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Dave Patterson
Portland State University

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Literary Lepidopterology: Nabokov and the Book that Was a Butterfly

Dave Patterson

When we read in Vladimir Nabokov's afterword to his masterpiece *Lolita*, considered so crucial to the reader's experience that it has been printed in every English edition, that Nabokov is "neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction... *Lolita* has no moral in tow," we tend to presuppose a certain amount of artifice, or even cheek. Earlier in the same note, after all, Nabokov admits that his answer to the question of the book's purpose "sounds like a conjurer explaining one trick by performing another."¹ Absolutely! In his words, his only reason for writing a book is "to get rid of that book." But fundamentally speaking, this in no way answers the question. One can still wonder: why was it there in the first place?

The cliché that "art is a mirror" maps uniquely well to *Lolita*, as we will see. The book truly offers something for everyone. Philosophers, psychologists, feminists, playwrights, and many more join literature laureates and English professors in line to face the mirror and study what it reflects back. Central to their analysis lies the mystery at hand: is *Lolita* intrinsically didactic—intended to teach a moral lesson—despite its author's insistence? Sidestepping Barthesian models of the irrelevance of authorial intent, in this paper I will argue, perhaps controversially, for Nabokov's sincerity and the book's status as an artistically pure, non-didactic work.

Woven into the story's fabric is the technique of doubling, or mirroring—two objects, figures, or characters who stand opposite each other, identical or at least very similar. Perhaps the book's highest profile example of this device is in the portrayal of Clare Quilty as the

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita: Revised and Updated*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr., (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 314, 311.

narrator's double, or *Doppelgänger*. Although he's first named on page 31, Quilty haunts the narrative from as early as the first chapter. A mere two paragraphs after main character Humbert Humbert takes his iconic three-step trip down the tongue (Lo-lee-ta), he evokes his killing of Quilty at the climax to come: "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style."² Later, Quilty is placed alongside Humbert on the wall in Lolita's bedroom: "Under this was another picture, also a colored ad. A distinguished playwright was solemnly smoking a Drome. He always smoked Dromes."³ And he is there in spirit with Humbert and his doomed wife Charlotte Haze at the Hourglass Lake, when Jean Farlow mentions him in the same breath as a story about two children making love: "Last time [Ivor Quilty] told me a completely indecent story about his nephew."⁴ He is woven into the fabric of the story from beginning to end, just as much as Humbert is.

Moreover, the two men are opposed and mirrored in every way. They are both learned and poetic, both concerned with literature and aesthetics, and they are both predators with a perverse fixation on the same underage prey. They are antagonistically linked by both theme and plot—they both pursue the same "prize" and one confronts the other at the end. If this perhaps perfunctory representation is not enough to demonstrate dualistic intent, scholarship establishing Humbert and Quilty as mirror images of each other is not difficult to find.

In his brilliant introduction to the annotated novel, Alfred Appel, Jr. touches on Nabokov's frequent use of the *Doppelgänger* motif while vitiating its use in *Lolita* as inherently parodic. After reminding us that traditional *Doppelgänger* stories portray the evil twin as "apelike," such as in Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Appel points out that Nabokov treats

² Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 9.

³ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 69.

⁴ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 89.

the convention quite differently: “But ‘good’ Humbert undermines the doubling by often calling himself an ape, rather than Quilty, and when the two face one another, Quilty also calls Humbert an ape.”⁵ Admittedly, there is little new about non-parodic *Doppelgänger* stories which crown the “evil” half as the winner of the conflict. Jekyll himself concludes his story by writing in his journal that he is about to perish and that Hyde will soon take over forever. That Hyde’s final act is suicide—killing both halves—only tells us that our primitive sides are self-destructive, not that our good side wins in the end.

Nabokov’s true subversion is found in his treatment of Humbert’s thematic conclusion. Traditionally, a *Doppelgänger* protagonist *must* face his double; the very essence of the narrative demands this confrontation as an elemental building block of the story. Yet Humbert closes his character arc several chapters *before* his awkward slap-fight with his drunk, middle-aged nemesis.

Humbert’s fundamental character failings are (superficially) his pedophilia, but more broadly his consistent incuriosity toward the inner worlds of those around him; his blindness to his victims’ suffering permits him to inflict it. Yet in the twilight chapters when he meets his beloved Lolita for the last time, she is (legally speaking) a grown woman, and yet he still asks her to come away with him. This seems to indicate he has transcended his pedophilia. Meanwhile his gift of several thousand dollars—fully unconditional—to support her move to Alaska with her new husband is easily read as empowering her inner world, when previously he discarded it. Considering, then, that Humbert’s metamorphosis is functionally independent of his relationship with Quilty, Appel’s point about the parodic nature of the *Doppelgänger* pattern is well-taken.

⁵ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, lxi.

But parody resists sincerity. Humbert may be haunted by his twin, but because his relationship with him is narratively non-committal, one cannot look to the story of his metaphorical struggle against his own dark side as the chief focus of the book. If the *Doppelgänger* genre is evoked but not centered, what is the book's reason to evoke it? If *Lolita* is not a story that is primarily *about* the duality of a man, what *is* it about?

At this point we must step outside the context of *Lolita* itself and return to its source. For inspiration, we turn to philosopher Richard Rorty and his fantastic analysis of Nabokov's artistic and philosophical vision of the world. In chapter seven of his book, he reconciles Nabokov's need for what he calls aesthetic bliss with his obsession with life after death. Rorty writes, "Over and over again, Nabokov tried to tie this highly unfashionable concern for metaphysical immortality together with the more respectable notion of literary immortality."⁶ And tying this together with both Nabokov's insistence that *Lolita* has no moral and his scornful thoughts on more politically motivated contemporaries such as Orwell, Faulkner, and Mann, we find an artist with a complicated relationship with his own legacy, a man who elevated artistic purity over what he called topical trash, and a man with a firm belief in the bliss of art for its own sake.

And he is a man with a lifelong love of butterflies. A year after emigrating to Cambridge, Nabokov volunteered to organize the butterfly specimens at the Museum of Comparative Zoology. He served at this museum for six years as the de-facto Curator of Lepidoptera. He wrote several scientific papers on the subject throughout this time and his life, and over the years he discovered and named numerous species of butterfly, the most notable of which is the *plebejus samuelis*, the Karner Blue.⁷

⁶ Richard Rorty, "The Barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on Cruelty," in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 150.

⁷ Robert Michael Pyle, "Nabokov's Butterflies," *The American Scholar*, 69, no. 1 (2000): 95, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41212973>.

It's difficult to imagine that Nabokov did not view lepidopterans in terms of the "aesthetic bliss" for which he yearned in his work. His books, *Lolita* in particular, ooze with butterfly imagery. When Humbert refers to "nymphets," the adolescent objects of his desire, he uses terms all-too-easily applied to butterflies and moths—*frail, silky, fairy-like*. The very word *nymph* is entomologically defined as an insect pupae. The story itself can be thought of as the product of a metamorphosis. A book-within-the-book, the story is written by Humbert from prison and later emerges after its writer's death into a fully realized publication, as the butterfly emerges from the caterpillar.

There is more to this metaphor, though, and to explore it we return to the doubling motif. Over and over within the narrative, we see objects or phrases doubled, or mirrored. The narrator names himself Humbert Humbert and never explains why. When Lolita writes home from "Camp Q" to her mother and stepfather Humbert, she addresses them as "Mummy and Hummy." Remember also the parodic use of the *Doppelgänger* genre, used not as a comment on humanity's dualism, but as merely another example of a mirror image. Doubles exist at every layer of the book's construction—its theme, its plot, its characters, and even metatextual characteristics, such as its genre.

Closer to my point, we also see doubling over long narrative distances. At Hourglass Lake, Humbert's wife Charlotte explains away Jean Farlow's comment that her husband swam with his watch on: "Waterproof," she says. Hundreds of pages later, this word is mirrored into Humbert's memory because it evokes the name of his shadowy nemesis (Quilty was mentioned in this scene, as earlier discussed). The address of Charlotte's "white-frame horror" is 342 Lawn Street, while Humbert's first assault of his victim, almost 100 pages later, takes place in room 342 of the Enchanted Hunters hotel. This hotel is mirrored another 130 pages thereafter, when

Lolita acts in a school play by the same name.

But nowhere does the mirror device flash in brighter, more insistent neon lights than at the midway point in the book, the intersection between several of these long-distance mirror images. In room 342 at the Enchanted Hunters, Humbert becomes eerily transfixed by the transcendent doubleness of the hotel room: “There was a double bed, a mirror, a double bed in the mirror, a closet door with a mirror, a bathroom door ditto, a blue-dark window, a reflected bed there, the same in the closet mirror, two chairs, a glass-topped table, two bedtables, a double bed...”⁸ This is not narration; this is a fever dream. This is a single paragraph that bears the immense weight of hundreds of pages of motif-building, a thematic singularity where logic breaks down and only the metaphor can exist.

Finally, it is crucial to note that the book is told in two “parts.” Part One concerns Humbert’s journey toward Lolita and concludes when he has removed all distance and reached the greatest possible (physical) intimacy. Following is Part Two, wherein Lolita slowly pulls away, increasing the distance between them until she has escaped him entirely. The two parts are linked in the middle, in the hotel room, the site of Humbert’s greatest crime, where the mirroring motif is at its strongest. Each part is a mirror image of the other, replete with corresponding structures on opposite sides of the divide between.

If we imagine the hotel room scene as analogous to the body of a butterfly and the parts as reminiscent of its beautifully mirrored wings, we may arrive at the central visual metaphor of the story as a fairy-like lepidopteran, perched on Nabokov’s finger, admired as a natural expression of the aesthetic bliss for which he yearned.

One can’t be remotely certain Nabokov sat down and decided, consciously, to write a

⁸ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 119.

book that resembles a butterfly in its formal structures. But it is all too easy to imagine him daydreaming in his office at the Museum of Zoology, gazing affectionately at the winged specimens pinned for display, contemplating ways to combine his love of lepidopterans with his exultation of aesthetic virtue and art for art's sake.

None of this necessarily contradicts the interpretations that uphold didacticism. We all credit Nabokov with the subtlety to deliver a truly layered experience that speaks to every human that engages it with honesty and curiosity. We make and consume art for the same reason: to connect. To reach out across the void to another, and to meet in the middle. If this connection is successful, the art is successful, and both sides are both equal and equally meaningful. What the reader sees was indeed intended by the author; the two are mirror images of each other. If art is a mirror, then we can imagine successful art as a butterfly, its wings as arms and its body as a handshake.

We have seen that despite volumes of literary criticism to the contrary, Nabokov attributed no intended moral lesson to his most famous masterpiece, claiming it to be a work of art for no reason but art's sake. Studying the book's formal architecture, we see a plethora of mirror and doubling imagery that evokes the mirrored wings of the lepidopterans Nabokov so fondly admired. Taken along with the two-part structure of the book and visualizing the central scene in the hotel room, where the two parts meet, as a butterfly's body that joins its wings together, the potential emerges that the book was indeed planned and executed primarily as a tribute to the aesthetically pleasing lepidopteran order of insects.

But returning to the many readers who extract moral lessons from a book never intended to give them, we remember Roland Barthes and the ultimate irrelevance of the author's intent to artistic proliferation. All honest interpretations are valid because they are not about the author,

but the reader. Thus the genius of Nabokov is his ability to write such a book that undoubtedly achieves his vision of aesthetic bliss, while also—incidentally or otherwise—teaching us important lessons of avoidance of cruelty, of embracing curiosity for others, and for becoming sensitive to others' suffering.

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