clear she never loved him, "it is quite out of the question. I would sooner go back to Cue" (Nabokov 279). Humbert is finally able to figure out why she refuses him, concluding Lolita would say, "He broke my heart. You merely broke my life" (Nabokov 279). She is incredibly forgiving in this scene, where she invites Humbert into her house and introduces him to her husband. However, she is "hopelessly worn at seventeen, with that baby, dreaming already in her of becoming a big shot and retiring around 2020 AD" (Nabokov 277). In this final encounter between Lolita and Humbert, the reader is able to see the long term damage his affair with her has had. She has aged beyond her years, and although she is still a child, she seems to be a mature adult. She has retained some resemblance of the hopes and dreams she once had, but now as a young woman, she is thrilled to simply receive the money Humbert gives her, saying "At this rate we'll be millionaires next" (Nabokov 280). This line shows her humor and optimism despite everything she has experienced at the hands of Humbert and Quilty. For the first time, the reader is able to see the strength of Lolita's spirit as she attempts to start over and move beyond what had happened in the past. Humbert, and the reader, know there is no monetary compensation for the way he

has hurt her, yet Lolita seems thankful for the small token she does receive. Thus, the reader is able to get a glimpse of the kind of person she may have become if Humbert had not intervened, and gain respect for her resilience and ability to be kind to the man who had kidnapped and raped her when she was an adolescent.

Regardless of the final interpretation of the end of the novel, Humbert is clearly aware his actions are unacceptable or he would not find it necessary to form rationalizations throughout the work. He goes to great lengths to learn about customs in other countries and religions in order to demonstrate the normalcy of his feelings to the reader. He also seems to believe he truly loves Lolita, although his lack of knowledge about what she thinks or feels, and the selfish nature of his relationship with her, begs the question of how much he truly understands of what it means to "love" another person. However, even if all of these claims fail to convince the reader that his activities are morally correct, they do provide him with credibility as an intelligent human being. He is clearly aware of what he is doing and has formulated reasons for doing so. Consequently, Humbert cannot be dismissed as a merely insane, but faces the reader as rational man who knowingly chooses to behave in an immoral manner. This conclusion is unnerving and may be why so many people have touted the novel as immoral. It challenges the reader's own conceptions of morality and forces him to evaluate Humbert's rationale. Ultimately Humbert's logical explanations ring false, they are too numerous and too convenient to make a coherent statement. It is his testament to his love for Lolita that is more difficult to dismiss, although his actions towards her firmly contradict all of his elegant proclamations, resulting in a narrator who is as immoral as his behavior appears. Furthermore, Lolita's voice can be heard beneath Humbert's

arguments for the normalcy of their relationship. She has been hurt physically and emotionally, and these scars are evident when he visits her years later. Her accounts of the situation often contradict his own interpretations, making the reader wary of Humbert's reliability as a narrator. The reader may dislike Lolita, but he inevitable pities the girl who has suffered so much at Humbert's hands. This sympathy works against Humbert, emphasizing his immorality in victimizing this young girl and creating an ethical content to the work.

Conclusion

Vladimir Nabokov's novel, *Lolita*, still remains a source of controversy and has a reputation for immortality and pornography. This conception of the work is a result of Humbert's powerful use of prose to make the reader sympathize with him, regardless of his actions. He uses beautiful imagery, captivating metaphors, entertaining word play, and comical encounters to mask the depravity of his actions and manipulate the reader's emotions. Additionally, he repeatedly rationalizes his behavior on a number of grounds, principally that it is logically acceptable, is a misunderstood consequence of his identity as an artist, and that he truly loves Lolita. However, the discerning reader can see through the transparency of these objections and recognize how poorly he treats the young girl he claims to love. Phelan makes this point, saying:

> "On the one hand, Nabokov is doing something extraordinary, however distasteful: occupying the perspective of a pedophile, asking us to take that perspective seriously, and indeed, through the second story, asking us, at least to some extent, to sympathize with him. In this respect, the ethics of the novel involves performing one of the best functions of art: extending the perceptions and feelings of its dominant audience, doing so in ways that challenge preconception even if the challenge makes us uncomfortable and even likely to turn against the artist" (Phelan 130).

As Phelan states, the novel challenges the reader to evaluate Humbert's actions objectively despite the aesthetics of the novel that might motivate her to do otherwise. Furthermore, Lolita's voice can be heard beneath Humbert's narration and often contradicts his account. As the reader begins to understand the horror of Lolita's situation she becomes less sympathetic towards Humbert and able to recognize the immorality of the situation. The reader is thus challenged to look beneath Humbert's

education, sophistication, and talent to evaluate his actions and come to the realization that these attributes do not make a moral individual. Humbert may be interesting, entertaining, and possibly remorseful, but these factors do not change the reality of the situation. He has caused irrevocable harm to an innocent, young girl he claims to love, an idea that contradicts his selfish behavior throughout the work. It may be uncomfortable to view the world through the eyes of this character, but from that perspective the reader learns how difficult it can be to recognize true immorality and not be swayed by the many rationalizations he creates for his actions. Thus, although Nabokov may claim that "there is not moral in tow," the work clearly has an ethical content as the reader gains insight into the relationship between Humbert and Lolita, and recognizes Humbert for the immoral man he truly is, despite the attempts he makes to prove otherwise.

Sources

Eylon, Yuval. "The Self-Indictment of Humbert Humbert." Philosophy and Literature. 30.1 (2006) 158-176.

Johnston, Bret Anthony. "Why *Lolita* Remains Shocking, and a Favorite." National Public Radio. 2006. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5536855

Levine, Peter. "*Lolita* and Aristotle's Ethics." Philosophy and Literature. 19.1 (1995) 32-47.

McGinn, Colin. "The Meaning and Morality of *Lolita*." The Philosophical Forum. 30.1 (1999).

Nabokov, Vladimir. "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*." The Annotated Lolita. Ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. New York: Vintage Books, 1991. 311-318.

Nabokov, Vladimir. The Annotated Lolita. Ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.

Phelan, James. Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.

Pifer, Ellen. Nabokov and the Novel. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Plato. The Republic. Ed. G.R.F. Ferrari, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Trilling, Lionel. "The Last Lover: Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*." Modern Critical Interpretations Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987. 5-13.

Wilde, Oscar. The Picture of Dorian Gray. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2002.