

Study Questions for Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955).

(For future users of this website, the edition of *Lolita* referred to in the questions below is Alfred Appel's *The Annotated Lolita*, Vintage Books, 1970.)

Proposal/Elucidation #1: Humbert Humbert as Writer

Probably the most important thing to keep in mind about Humbert Humbert is that he is writing. He has fifty-six days until his trial, a trial he knows will probably result in his death, and what he does with the time is write. He writes his life *as a work of art*. Not as a work of autobiography, mind you, and not of confession--not, certainly, of self-justification--Humbert is too smart for that--but as a work of art in whose first paragraph he will analogize his own predicament with perhaps one of the most sacred images of the history of western culture, the crown of thorns placed on Jesus' head at the Crucifixion. "Look," Humbert concludes the first paragraph to his opus, "at this tangle of thorns." In Humbert, then, we are dealing with an artist, or, to be fair, a man who thinks he is an artist, and who esteems his story as capable of shaping nothing less than his reader's consciousness, just as was the story of Christ.

If we keep this in mind--that H.H. is writing his life as art--we may have an easier time accounting for the many kinds of language he uses to do so. At many points in his narrative Humbert will write in a language of heartbreaking precision, especially in his descriptions of Lolita-the-real-girl--and here I am thinking, for example, of her "sooty eyelashes," or, as she rides her bicycle, her "one hand dreaming in her print-flowered lap." This kind of language makes me feel something of Humbert's humanity, and makes me feel that he has seen something of Lolita's, too. But Humbert also writes in a language, or language-s, that feel more performative than genuine, language that is ornate, fussy, high-falootin' ("You sound like a book, *Dad*"), needlessly literarily allusive, needlessly French, shamelessly alliterative ("dwelt delicately"), at times archaic, at times abstruse, at times very capably and idiomatically American, at times purplely poetic, nearly always entertaining (or so I would argue); and, perhaps most important for our purposes, emotionally very hard to decipher, for Humbert's ineluctable drift toward irony, parody, and caricature, the cruelest of his caricatures, perhaps, those of himself. The sheer density of his prose, its brocaded, embroidered, thorn-interlaced, almost *material* feeling thing-like-ness, should be thought of not as Vladimir Nabokov's "window" onto Humbert's "reality," but as Humbert's performance of what he wants his readers to believe that reality was like.

Does viewing the novel this way--as Humbert's eleventh hour opus--change or influence your attitude towards it? And, secondly, do you feel that life can be like that--that our way with words sometimes creates not our true selves, but our masks?

Proposal #2: First Chapter as "Contract" With Its Reader

Another way to get on terms with *Lolita* is to concentrate on its first chapter. As Peter Turchi taught me in a lecture on *Lolita* at Warren Wilson's MFA program--this was several years ago--a great novel will draw up "contract" with its reader in its first

pages—it will show you, in condensed form, the laws of the world about to unfold. Note, for instance, that in the novel's second and third sentences, the emphasis is on the word, not the person: "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." Note the author's seeming pleasure in syllabing the word into its separate sounds, then his virtuosity in immediately arriving at several new "ee" and "tee" words which, joined together in a sentence, describe how the sound "Lolita" gets made in the mouth: "tip," "tongue" "taking" "trip, "three,," "teeth," "tip," "palate." Note the author's preoccupation with the way the word "Lolita" affects *him*: "My sin, My soul." Already, in sentence two, we intuit something of this author's (ultimately monstrous) solipsism.

Also, did anyone notice how short that first chapter is? With his cursory reference to Lolita's "precursor," Humbert mocks those realistic novels that provide, in their first chapters, a psychological or historical explanation for the protagonist's current behavior or crisis. You might also note the math problem H.H. asks you to perform if you're to figure out when it was that H.H. was involved with that precursor: "About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer." We don't realize it, but as we pretzel our heads around that formulation, we are engaging the first of the many number-games arrayed for us by the trickster-gamester Humbert Humbert, games, coincidences, doublings, labyrinths and privately determined numerologies comprising a kind of tracery of the convolutions of Humbert's mind.

In focusing on these single sentences, I mean to demonstrate the delicacy of attention required of us if we're to understand the novel's meanings. We may decide we don't like that kind of novel; but if we're going to proceed with *Lolita*—if we're going to be good stewards of it, in a sense—best, probably, to take down our dictionaries, to take down our French-English dictionaries, even, to ready our pens and our reading journals, to poise ourselves to hover over the word. Have you found, during the days or weeks you've been reading *Lolita*, a heightened awareness to words generally, to their lives and after-lives, their percussions and re-percussions? Some novels, like *Lolita*, will train us in a new kind of attention: what aspect of your experience has this new attention revealed?

Proposal/ Question #3: What Kind of Person is Humbert Humbert?

What kind of person is Humbert Humbert? In deciding that he is a monster—which is how I myself have been referring to him in previous questions—might we be limiting the novel's potential to teach us something about ourselves? What sort of person holds a resolutely ironic stance towards his feelings and those of others; seeks coincidence and an almost mystical patterning in the events that make up his story; prefers obsession and lust to acceptance and supportive familial and/or conjugal relationship; repeatedly aggrandizes and distorts his own image, often to the total disregard of the realities of other people; believes in fate; revels in the melancholic recognition of the passage of time and love; seeks the structured, the patterned, the intentional—the artful—in all things; sees himself as the center of the universe, all reality merely a projection of his subjective state?

Not my sort of person, I dearly hope, and not yours either; but surely these are habits of psychology we have all struggled to overcome. One of my real dilemmas in reading the novel these last weeks has been articulating why Humbert needs to be so horrible and horrifying for the novel to reveal something universal in our humanity. Could Nabokov have taught us the same lesson, I ask myself, without Humbert's having stolen Lolita's childhood? Why the extremity, why the perversity, why the nightmare? "There is much sense in Humbert's madness," writes the scholar Michael Wood, "but of course we shan't see it unless we see the madness too." And this is a theme we've wrestled with in previous meetings; the Misfit, from Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find," is arguably one of the most intelligent and sympathetic characters she ever wrote—yet he is a murderer. Why is it that so many writers seek to reveal the natural in our nature through the least natural among us? I genuinely don't know the answer myself—and open the question to the group.

A corollary to the question above: Why do the sexual encounters between H.H. and Lolita, so troubling to read, need to be in the story? I would argue that they do need to be there; that for the story to "enchant" us, it must engage us at the level of our "spines" (and Nabokov once said that for a story to be great it had to engage the reader at the level not just of the mind, but of the "spine.") Also, why do you think Nabokov chose to make Lolita twelve, as opposed to, say, six? And why didn't he monstrous-ize Humbert's appearance and bearing? Why is Humbert made to seem sort of attractive?

Proposal/ Question #4: "Somehow his horrid scrapes become our scrapes"

The following is a set of remarks from *The Magician's Doubt*, a monograph on Nabokov's novels I highly recommend, by the very delicate reader--and professor of English at Princeton University—Michael Wood.

"We might [...] say that while Humbert writes wonderfully about his own deviance, he can't write himself straight; and the thinness of his repentance is a measure of the weird, lingering humanity of his crime. He has been involved in 'intricately sordid situations,' as the scholar, F. W. Dupee says, but somehow 'his horrid scrapes become our scrapes'. Not literally or legally, we hope, but closely enough for all but saints and hypocrites. Love itself, of the least deviant kind, is scarcely less possessive or crazed than Humbert's mania." (Michael Wood, *The Magician's Doubt*, (Princeton University Press, 1994) pp. 140-141.)

Do you agree with Wood? Does the novel, as Wood seems to imply, have something to teach us about "love itself"?

Proposal/ Question #5: What do you make of Quilty?

We have talked over these past months about a novel's central character being "foiled" by another character that seems to represent that first character's perfect challenge. And certainly we could say this of Quilty—that he "foils" Humbert. He also seems a kind of double to Humbert—a shadow, a shade, a reflection, an inversion. (Doubling happens all

over the novel; for a brilliant analysis of why this might be so, see Alfred Appel's introduction to his *The Annotated Lolita* (Vintage Books, 1970)). When we meet on Monday, I would like to look over Chapter 35, the chapter in which Humbert kills Quilty. Figuring out the ways in which Quilty foils Humbert—and also, in kind of infinite regress, repeats and repeats and repeats him—may prove useful in articulating the novel's (yes) moral offering.

Proposal/ Question #6: Can we believe that Humbert Humbert really “loved” Lolita?

Toward the end of Chapter 29—the chapter in which Humbert goes to find Lolita--Humbert declares to his reader that he “loved” her. (In Appel's annotated edition, this happens on pp. 277-278).

Please reread this passage again, and, if possible, please reread it within the context of Chapter 29 as a whole. Do you believe Humbert? We'll talk about why we do or we don't when we meet.

Proposal/ Question #7: Why Read This Book?

Peter Turchi recently sent me the title for the talk he'll be giving at All Souls in February, and it goes like this: “The Bright Side of Darkness: Stories and Novels that Take Us Places We Don't Want to Go to Meet People We Don't Want to Meet Doing Things We Don't Want Anyone to Do; and Why We Should Read Them Anyway.”

Have you articulated for yourself a reason to read *Lolita*—a reason perhaps more substantial than the sheer pleasure of its surface effects: its linguistic play, the elegance of its structure, the fun to be had in solving its puzzles and games? If you have articulated this larger reason, what is it? And if you haven't, why does the novel ultimately disappoint you? I myself promise to articulate why I believe the novel is worthwhile—but not until I hear from you.

Proposal/ Question #8: An Ape Drawing the Bars of His Own Cage

To the question of where he found the inspiration for *Lolita*, Nabakov replied: “As far as I can recall, the initial shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature's cage.”

How might this image—an ape drawing the bars of his own cage—stand as an adequate metaphor for Humbert Humbert?

Looking forward to seeing you Monday,
Emilie

