VALIDITY OF SELF-JUSTIFICATION IN THE TEXT OF LOLITA

In what ways does Humbert Humbert justify himself?

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Abstract

*Lolita* is a famous novel written in first-person perspective. Although the novel is seemingly intended to be Humber Humbert's confession of crimes, his use of self-justification can be observed throughout the whole text. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the methods of Humbert's self-justification.

First, he has justified his crime of incest and rape by accusing Lolita of seducing him actively. He subjectively portraits Lolita into a seductive nymphet and deprives Mrs. Haze, her mother, the authority to comment on Lolita's personality. He also draws support from traditions and laws regarding sex and marriage. He attributes Mrs. Haze's death to the motion of fate, despite him being the catalyst. Second, he justifies his lust and unusual desire to control Lolita as love by exaggerating his fondness and care for Lolita. He also draws a comparison between his childhood lover and Lolita and alludes to Annabel Lee, the young wife of Edgar Allan Poe, a famous American poet, in order to persuade the audience. In conclusion, he justifies his sins as love and he himself as the victim of this love in his confession of crime.

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Introduction

*Lolita*, a novel published in 1955 by Vladimir Nabokov, is famous for its disputability. In the novel, Nabokov depicts the immoral romance between Humbert Humbert, a middle-aged man who has an unusual affection towards "nymphet", and Lolita, the step-daughter of Humbert. When Lolita's mother, Mrs. Haze, accidentally dies, Humbert and Lolita begin to travel around America as secret lovers under the guise of father and daughter. Nevertheless, during the trip, Humbert desperately finds out that Lolita has fallen in love with another man, Quilty, who later encourages Lolita to betray and escape from Humbert. The story ends when Humbert kills Quilty and Lolita dies of dystocia.

However, when pulled out of the narration, the plot seems self-contradictory and does not make much sense especially when Lolita, an ordinary teenage school girl, craftily betrays Humbert, becoming an extraordinarily complicated character and when Humbert, while insisting his sincere love, is restricting her freedom. Therefore, in *Lolita* arise the questions about the true nature of their love and thus, who the real victim is. The disputability of this novel results from these two questions, making readers cast doubt upon the reliability of the narrator, Humbert himself. For the sake of deeper understanding of the true meaning concealed in the text, it is important to know why and how unreliable Humbert can be.

There are several factors that contribute to this unreliability: the first-person perspective, excessive psychological descriptions, skeptical details, and spasmodic word play; these factors make the novel more like a self-justifying diary than a statement of confession, what the novel is supposed to be, indicated in the first line in the foreword (Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. New York: Vintage Books. 1997. 2.) The purpose of this essay is to investigate in what ways and how validly Humbert justifies himself. Moreover, it serves as an explanatory portrait of Lolita, who remains mystery due to Humbert's unreliable nature as a narrator.
Justification of Sins

This chapter will be discussing how Humbert justifies his sinful behaviors, mainly incest and rape, by pointing out that Lolita herself is the cause of his actions and that the society has an approving attitude. He is also the key catalyst of Mrs. Haze’s death for which he feels nonchalant.

Humbert regards Lolita as a nymphet, which he defines as girls who are "between the age limits of nine and fourteen" and "to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac.)" (Nabokov, 16.) He strives to depict an attractive, nymphetamine portrait of Lolita, who owns a "fantastic power" (Nabokov, 17) that has been fiercely attacking him.

The following excerpt describes that when Mrs. Haze and Humbert are resting in the garden, Lolita wants to tease Humbert but accidentally hits Mrs. Haze instead.

"...the obnoxious lady [Mrs. Haze] sank down on the grass..., and presently an old gray tennis ball bounced over her, and Lo's voice came from the house haughtily: 'Pardonnez, Mother. I was not aiming at you.' Of course not, my hot downy darling." (Nabokov, 55.)

This detail can be interpreted in two ways: in Humbert's view, this action is highly associated with flirting, since he uses a sexual word, "hot", to summarize her. However, it is not likely for Lolita to realize the sexual implication back then; this is most likely to be an unsophisticated teasing since she is acting the same as her peer friends who later throw stones when seeing Humbert and Mrs. Haze make love on the lakeshore (Nabokov, 88.) Later Humbert has also used the double interpretation of words in attempt to mislead the audience.

The following excerpt is about their first time having sex. Humbert fools Lolita to
have a sedative pill in order to rape her; however, the sedative is not strong enough to make her unconscious, rendering Humbert frustrated, lying beside Lolita. Unexpectedly, when Lolita wakes up, she forwardly conducts sex, leaving Humbert bewildered.

"I felt her eyes on me, and when she uttered at last that beloved chortling note of hers, I knew her eyes had been laughing. She rolled over to my side... and we gently kissed. Her kiss, to my delirious embarrassment, had some rather comical refinements of flutter and probe... As if to see whether I had my fill and learned the lesson, she drew away and surveyed me." (Nabokov, 132-133.)

The emphasis is on Lolita's adeptness, which is inconceivable and surprising.

However, for other people such as Lolita's teachers and Mrs. Haze, Lolita is no more than a common girl, an immature adolescent. The teachers consider her naughty as Lolita is "detested by teachers," (Nabokov, 53) while Mrs. Haze simply regards her as a childish girl.

When Mrs. Haze (who has married Humbert already) and Humbert get Lolita's letter with several small mistakes, Mrs. Haze starts to comment on the letter in a harsh manner.

"'The dumb child,' said Mrs. Humbert, 'has left out a word before 'time.' That sweater was all-wool, and I wish you would not send her candy without consulting me.'" (Nabokov, 81.)

Even as an outsider, Humbert sends her candy, representing care to his poor Lolita; Mrs. Humbert is depicted as a cold-hearted woman by contrast.

Humbert tries to shield these descriptions from the audience by introducing an
indirect feeling of aversion to Mrs. Haze. When Humbert sees a magazine in which Mrs. Haze makes some remark, he sighs:

"Oh, she simply hated her daughter!... On Lo's twelfth, January 1, 1947, Charlotte Haze, née Becker, had underlined the following epithets, ten out of forty, under 'Your Child's Personality': aggressive, boisterous, critical, distrustful, impatient, irritable, inquisitive, listless, negativistic (underlined twice) and obstinate. She had ignored the thirty remaining adjectives, among which were cheerful, co-operative, energetic, and so forth." (Nabokov, 80-81.)

This excerpt serves to emphasize a trait: ignorance. By outlining how negatively Mrs. Haze comments on her child while ignoring her positive qualities, Humbert conveys the idea that Mrs. Haze is a harsh, unappreciative mother who cannot correctly judge Lolita and hence owning no right to describe her. In general, Humbert attempts to discredit Mrs. Haze, and hence depriving her authority to describe Lolita. In this way, he can make himself a more reliable speaker even than Lolita's mother; in fact, he is more biased than Mrs. Haze, since he only judges Lolita in the perspective of a sexualized lady instead of a juvenile.

Also, Humbert has been persuading the audience that Lolita, in the beginning, is in love with him.

On the way back from the Camp Q to a motel, Lolita poses an interesting question.

"Say, wouldn't Mother be absolutely mad if she found out we were lovers?"
'Good Lord, Lo, let us not talk that way.'
'But we are lovers, aren't we?'" (Nabokov, 114.)

"Lover" is a word worthy of scrutinizing for its double meaning. For little Lolita who has not been in any intimate relationship yet (except for her short-term sexual
relationship in the Camp Q,) this term implies the intimacy between two with opposite genders. We can understand this by considering this dialogue, in which Lolita answers Humbert:

"'You know, I missed you terribly, Lo.'
'I did not. In fact I've been revoltingly unfaithful to you, but it does not matter one bit, because you've stopped caring for me, anyway.'"

She equates love with caring; but Humbert only dares take care of her in a decorous way before, for instance, "send[ing] her candy without consulting me[Mrs. Haze]" when she is on the Camp Q; therefore, it can be inferred that she does not mean the same thing as what Humbert, who uses the term previously to talk about his first wife's affair (Nabokov, 28-29), comprehends it to be.

The following excerpt is a description of Humbert's first time to indulge in the joy and surprise when his love seems to be reciprocated. When Lolita is going to the Camp Q, she suddenly goes back from the car and runs upstairs to give him a kiss; he gladly calls it an interruption of "the motion of fate." (Nabokov, 66)

"My Lolita, who was half in and about to slam the car door, wind down the glass, wave to Louise and the poplars (whom and which she was never to see again), interrupted the motion of fate: she looked up--and dashed back into the house (Haze furiously calling after her). A moment later I heard my sweetheart running up the stairs. My heart expanded with such force that it almost blotted me out. I hitched up the pants of my pajamas, flung the door open: and simultaneously 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, my palpitating darling! " (Nabokov, 66)

However, as later he tragically realizes, there is no connection between sex and love
in little Lolita's mind.

"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.)

Lolita simply regards sex as a game which she has played with Charlie Holmes on the Camp Q without realizing any further meaning. Ironically, "playing a game" is usually an approach to child sexual abuse. The perpetrator usually suggests activities such as playing a game, and the game will turn out to be "little secrets." (Victims of Child Abuse, Domestic Violence, Elder Abuse, Rape, Robbery, Assault, and Violent Death: A Manual for Clergy and Congregations, Special Edition for Military Chaplains, Office for Victims of Crime, 2001.)

Lolita feels painful about this relationship, "which we see in her crying every night after she thinks Humbert is asleep, in the scratches she leaves on Humbert's neck while resisting sex with him, and in her escape from him." (Lolita Misrepresented, Lolita Reclaimed: Disclosing the Doubles, Elizabeth Patnoe, College Literature, 82.)

Humbert also draws support from some phenomena in the society. When he refers to customs and laws regarding marriage:

"And fifteen is lawful everywhere. There is nothing wrong, say both hemispheres, when a brute of forty, blessed by the local priest and bloated with drink, sheds his sweat-drenched finery and thrusts himself up to the hilt into his youthful bride." (Nabokov, 135.)

"'In such stimulating temperate climates [says an old magazine in this prison library] as St. Louis, Chicago and Cincinnati, girls mature about the end of their twelfth year.' Dolores Haze was born less than three hundred miles from
stimulating Cincinnati. I have but followed nature. I am nature's faithful hound. Why then this horror that I cannot shake off? Did I deprive her of her flower? Sensitive gentlewomen of the jury, I was not even her first lover." (Nabokov, 135.)

Combining with that he claims that Lolita loves him, this statement intendedly indicates that he should not be accused of rape. Biologically, Lolita is no longer a young girl, according to the old magazine, so his act cannot be called carnal abuse. Secondly, "there is nothing wrong" for lovers, even whose ages differ by a lot, to have sex. The metaphor of brute and bride serves to wipe off the crime of rape.

Last but not least, Humbert is apathetic about Mrs. Haze's death, which is directly caused by his sick desires. She occasionally finds Humbert's secret journal about his desires for Lolita and wants to send warning letters to Lolita. Blinded by rage, she is killed in a car accident. Again, he considers this the motion of fate.

"I had actually seen the agent of fate. I had palpated the very flesh of fate - and its padded shoulder. A brilliant and monstrous mutation had suddenly taken place, and here was the instrument... Had I not been such a fool - or such an intuitive genius - to preserve that journal, fluids produced by vindictive anger and hot shame would not have blinded Charlotte in her dash to the mailbox. But even had they blinded her, still nothing might have happened, had not precise fate, that synchronizing phantom, mixed within its alembic the car and the dog and the sun and the shade and the wet and the weak and the strong and the stone. Adieu, Marlene! Fat fate's formal handshake (as reproduced by Beale before leaving the room) brought me out of my torpor; and I wept. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury--I wept." (Nabokov, 103.)

Mrs. Haze's death is symbolic in the sense of allowing Humbert to take control of Lolita. Actually, Humbert has a will to kill Mrs. Haze, and he has been imagining it in
his mind since when he goes to the lakeshore with her (Nabokov, 87-88) but "her ghost would haunt me [Humbert] all my [Humbert's] life" (Nabokov, 87) in the reality. However, since this novel is greatly solipsized (even his love is solipsized\(^1\)) we can make a connection that the death of Mrs. Haze, in a solipsist sense, is no more than the dissolution of the last scruple for Humbert to seize Lolita; he is mentally liberated in Haze's death.

In summary, he has been justifying his crime of incest and rape by accusing Lolita being seductive, discrediting Mrs. Haze’s comment on Lolita and drawing support from traditions and laws regarding sex and marriage. He feels diffident about Mrs. Haze’s death and imputes it to the fate.

\(^1\) This will be further explained in the next chapter.
Justification of Lust

Humbert has a complicated ardor toward Lolita, in the forms of paternal care, carnal desires, and autocratic control. Sometimes Humbert claims his lofty, intense love to Lolita, "I am your father, and I am speaking English, and I love you." (Nabokov, 150.) Even when he finds out that Lolita has betrayed him and married, he lamented "I could not kill her, of course, as some have thought. You see, I loved her. It was love at first sight, at last sight, at ever and ever sight" (Nabokov, 270.) These sentences seem to depict his great love for Lolita and his pain due to Lolita’s betrayal. Nevertheless, it is still uncertain whether his feeling is what he says to be love or just lust.

Firstly, he has referred to different Lolita's, emphasizing "my Lolita". However, this is different from other romantic novels where the word "my" is used to imply the sense of intimacy or fondness, whereas Humbert's Lolita and the real Lolita are distinct. The following monologue is worth examination.

"I knew I had fallen in love with Lolita forever; but I also knew she would not be forever Lolita. She would be thirteen on January 1. 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.)

In the reality, Humbert has no choice but to accept the change in the real Lolita. As Lolita grows up, she will be less likable for Humbert, a "college girl." His forever love is for the young Lolita only, not for a grown-up Lolita, which is a contradictory statement. A reasonable explanation is that his passion is for an idealized Lolita, who does not change with the real Lolita.

When he secretly ejaculates while playing with little Lolita, he senses a safety.

"Lolita had been safely solipsized." (Nabokov, 60.)
Solipsism\(^2\) is the "metaphysical belief that only oneself exists, and that ‘existence’ just means being a part of one's own mental states - all objects, people, etc, that one experiences, are merely parts of one's own mind." ("Philosophy: Solipsism.") Here, his "solipsized" Lolita makes him reach orgasm, while the real Lolita, without realizing anything happening, does not belong to him. The following monologue is a more direct explanation of his solipsism.

"What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita - perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness - indeed, no life of her own." (Nabokov, 62.)

These monologues show that Humbert does not love the real Lolita, since the charm of the real Lolita is fleeting. His object is an idealized nymphet, a figure in his perfection and imagination. The real Lolita grows up, while the idealized Lolita is "eternal" and always satisfactory.

Humbert has an unusual control on Lolita. The book is divided into two parts; this structure plays a significant role for analysis. The last sentence of the first part is "You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go." (Nabokov, 142.) Since this, Humbert has been terrorizing her in order to keep Lolita with him.

"... Let us see what happens if you, a minor, accused of having impaired the morals of an adult in a respectable inn, what happens if you complain to the police of my having kidnapped and raped you? Let us suppose they believe you... Okay, I go to jail... You will dwell, my Lolita will dwell (come here, my brown flower) with thirty-nine other dopes in a dirty dormitory... Don't you think that

\(^2\) The idea of solipsism frequently appears throughout the novel. In the previous chapter Justification of Sins, the death of Mrs. Haze is symbolic and solipsist.
under the circumstances Dolores Haze had better stick to her old man?" (Nabokov, 151.)

He keeps Lolita with him, enjoying her youth by taking advantage of her weakness. In another way round, if he loves Lolita in a positive, appreciative way, he will not be doing this either. As suggested in the preceding sentence, Humbert "succeeded in terrorizing Lo." (Nabokov, 151.)

Humbert frequently compares Lolita with Annabel, his childhood sweetheart, in order to persuade the audience that Annabel is the origin of everything, the sufficient, essential reason that explains his love for Lolita. By doing this, he implies that his fervor to Lolita is love, which he devotes to Annabel.

"...there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses. It was the same child - the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair... I recognized the tiny dark-brown mole on her side. With awe and delight (the king crying for joy, the trumpets blaring, the nurse drunk) I saw again her lovely indrawn abdomen where my southbound mouth had briefly paused... The twenty-five years I had lived since then, tapered to a palpitating point, and vanished." (Nabokov, 39.)

However, Annabel and Lolita are fundamentally different. Annabel, when alive, was as old as Humbert; and they had common interests and mutual value systems. Their love probably results from the spiritual attraction.

"Our brains were turned the way those of intelligent European preadolescents were in our day and set, and I doubt if much individual genius should be assigned to our interest in the plurality of inhabited worlds, competitive tennis, infinity, solipsism and so on. The softness and fragility of baby animals caused us the same intense pain." (Nabokov, 12.)
In contrast, Lolita and Humbert hardly have any spiritual communication, mainly because of their age and culture differences. Most of the time, Humbert speaks in a disciplinary, restraining tone. Moreover, what has attracted Humbert in the first place is Lolita’s nymphetic appearance. Therefore, this analogy between Annabel and Lolita is invalid.

When Humbert talks about Annabel, Nabokov is alluding to the "Annabel Lee," the last poem by Edgar Allan Poe. "Annabel Lee" probably refers to Allan Poe’s wife, who was 14 years younger than Allan Poe. Her death caused great pain in him; therefore, he wrote "Annabel Lee" to express his unfading love. The name, Annabel Lee, also serves as a bridge connecting Lolita with his childhood lover. This connection also intensifies his analogy because it implies the audience to comprehend his feeling in the same way as they comprehend Allan Poe’s poem.

In summary, he justifies his sick desires for Lolita as love by exaggerating his greatness, thereby justifies himself as the victim from this love. He also compares Lolita and his childhood lover in attempt to equate them. Moreover, Nabokov alludes to Annabel Lee in Humbert’s childhood lover’s name to intensify his analogy.
Conclusion

In *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov has written a love affair in which the main character Humbert Humbert as well as the narrator suffers from an unrequited love. However, Humbert tries to justify himself in the novel by taking advantage of his first-person narration. He insists that Lolita actively seduces him so that he falls in love with her but then suffers from her betrayal, in order to shirk his crime. Yet, his justifications are not as valid as he insists, since it can be revealed that he skillfully exaggerates the "nymphic" aspect of Lolita and the intenseness and authenticity of his love. Based on this, it is possible to discover the actuality that lies beneath the deceptive narration. The other main character, Lolita, who remains mysterious to the audience, can be inferred to be the real victim in this affair.
Reference


