

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*: The Representation and the Reality Re-Examining *Lolita* In the Light of Research into Child Sexual Abuse

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ABSTRACT

“Lolita” has become a cultural icon, normalizing, sometimes celebrating, the sexualization of children—this is known as the Lolita effect. This study seeks to examine the role the novel and aspects of its scholarship have played in creating this effect.

Combining textual analysis and a literature review, this study juxtaposes the fictive depictions of the novel with the actuality of abuse as delineated by research studies. These findings are contrasted with elements of the discourse that have influenced their interpretation.

Significant levels of concordance were found, revealing that Nabokov had a remarkably prescient knowledge of the feelings and cognitions of an abuser, the strategies utilized in grooming, and the diagnostic category of hebephilia long before these issues were discovered by research.

Given the novel’s social and cultural impact, this paper calls for a re-examination of the relationship between the novel’s fiction and the clinical reality of child sexual abuse.

KEYWORDS: Pedophilia, Cultural studies, Women and Gender Studies, Nabokov, *Lolita*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Lolita* is a literary masterpiece of the 20th century. However, despite the vast amount of criticism and academic discourse available concerning the rhetorical complexities of the novel, there has, to date, been no systematic examination of the reality of the subject at its very core—child sexual abuse. Utilising data derived from research studies this essay will examine the clinical reality underpinning the narrative by calibrating the novel’s representations to the real world of child sexual abuse. The action in Nabokov’s novel amounts to a detailed description of the process of grooming and abuse of a 12-year-old girl named Dolores (*Lolita*). His description of the evolving cognitive processes of a pedophile is one of the most revealing in literature and is indeed worthy of the fictive Dr. Ray’s assertion, “As a case history, ‘*Lolita*’ will become, no doubt, a classic in psychiatric circles” (Nabokov 1955, 7). The novel offers important clinical insights into the feelings, cognitive processes, and strategies that mediate abuse. The eminence of the novel, the academic discourse surrounding it, and its adaptations have had a significant cultural impact, altering community attitudes, with social and clinical consequences.

Note: Page references of all quotations are from the 1997 Penguin edition.

Plot Summary

Lolita is the story of a middle-aged hebephile academic named Humbert, who becomes sexually obsessed with a 12-year-old child named Dolores Haze, whom he calls *Lolita*. He marries her widowed mother to gain access to her and then proceeds to groom her. After the mother dies in a motor accident, he abducts the child and goes on a year-long road trip to avoid the scrutiny of their relationship. He uses her dependence on him to sexually and emotionally abuse her. At one point in the novel, he is forced by financial issues to take up a teaching post. This enables Dolores to establish a support circle of peers and develop an escape strategy with the help of a man called Clare Quilty. Humbert misses her and expresses feelings of guilt for “having stolen her childhood (221).” He also claims to love her. Dolores, having fled her abusive relationship with Humbert, discovers that Quilty is equally perverse. She spurns him and marries a supportive man, Richard Schiller. Pregnant and impoverished, she later contacts Humbert and asks for financial help, following which Humbert begs her to return to him. She refuses, and he insists on learning the identity of the man who helped her escape. He then goes to Quilty’s house and kills him. Whilst awaiting trial, he writes the narrative as a memoir. He then dies of a heart attack, and the document is published with a preface by his psychiatrist, Dr. John Ray.

Publication History

Following initial rejection by American publishers, *Lolita* was first published in 1955 in Paris by Olympia Press, publishers of D.H. Lawrence and Henry Miller, and much porn besides. However, no sexual activity is explicitly described in the novel, and only two sexual encounters are depicted: a masturbatory episode on the sofa and Humbert's alleged seduction by Lolita in a hotel. Then, in 1958, the book was published in America, and Nabokov expected the romantic treatment of an abusive relationship to arouse furious opposition. To his delight, undoubtedly due to its salaciousness, in a matter of days, *Lolita* became a runaway bestseller.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: FREUD AND KINSEY

Although Nabokov expressed criticism of both Freud and Kinsey, it appears that he studied their works. Early in his psychological research, Freud noted the high incidence of child sexual abuse in his patients and rightly concluded that it was a source of trauma. However, he went on to construct their accounts as fantasy, on the presumption that "surely, such widespread perversions against children are not very probable" (Masson 1985, 267). Freud thus shifted the locus of pathology from the abuser to the victim. The entry of the Freudian perspective to Western culture was accompanied by the idea of the child as an active sexual being. As Kincaid (1998, 15) commented "(Freud) smoothed the way [...] (by) conceiving of infancy in terms of stark sexual drives [...] If we posit openly that children are activated by sexual energy, the evasive screens necessary for eroticizing them disappear."

At the time *Lolita* was written, there had been very little systematic research into child sexual abuse. American sex researcher Alfred Kinsey's 1948 report "Sexual Behavior in the Human Male" received massive publicity at the time that Nabokov was developing his novel. One of Kinsey's influential "findings" was that adult-child sexual contact is unlikely to cause appreciable harm and that any harm to the child from such activity usually results from a sexually repressed society's inappropriate response (Jones 2004, 752). In fact, Kinsey falsely presented as separate cases the activities of a single man who had sex with over 300 children (Tate 1998). Eric Goldman (2004) observes "While Freud is a palpable presence in *Lolita*, Nabokov also clearly had in mind more recent studies of female sexuality that involved statistical analysis of kinds of sexual behavior, such as the Kinsey reports..." (70).

ABUSE, POWER, AND SILENCE

The novel is set against the backdrop of the real world where one in three women experiences sexual violence (WHO Global Report 2015, 1). One in nine girls under the age of 18 have experienced sexual abuse or assault at the hands of an adult; 82% of all victims under 18 are female (DOJ 2000). Despite this harsh reality, some of the scholarship that surrounds this novel has endorsed Nabokov's claim that "a novel has no morality" (De la Durantaye 2010, 105). Ellen Pifer notes "commentators were eager to brush aside the shocking nature of Humbert's sexual conduct and his crime against the child. They preferred to concentrate instead on solving the novel's linguistic puzzles or tracing the contours of its cunning design" (Pifer 2003, 9).

Central to child abuse is not just sexuality but power—the power of an adult with all their material, social, and psychological privileges over a disadvantaged child. Nabokov is privy to this and has Humbert insinuate that the age disparity must be large to maximize the abuser's hegemony: "the student should not be surprised to learn that there must be a gap of several years, never less than ten I should say, generally thirty or forty" (7). Like many abusers, Humbert then consolidates this power by making the victim utterly dependent on him through financial deprivation, social isolation, emotional manipulation, and threats. Humbert relishes his sense of power: "she was mine, the key was in my fist, my fist was in my pocket, she was mine" (124).

Mirroring the reality of sexual abuse, where silencing drives secrecy, which is in turn paramount, Humbert solipsizes his discourse, eclipsing the victim's voice "fanciful Lolita [...] floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own" (62). Nabokov's character, Dr. Ray, the 'psychiatrist' who prefaces the novel, asserts "A desperate honesty that throbs through his confession does not absolve him from sins of diabolical cunning. He is abnormal. He is not a gentleman. But how magically his singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author!" (7). However, the very opposite is true, as reflected in Leona Toker's analysis: we are manipulated into identifying and sympathizing with Humbert and induced "to derive (a) pleasure from the account of the pursuit of ecstasy and to ignore the price of this pursuit" (Toker 1989, 202). Compassion for *Lolita* is scarce in many of the commentaries on this novel. Enchanted by Nabokov's erudite villain, entranced by the beauty of the language, and seduced by the sophistry of Humbert's arguments, many have been all too willing to dismiss the darkness of his deeds. So effective are Nabokov's literary skills that a survey of responses to *Lolita* found that most scholars sympathized with Humbert "By arguments similar to those used by convicted rapists in order to view themselves as non-rapists, reviewers depicted Dolores Haze as both morally unworthy and at least partly responsible for her own victimization" (Bayma and Fine 1989).

THE LOLITA EFFECT

Nabokov introduced two new words into the English language – Lolita and Nympholepsy, the first was to become a signifier for the second. The most enduring legacy of the 1955 publication and Stanley Kubrick's acclaimed 1962 film is the "Lolita Effect," a phenomenon in mass culture where pubescent girls are portrayed as hypersexualized objects of desire (Durham 2009). From the promotion of child prostitutes as 'Lolitas' to the pervasive images in fashion (Bertram and Leving 2013) and pornography (Walker et al. 2016), Lolita as an exotic object of male sexual desire, with a frisson of the forbidden, has become a cultural icon (Vickers 2008). Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines the word Lolita as "a precociously seductive girl." As Humbert has it, such girls are "little deadly demon(s)" with "fantastic power(s)" (17), who cunningly exploit their sexual capital to manipulate and exploit hapless adult men. Alfred Appel, a leading authority on Lolita, warns us of the existential threat posed, "It is poetic justice that Lolita should seduce Humbert[...]Lolita is a Baby Snook¹ who looms threateningly high above us all" (Appel 1967, 219). One of the social consequences of the novel is the permission it gives in literature for adult abusers to masquerade as powerless victims of powerful "nymphets". This is a common cognitive distortion utilized by predators to justify their crimes (Ward et al. 1995). However, this view is often amplified and promoted, not only in media (Plevikova 2016) and film (Kubrick 1962; Lyne 1997) but also in aspects of the scholarship related to the novel. The name Lolita has come to be used not only to describe but also normalize, even celebrate, the sexualization of children, thus serving to foster attitudes that may have detrimental social and clinical consequences. Lolita has become a keyword for those searching for child sex on and via the internet (NIST 2007). As Patnoe writes, "The Lolita Story and its discourse have become an ongoing and revealing cultural narrative, a myth appropriated in ways that validate male sexuality and punish female sexuality, in ways that let some people avoid the consequences of their desires as they impose those desires on others" (Patnoe 2002, 114). Merskin (2004), in her essay "Reviving Lolita," states the following:

sexualized portrayals of women as child-like in the media in general, and fashion advertising, the merchandising of children as sexual commodities is ubiquitous and big business. Accumulation theory (DeFleur and Dennis, 1994) predicts that if messages are seen and heard consistently across media forms, corroborated between those forms, and persistently presented, the messages will have long-term, powerful effects on audiences. Hence, the accumulation process normalizes looking at images of and thinking about preadolescent and adolescent [...] girls as sexually available.

In public, pedophilia evokes self-righteous disgust sometimes amounting to moral panic. However, in the real world, victims of abuse are often met with blame, disbelief, and denial. As Roland Summit (1983) states in his study "The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome," "Initiation, intimidation, stigmatization, isolation, helplessness, and self-blame depend on a terrifying reality of child sexual abuse. Any attempts by the child to divulge the secret will be countered by an adult conspiracy of silence and disbelief." Celebrated pedophiles such as Epstein, Saville, and perpetrators in the Catholic Church have been able to operate openly because they could rely on the public and the establishment to prize the predator and devalue and disregard the victims.

SCHOLARSHIP AND SEXUAL ABUSE

Academic scholarship further reflects this inequality of power. Nabokov's antihero Humbert is admired for his wit and erudition. Consequently, Humbert's self-confessed crimes of kidnapping and rape are cast as expressions of "the really genuine and selfless love he has for her" (Kubrick 1962). Whilst most critics acknowledge the solipsism of Humbert's description of Lolita, fewer acknowledge the multiplicity of traumas he inflicts on her beyond the deprivation of childhood. For many readers, Lolita as a character is subordinated by Humbert's warped vision of her. Rabinowitz in "Lolita: Solipsized or Sodomized?" has the following to say on the scholarship of the novel:

If silencing is what, in the novel, Humbert does to disguise sodomizing as solipsizing, what have the "serious" critics and readers done? Many of them have, I would argue, by and large re-enacted Humbert's crime. That is, the Rule of Abstract Displacement has enabled most of the critics (Linda Kauffman and Elizabeth Patnoe are significant exceptions) to silence Lolita just as Humbert does, by refusing to take her seriously as a concrete person on the narrative level. Only a reader who refuses to hear Lolita's repeated "no's" could call her a "complicit Juliet"; and this refusal solipsizes her, erasing her agency and turning her into an object to serve the critic's own needs. (Rabinowitz 2004, 335)

Abused children often adapt to their plight and develop strategies to thwart their abuser (Kitzinger 1988). Nabokov is psychologically insightful enough to chronicle Dolores's resistance (164). Despite Nabokov depicting Dolores as a resilient child who successfully escapes from both of her abusers, sections of the scholarship promote a misogynistic reading of her resilience by framing her in terms of two tropes – the "Alpha Bitch" and the "Fille Fatale". The first is as the heartless rejecter/manipulator of Humbert's true love: "She remains perpetually the cruel mistress; even after her lover has won physical possession of her, she withholds the favour of her feeling, for she

1. A challenging child played by Fanny Brice in an infant costume.

has none to give”(Trilling 1958). The second is that of the seducer/demon. This construct is evident in such comments as “she is a demon disguised as a female child” (Josipovici 1964) and “his (Humbert’s) darling, who, on their first night together, turns out to be utterly depraved and plays the role of seducer” (Rolo 1958).

Most scholars repudiate Humbert’s behavior, but none have systematically addressed the reality of the “fiction,” the uncanny concordance between the novel’s depiction and the actuality of abuse. Therefore, it becomes relevant to clinically document the many forms of abuse inflicted on a 12-year-old child named Dolores Haze, whom Humbert reconstructs in the image of his sexual fantasy as Lolita.

Sexual Abuse

Studies (Magalhães et al 2009, Gomes et al 2014) show that child molesters mostly engage in non-penetrative sex. Reflecting this reality, Humbert reports “In whatever town we stopped” (105), he parked his car outside the school and had Dolores masturbate him as the children streamed past. However, according to novelist Martin Amis, Dolores is raped at least twice a day, every day (Amis 2001, 471). Humbert is aware that he is tearing her perineum—when she is hospitalized with a fever, he plots to lie to the doctor, “I wondered if I should mention, with a casual chuckle, that my fifteen-year-old daughter had had a minor accident while climbing an awkward fence with her boyfriend” (238).

Financial Abuse

Making the victim financially dependent on the abuser is a standard maneuver in exploitative relationships (Sharp-Jeffs 2015). Humbert effectively prostitutes Lolita by paying her three cents a day in recompense for being raped with a three-dollar bonus for fellatio because “I could not obtain by force” (182). He then forcibly steals the money back from her, lest “she might accumulate sufficient cash to run away” (182).

Emotional Abuse

Studies demonstrate that emotional abuse intensifies the damage wrought by sexual abuse (Garbarino, Guttman and Shelley 1986). Humbert combines excessive gift-giving to pacify Dolores with the systematic denigration of her as a person. He disparages her aspirations and interests, judging them not by the standards of a 12-year-old but by the refined standards of European culture. In his sexual fantasy, he construes her to be “hopelessly depraved” (133) and of “nymphaean evil breathing from every pore” (124). He judges her to be “a disgustingly conventional little girl... a most exasperating brat” (146,145)—irredeemably vulgar, unsanitary and trite—cataloging as proof her tastes in reading, music, food, and clothes. This invites the identification of the aesthetic reader, who chuckles along with the narrator at the pedestrian materialism of American culture as represented by Lolita in contrast to Humbert’s sophisticated literary references throughout the text. This appeal to the aesthetic manipulates the collusion of the reader in the abuse (Tamir-Ghez 1979, 65–83).

Social Isolation

One of the most damaging traumas is emotional and social isolation (Lacey et al. 2014). A rare, poignant glimpse into Dolores’s extreme isolation is “You know, what’s so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own” (282). By constantly moving around the country, Humbert limits her socialization. He deprives her of any sense of stability and any chance of receiving emotional support from anyone concerned for her as a person.

Sexual Reification

Humbert views Dolores not as a person but as a sexual object. He is a monster of incuriosity, inattentive to anything irrelevant to his sexual inclinations: “it was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita’s states of mind while comforting my own base self” (285). The eminent humanist critic Lionel Trilling amplifies this denigration of Dolores as a non-person “(Lolita) had few emotions to be violated by Humbert’s exploitation of her” (1958).

THE CLINICAL DIMENSION – HEBEPHILIA

Throughout the novel, Humbert is obsessively preoccupied with a precise age range in terms of who he finds sexually arousing. “Between the age limits of nine and fourteen, there occur maidens whom, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older” (16). Nabokov thus presciently anticipates Ray Blanchard, who in 2009 used physiological measures to delineate the existence of a grouping of men with a predominant fixation on pubertal children (Blanchard et al. 2009). The concept of a subgroup of pedophiles whose sexual interest was lost after puberty, “whose magical nymphage had evaporated” (172), simply didn’t exist in his time. The scientific nomenclature for it was hebephilia. Nabokov, over half a century before Blanchard, termed it nympholepsy.

The Stages of Grooming

Even though it was not until the 1980s that research began delineating the psychology of grooming children (Finkelhor 1986), Nabokov, as early as 1939—as evidenced by his novel *The Enchanter*—demonstrated an acute awareness of the stages and strategies of child seduction.

The first stage is creating a pathway of access to the victim, such as becoming a priest or, like Quilty, writing and directing, plays for young people. Having zeroed in on his prey, Humbert sets about romancing the mother so that he can move from “lodger to lover,” from the extrafamilial to the intimate intrafamilial role of a stepfather. It is common for pedophiles to target vulnerable single mothers to gain access to their children (Finkelhor 1980). Then, the abuser takes covert control of the family dynamics. Humbert compares himself to a spider whose web encompasses every nook and cranny of the home: “I am like 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...” (49).

Pedophiles often approach their prey accretively, gradually increasing the level of physical intrusion. In the initial stages of the seduction, he is careful to not “spook” his prey. The “sofa scene” is a variant of the strategy called “horseplay” widely utilized by child abusers to blur the boundaries of touching (Kaufman and Erooga 2016). Humbert covertly masturbates by rubbing himself against Lolita as she sits across him, reading a magazine. He congratulates himself after the frotteuristic encounter: “I felt proud of myself. I had stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor. Absolutely no harm done” (61).

Another common grooming strategy is the use of alcohol and/or drugs to entice, intoxicate, or sedate the victim (Conte et al. 1989). Humbert muses over administering “a powerful sleeping potion so as to fondle the latter through the night with perfect impunity” (70). In Nabokov’s day, the drug of choice was barbiturates; today, it is Rohypnol. At the Enchanted Hunter hotel, he drugs Dolores, but his attempt at sexual access is thwarted by her awakening. In the morning, possibly due to the disinhibiting hangover effects of drugs, she talks about a children’s sex game she had explored with a peer. He feigns sexual innocence, challenging her to educate him. What starts as a children’s game ends in assault. Having gained total control of her, he discards all concerns for “innocence” and proceeds to rape her daily for the next two years.

Psychological Grooming

Nabokov displays a remarkable level of clinical knowledge in demonstrating that to sustain the abuse, the rapist must brainwash the victim and induce her to invest in her own victimization so that she does not disclose their secret or seek help. “From the very beginning of our concourse, I was clever enough to realize that I must secure her complete co-operation in keeping our relations secret, that it should become a second nature with her, no matter what grudge she might bear me, no matter what other pleasures she might seek” (147). The coercive nature of abuser-child interactions relies on gaining and manipulating the victim’s trust by exploiting a range of normal adult-child relationship patterns. Nabokov begins by casting Humbert as a guardian: “I want to protect you, dear, from all the horrors that happen to little girls” (147), and Humbert then progresses to educating Dolores using a magazine “Look, darling, what it says. I quote: the normal girl—normal, mark you—the normal girl is usually extremely anxious to please her father. She feels in him the forerunner of the desired elusive male ... The wise mother (and your poor mother would have been wise, had she lived) will encourage a companionship between father and daughter” (148). Having instructed her that a close father-daughter bond is normal, wise, and desirable, he, as the enchanter, proceeds to “meld the wave of fatherhood with the wave of sexual love” (Nabokov 1939,51). He cites the Sicilians from another book to hammer home his point: “Among Sicilians, sexual relations between a father and his daughter are accepted as a matter of course, and the girl who participates in such relationship is not looked upon with disapproval by the society of which she is part. I’m a great admirer of Sicilians ... fine upright people, Lo, and great lovers” (148).

Having laid the foundation of trust, he then deploys the most powerful strategy in the sex offender’s playbook: dire warnings of the dangers of disclosure. He begins by framing her as the accused. “Finally, 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... I go to jail. But what happens to you, my orphan?” (148) He then paints a bleak picture of her future, catastrophizing the consequences. “You become the ward of the Department of Public Welfare... You will dwell, my Lolita will dwell ... with thirty-nine other dopes in a dirty dormitory ... under the supervision of hideous matrons” (149).

Finally, as most abusers do, he targets and exploits her vulnerability. Knowing that “This was an orphan. This was a lone child, an absolute waif” (139), he delivers his coup de grace, “This is the situation, this is the choice. Don’t you think that under the circumstances Dolores Haze had better stick to her old man” (149). A triumphant Humbert confides to the reader, “By rubbing all this in, I succeeded in terrorizing Lo, who despite a certain brash alertness of manner and spurts of wit was not as intelligent a child as her I.Q. might suggest. I managed to establish that background of shared secrecy and shared guilt” (149). This last sentence is a powerful clinical insight. It is a confusing construct that often becomes an integral component of the survivor’s

consciousness and identity. It triggers tortured thought processes, generating feelings of guilt, self-doubt, and self-hatred. So successful are the strategies Nabokov describes that some studies reveal that up to 91% of children do not report their abuse (Henry and McMahon 2000).

Rape vs. Seduction

The writer and critic Robertson Davies describes the theme of *Lolita* as “not the corruption of an innocent child by a cunning adult but the exploitation of a weak adult by a corrupt child” (Davies 1996, 213). He bases this on the sentence “I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me” (132).

In fact, it is extremely common for sex offenders of all types to claim that it is they and not their prey who are the victims. Dolores repeatedly asserts that she was raped, yet many critics seem oblivious to the victim’s voice, as is often the case in real life. On the morning after Humbert rapes her, Dolores 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” (140). Later in the novel, she repeats the charge: “the hotel where you raped me... The Enchanted Hunters” (200). The physical damage from the rape is evidenced by Humbert’s statement, “Presently, making a sizzling sound with her lips, she started complaining of pains, said she could not sit, said I had torn something inside her...” (140) and he confesses that he has gone too far, “This was a lone child, an absolute waif, with whom a heavy-limbed, foul-smelling adult had had strenuous intercourse three times that very morning... I had been careless, stupid, and ignoble” (140). At the end of the novel, Humbert passes judgment on himself, “Had I come before myself, I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years for rape” (307). Despite the balance of evidence, the child-as-seducer narrative not only pervades the cultural discourse of the novel but also dominates that of the two major film adaptations of the book. Both Stanley Kubrick and Adrian Lyne enthusiastically invested their considerable talents in the task of depicting *Lolita* as the seductress and Humbert as the tragic victim. As the respected critic Leslie Fiedler sums up, “*Lolita* (1958) whose subject is the seduction of a middle-aged man by a 12-year-old... *Lolita* (who is a) nymphomaniac, demonic rapist of the soul... (Humbert) is fascinated, raped and left to die in Jail” (Fiedler 1997, 213). The consequences of this discourse are all too evident in the real world, where nearly two-thirds of adult women and most children who have been sexually assaulted do not report it due to the well-founded fear that they will be met with “Deflection, Denial and Disbelief” (Lovett, Coy and Kelly 2018).

NABOKOV, HUMBERT, AND PEDOPHILIA

Nabokov told scholar Alfred Appel (1971) that he “despised ideological coercion instinctively all my life.” Despite this assertion, such is Nabokov’s narrative prowess that Norman Miller was moved to declare “*Lolita* [...] can be quite simply described as an assault on the reader,” who “softened by the power of appeal is, [...] ready to forgive all” (Miller 1972, 188). Similarly, Tamir-Ghez (1979) states, “What enraged or at least disquieted most readers and critics was the fact that they found themselves unwittingly accepting, even sharing, the feelings of Humbert Humbert [...] They caught themselves identifying with him.” Kevin Ohi (2005) argues that the persuasive power of the novel is the product of the beauty of the words Nabokov plays with “one of the novel’s central insights: the linguistic seduction and the erotic seduction are one (160).”

In *Lolita*, Nabokov advances arguments and utilizes rhetorical strategies that have persuaded many readers, scholars included, that pedophilia is the rapture of romantic love: “*Lolita* is not merely about sexual perversion but rather about love” (Appel 1967, 209). This is a core belief for pedophiles. The Penguin edition back cover promotes the book as “the greatest novel of rapture in modern fiction.” Notwithstanding the unreliability of the narrator and intertextual ambiguities, Nabokov, a lawyer’s son, has Humbert advocate for his disposition by citing many of the arguments pro-pedophilic propagandists deploy in their defense (Mihalides et al. 2004). These include inconsistencies in the law (18), the sexuality of children (133), cross-cultural prevalence (19), differential maturation (20), and acceptance in history (Dyer 1988). He invokes a long list of luminaries from Poe to Dante to make his case to the reader (Proffer 1968, 39). He, as pedophiles do, either denies or minimizes the potential harm he inflicts by limiting it to the loss of childhood (281). Nabokov’s genius as a writer enables him to confound and dazzle the reader causing many to “condone the abuse” because they have been “seduced into conniving in the violation” (Trilling 1958). Whilst more sophisticated scholars have condemned Humbert for the monster he is, Nabokov’s engineering of sympathy for and identification with a pedophile protagonist has many fervent converts. Martin Green (1996) articulates his identification “Humbert Humbert is our protagonist and we are unable to disassociate ourselves from him self-righteously, because he represents a part of ourselves, we are normally proud of [...]. He is ourselves, without our inhibitions, acting out our tendencies.” Perhaps one of the most consequential converts was film director Stanley Kubrick, who amplified and exported this romantic reading into popular culture. The image of the sexually provocative *Lolita* seductively sucking a lollipop as she gazes out over red heart-shaped glasses has become a cultural icon of the child as an object of male desire.

NABOKOV’S ABIDING INTEREST IN PEDOPHILIA

Pedophilia was an enduring preoccupation for Nabokov. The pedophilic motif permeates his oeuvre, from his early poetry to the posthumously published *The Original of Laura*. Novelist Martin Amis notes that “In other words, Laura joins *The Enchanter* (1939a), *Lolita* (1955), *Ada* (1969), *Transparent Things* (1972), and *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974) in unignorably concerning itself with the sexual despoliation of very young girls” (Amis 2018). The biographer Robert Roper comments “That Nabokov was mulling the *Lolita* plexus for a long while before taking up the subject in America is clear, and he would return to the theme of—possibly to his own private fascination with—the bodies of young girls in other texts, so that, from one perspective, at any rate, his entire body of work can be said to be centrally about this matter” (Roper 2015,139).

In the final analysis, the sheer congruity of insights and the wealth of detail on the most intimate thought processes of a pedophile suggest a remarkably prescient level of imaginative awareness. Martin Green (1996) observes “Autobiography is a device, and to speak in his own voice is a matter of having a model and being a mimic. With Nabokov, there is always a mask, and of a self-proclaiming kind. Sincerity is something he achieves not by laying all masks aside but by manipulating them.” Studies (Cantor and McPhail 2016; Sheldon and Howitt 2007) show that there is a large population of people who experience intense pedophilic impulses, who either do not act on them or alternately satisfy themselves through covert means such as fantasy, pornography, voyeurism, or furtive frottage. As Nabokov scripts the unnamed protagonist of *The Enchanter* (1939 b) to confide, “I’m no ravisher. The limitations I have established for my yearning, the masks I invent for it when, in real life, I conjure up an invisible method of sating my passion” (15). Nabokov’s Humbert makes an eloquent plea for tolerance of these “victimless” inclinations, “(the)majority of sex offenders that hanker for some throbbing, sweet moaning, physical but not necessarily coital, relation with a girl-child, are innocuous, inadequate, passive, timid strangers who merely ask the community to allow them to pursue their practically harmless, so-called aberrant behavior” (87).

II. CONCLUSION

This essay has sought to delineate the remarkable level of insight that Nabokov had into the mind and methods of a pedophile. It seeks to add a psychological perspective to the understanding of this unique novel. Nabokov has asserted that “*Lolita* has no moral in tow. “However, the novel, aspects of its scholarship, and its adaptation into film by Kubrick have had a profound impact on society and culture. What Durham (2009) calls “the *Lolita* effect” is perhaps the most enduring social and cultural consequence of the book and film. Despite the ubiquity of this unintended outcome, sections of the discourse on this novel often remain disconnected, evidenced by the reluctance of some critics to address the context of its contents and consequent societal impact. The role culture can play in legitimizing sexual violence is evidenced by history. During the Renaissance, rapes were regarded as expressions of male passion and as such were socially valorized and rarely prosecuted (Ruggiero 1985). The aestheticization of rape in high culture—epitomized by depictions in art, such as the rape of Lucretia, the Sabine and Amazon women—has nurtured, normalized, and empowered these ideologies (Matthes 2001). Just as we respond Picasso’s *Guernica* in the light of the horrors of Franco’s war or Solzhenitsyn is read in terms of the terror of the Stalinist state, the time has perhaps come to contextualize this artistic masterpiece to the reality of the children who cry into the night, every night.

No other novel has depicted the mind and methods of a pedophile with such clinical accuracy or utilized the beauty of language and the complexities of narration with such power. The failure in some sections of the academic discourse to systematically address its roots in the real world has contributed to the romanticisation of pedophilia and the *Lolita* effect.

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