



## INSTITUTIONEN FÖR SPRÅK OCH LITTERATURER

SEXUAL ABUSE IN VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S LOLITA:

# A Psychoanalytic approach to Humbert Humbert's Sexuality

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# Abstract

**Title:** *Sexual Abuse in Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita*

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**Abstract:** Through examining Humbert Humbert's psychological defense mechanisms in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, this essay aims to analyze Humbert Humbert's sexuality through the framework of psychoanalytic theory by demonstrating how Humbert Humbert's abuse is employed as a psychological defense to process his sexuality. By analyzing his abusive actions, the results suggest that the reason for Humbert Humbert's psychological defense is caused by his fear of abandonment that has been a constant issue throughout the novel, both physically and emotionally. This essay shows that the inconsistency of Humbert Humbert's abusive behavior further indicates his denial and separation of self, contributing to his sexually abusive behavior.

**Keywords:** Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, Psychoanalysis, Sexuality, Sexual Abuse

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# Introduction

Originating before medieval times, romantic fiction has since developed into what we now know and recognize as the romantic novel. However, the image of romance is frequently depicted as both sexist and violent, with endless portrayals of aggressive and possessive male love interests. Furthermore, the depiction of sexual abuse in romantic literature is hardly uncommon, particularly in young adult romance fiction such as the novel *Twilight* by Stephanie Meyer, where the romantic gestures include abuse such as stalking and patronizing behavior. *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E.L James has reached a wide demographic by introducing its readers to alternative sexual practices. However, the interpretation of BDSM in *Fifty Shades of Grey* has gathered a wide variety of both recognition and controversy through her misrepresentation of sexual abuse as a romanticized and erotic concept (pp. 69, 110).

According to Bonomi, the depiction of abuse in literature normalizes the practice (2013).

If sexual abuse has been the subject of numerous literary works, nowhere is it as uniquely portrayed as in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Published in 1955, *Lolita* has since been subject to countless interpretations and has been described by readers as a romantic novel. Notably, the most common interpretations of the novel are perhaps best presented by Dieter E. Zimmer's online gallery of the numerous book cover designs of *Lolita*, depicting a young victim as a charming seductress. On the cover of the novel *Lolita – the Story of a Cover Girl*, Bertram and Leving write that these illustrations go against the will of the author, who emphasized his objection towards "any kind of representation of a little girl" (p. 13). In line with White, these cover illustrations continue to provide the world with a sexualized image of a young victim (p. 38). The topic of this essay is the representation of sexuality, which has been a major concern in the critical reading of this novel. However, the specific aim of this essay will be to assess Humbert Humbert's abusive actions in *Lolita* as a defense mechanism against his sexuality.

Merskin states that the interpretation of "young girls as inviting and willing participants in their own sexual exploitation" are as interesting as they are disgusting (p. 97). Above all, the aestheticization of sexual abuse that occurs in the novel has resulted in the iconic sexualized image of young Lolita girls (Albright, p. 1). Albright finds that the iconic image in question has featured female children in make-up and provocative poses in child beauty pageants as well as advertising (p. 1). According to Albright, this image sends a negative message to young girls and women, conveying that they are nothing more than sexual objects (p. 1).

Regarding Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, the novel is introduced as a statement by the criminal, Humbert Humbert, and navigates the reader through a series of events that center on his love and victim, Dolores Haze (1955). As the journey takes the reader on a kidnapper's road trip across America, navigating through the states by a series of sharp Freudian remarks and horrifying descriptions of sexual abuse, it delves into the psyche of a pedophile and his passionate attraction to a growing child (1955). Incidentally, Assa states that Nabokov had an avid interest in psychology, as well as a passionate dislike for Sigmund Freud and his proto-theories in psychology (p. 1). Despite the author's aversion towards Freud, the content of the novel is largely composed of Freudian themes. Still, the research aimed at sexuality, or sexual abuse, particularly in *Lolita* is typically approached through a feminist perspective and lacks other viewpoints.

This paper aims to explore the depiction of Humbert Humbert's sexual abuse as a psychological defense against his repressed sexuality through the framework of psychoanalytic theory. This will be accomplished by analyzing Humbert Humbert's delusional interpretations of romance and how it changes throughout the narrative. Furthermore, this paper will establish how his unconscious defense mechanism against his abusive actions towards Dolores Haze is manifested to subjugate his guilt for abusing his underage lover. Additionally, it aims to identify Humbert Humbert's sexual love towards Lolita as a psychological regression of his sexual love towards Annabel, which will act as one of the fundamental issues of this study. By delving into the unconscious mind of Humbert Humbert, this research paper seeks to answer questions such as how Humbert's actions indicate psychological patterns of destructive behaviors and how sexuality and violence are represented through the portrayal of characters in Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*. Addressing the claim through this approach highlights the concern of sexual abuse as an early behavior in a perspective that closely relates to the aim of this study.

## **Methodology**

In agreement with Falk, *Lolita* can be interpreted as a parody of a variety of different genres, most significantly as a parody of Freud's psychoanalysis (p. 1). As proclaimed by Werner, Nabokov's aversion towards psychoanalysis, and Freud, is an indisputable fact and is proven by references to Freud that span half a century, as well as Nabokov's interviews, letters, lectures, autobiography and the majority of his novels (p. 214). Humbert Humbert mirrors Nabokov's hatred of psychoanalysis by enunciating his contempt for the discipline throughout

the novel (p. 18). Despite the obvious mockery, a close reading of the novel *Lolita* will be conducted by approaching the concepts through psychoanalytic theory. By peeling back the layers of obvious inserts of phallic imagery, the study seeks to access the analytic truth that is hidden underneath all the traps that were placed by Nabokov.

To clarify, psychoanalytic theory is based on the principles that were established by psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). These principles are part of the mind’s defense mechanism and are used to protect the Freudian concept of “ego,” meaning the “I” or the “bearer of consciousness” against unacceptable impulses that cause anxiety (“A Glossary of Freudian Terms”). As mentioned by Tyson, the defenses are the means through which the unconscious is kept repressed in the unconscious (p. 15). This is done to protect the mind from the information that the mind cannot handle knowing (p. 15). There are several types of defenses that protect the mind from information it cannot process at the time. However, the defenses that will be included in this paper are denial, regression and projection. The meaning of denial is not believing in the existence of a problem, or perhaps even repressing the existence of an event (p. 15). Regression can be described as a sort of flashback and is a temporary regression to a former psychological state that can either be pleasant or unpleasant (p. 15). Projection, on the other hand, includes assigning fears, issues, or guilty desire unto someone else and condemning the other person as a substitute for oneself (p. 15). Additionally, other forms of defenses are included in the paper as defense mechanisms in line with Sigmund Freud’s principles. Rationalization, for instance, is the ego defense which includes providing logical reasoning that justifies these impulses that lead to destructive behavior (“American Psychological Association”). These defenses hide what are called the core issues, such as fear of abandonment, fear of betrayal, etc., and are the main causes for feeling anxiety (p. 16).

According to Tyson, the concepts of psychoanalysis, such as defense mechanisms, are in such common use that people have acquired a simplified definition of the concepts (p. 11). However, their superficial meaning poses a problem as it renders them meaningless (p. 11). In other words, the disadvantage of the common use of psychoanalytic concepts “in their clichéd form” is that people are unlikely to view them as means of understanding human behavior (p. 11).

However, as the fundamental concepts of psychoanalytic criticism is the understanding of human behavior, it is the ideal theory for the illustration of human behavior in literary texts (p. 11). Furthermore, the main objective of psychoanalysis is to resolve unknown psychological problems, revealed through patterns of destructive behavior (p. 12).

That notion is supported by the psychoanalytical concept of the unconscious (p. 12). The unconscious is described as the container of unresolved conflicts, guilt, and other reasons for a person to experience anxiety or emotional pain (p. 12).

*Lolita* is narrated from the perspective of Humbert Humbert and it is through him that the readers interpret the novel. Due to this, the psychoanalytic theory contributes to the understanding of his unreliable narration, and, thereby, his unconscious mind, and what motivates his behavior. Thus, *Lolita* bases its structure on the interpretation of the unconscious mind behind the narration of Humbert Humbert.

Psychoanalytic theory will be used in this paper by identifying the defense that Humbert Humbert uses to contain the unconscious through the act of rationalization, as well as denial, regression and projection (p. 15-16). These defense mechanisms are used throughout the novel and contribute to our understanding of Humbert Humbert as he forms his identity around his unconscious desires (p. 15).

More importantly, the novel *Lolita* begins with the words of Dr. John Ray, Jr., Ph.D. who explains that he has received a manuscript titled *Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male* from the deceased author, known as “Humbert Humbert, or H.H.’s,” lawyer. This manuscript, according to the doctor, depicts his horrible yet beautifully written memoirs (pp. 1-3). The novel continues through the narration of Humbert Humbert’s happy childhood, where he met and lost his love, the twelve-year-old Annabel (pp. 8-14). This, according to the narrator, was the beginning of his attraction towards sexually desirable children he calls “nymphets” (p. 4). Throughout his adult life, he looks for children like his lost Annabel, until he finds Dolores, or as he calls her, Lolita (p. 14).

His actions that are illustrated in the manuscript are described by Dr. John Ray, Jr. as persuasive, despite their horrible nature (pp. 1-3). This is the very essence of rationalization, in how it normalizes actions that should otherwise be condemned. As we see in the case with Dr. John Ray, Jr., he is exposed to the rationalizations of Humbert Humbert, which affects his judgement of Humbert Humbert’s abusive actions towards Dolores Haze. This in turn, also influences the readers who process Humbert’s actions through the rationalizing narration. In other words, although Humbert’s actions are horrible, they are rationalized to the point of actual reason. This impacts the reading of the novel as the reader is being manipulated by Humbert Humbert’s rationalization.

This paper begins with Humbert’s early experiences and continues to analyze his psychological patterns of destructive behaviors later on in life and will center on five sections. The first section will cover the childhood of Humbert Humbert through a psychoanalytic



reading of his childhood days, along with his lost love. The second section, will include his obsession of Lolita, whom he refers to as the incarnation of his lost love and how they both connect with each other (p. 14). The third section will, in turn, lead to the analysis of his tendencies to justify his violent behavior towards Lolita. As he does not see fully grown women as sexually desirable, his behavior towards Lolita differs greatly from his actions towards them, even though the abuse acts as the only constant. The fourth section examines the imitating behavior. In his and Lolita's tendencies to imitate behavior and certain characteristics, their roles as predator and prey act as the only constant. Lastly, the fifth section will contain a psychoanalytic reading of Humbert Humbert's inconsistent actions and thoughts that indicate a separation of self.

Although Humbert Humbert dislikes grown women, this study will be limited to the psychoanalytic approach and will not include discussions of feminism, as the current research on the subject of sexual abuse is especially focused on feminist theory. However, the research that is included in this paper is not limited to psychoanalysis alone. The secondary sources consist of a wide variety of books, internet sources, and academic papers on subjects such as sexuality, sexual abuse, and psychoanalysis.

Additionally, the secondary sources regarding psychoanalysis mainly include the book *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* by Lois Tyson, written in order to educate students and teachers alike, and various websites concerning psychoanalytic terminology and Sigmund Freud. *The Function of Parody in Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita* by Nichole Falk covers how Nabokov played with the concept of parody in *Lolita*, which offers this paper another perspective to take into account. In "Knowing Lolita: Sexual Deviance and Normality in Nabokov's *Lolita*," Eric Goldman writes about how *Lolita* portrays the representation of different concepts of sexuality. Altogether, the combined sources used in this paper contribute to furthering the purpose of this research.

## Childhood

The most important early experiences in Humbert's life revolve around psychological trauma. As he recalls his childhood, he was born in Paris in 1910 to "a gentle, easygoing" father and a mother who later died of an accident and whom he could not remember (pp. 7-8). Raised by his aunt Sybil, he grew to be a happy child in a happy environment (p. 8). However, as he reached the tender age of thirteen, he fell in love with a girl, named Annabel Leigh, who died of typhus four months later (p. 12). Despite their short romance, her impact upon him lasted a

lifetime and remained a psychological wound lodged in his unconscious mind.

First of all, Falk states that the foreword to the novel predicts the parody of a case study that will be the theme of this section (p. 19). To clarify, the parody in question is the childhood trauma of Humbert Humbert that is specifically designed by the author to parody a psychological case study. According to Falk, this can be interpreted as a mockery of the practice, designed to highlight its reductive aspects (p. 19). Similarly, Appel suggests that Nabokov provides the readers with the first trap by providing a childhood trauma, which might account for his pedophilia, or “nympholepsy” (p. 220). However, despite what Falk correctly pointed out as Nabokov’s mocking, oversimplistic highlighting of the aspects of psychoanalysis, this chapter will nonetheless focus on the Nabokov’s fabricated trauma as a source for clarification (p. 19).

Notably, Nabokov’s allusion to Edgar Allan Poe’s famous poem “Annabel Lee” is the beginning of Humbert Humbert’s psychological issues in the form of his childhood sweetheart Annabel Leigh. Although he can no longer see her face in his mind’s eye, recalling only Lolita, his reminiscences of their budding romance are both wistful and sentimental. Despite his feelings towards her, their romance was also clouded by frustration due to their inability to sexually explore each other, away from the prying eyes of adults. This frustration ended in a traumatizing event on a seemingly deserted beach, where they were discovered by two men that started to cheer them on. As the sexual intercourse was interrupted, the feelings of sexual frustration and humiliation resulted in trauma and served as a constant presence in Humbert’s life. Nevertheless, because of her untimely death, he was unable to process the trauma of the event and instead associated it with her death: “I also know that the shock of Annabel’s death consolidated the frustration of that nightmare summer, made of it a permanent obstacle to any further romance throughout the cold years of my youth” (p. 12).

After the death of his childhood sweetheart, he was forced to repress the sexual feelings that he had towards her to be able to defend himself from psychological pain. Despite showing no sign of considering sexual desire to be shameful or negative, the trauma that he suffered caused him to repress his desire for a romantic relationship. According to him, the shock of her death was combined with sexual frustration, which made him incapable of engaging in sexual intercourse with other partners during his youth. Furthermore, as he never consummated his relationship with Annabel, he associates feelings of sexual frustration with death and pain. As explained by Tyson, psychological defenses exist to keep the repressed parts of our mind from surfacing to escape knowing what the mind cannot handle knowing (p. 15). However, these repressed feelings, or what he calls obstacles, will resurface in other

forms and through other means.

In the case of Humbert Humbert, the account of what happened suggests that this chapter of his life has already closed and can no longer hurt him. However, his dismissal of its continued effect on him beyond the years of his youth is a defense mechanism that attempts to conclude an unresolved psychological issue to repress the pain of the traumatic event. This form of denial is focused on the effects of the incident, rather than on the incident itself, thereby, denying the existence of the problem.

Long after her death I felt her thoughts floating through mine. Long before we met we had had the same dreams. We compared notes. We found strange affinities. The same June of the same year (1919) a stray canary had fluttered into her house and mine, in two widely separated countries. Oh, Lolita, had you loved me thus! (Nabokov 12-13)

Due to the psychological trauma that he experienced with the death of his childhood love, his psychological defenses hinder him from processing particular events in a rational and logical manner. In fact, by directing his love for Annabel into fantasies, he, thereby, concludes that their shared experiences are proof of a connection between them that explains their bonds of love.

As shown, he concludes that random events that occurred even before their first meeting are proof of Annabel's love for him. By creating an imaginary link between them, he projects his own feelings towards the dead Annabel, whom he sees as a vessel for his repressed desires, as a psychological defense mechanism. To be able to defend his unconscious mind from further trauma, Humbert Humbert rationalizes their love as unexplainable occurrences that stretched even after the time of her death. Because he believes that his own thoughts mirror hers in death, her death allows him to project his own thought onto her and indulges him to imagine whatever he wants her to think and how her existence will continue: "I am convinced, however, that in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel" (p. 12). The trauma that Humbert describes serves as a psychological regression, beginning with Annabel and is later replaced with Lolita. This psychological regression, which will be covered with the introduction of Lolita, is the vessel for his frustration and sexual desires and serves as another form of defense mechanism. Furthermore, he is able to cope with the fact that Lolita does not love him back, because she might have loved him in another form, in another life. This form of imaginary thinking, interwoven with

the logic of psychological rationalization, is the core of his mental protection. It serves to shield him against the familiar pain of his childhood and functions to prevent further damage. In other words, by channeling his irrational and often magical thinking into rational arguments and explanations, he uses rationalization as a psychological defense mechanism. With the use of psychological rationalization, he describes the connection between Annabel and Lolita as both magic and fate, joining both mystical elements to explain a non-existent link between two girls with no relation to each other apart from being the recipients of Humbert Humbert's love.

As he views his and Annabel's affair as unfinished, he describes his relationship with Lolita as a continuation of his relationship with Annabel, despite Lolita being an unwilling participant. In an attempt to mend the rift in his unconscious mind, he uses Lolita, a living and breathing girl, as a replacement of the dead Annabel, whom he can no longer touch. By connecting the two girls together, Humbert is able to fabricate a continuation of the sexual scenario from long ago to deal with the process of an unresolved psychological issue, which is the interrupted sexual consummation of his relationship with Annabel.

He sees Lolita as a vessel for his repressed desire to consummate his relationship with Annabel and is therefore in denial about the death of Annabel. In accordance with Tyson, Humbert Humbert's fabricated connection between Lolita and Annabel is more than a mere fantasy, it is a form of denial (p. 47). This psychological defense works as a tool to help him repress the truth of Annabel's death: the fact that she is indeed gone. His denial of the event is unconsciously done in hopes of resolving the unresolved issue with the act of sexual consummation. Thus, the connection he creates between Lolita and Annabel is his denial of her death, thereby, immortalizing her in his unconscious mind: "while with a generosity that was ready to offer her everything, my heart, my throat, my entrails, I gave her to hold in her awkward fist the scepter of my passion" (p. 13-14). He describes their "unsuccessful first tryst", as perhaps there were many that came after, as an interruption of a scene of worship (p. 13). The phallic symbolism contrasts harshly with the ceremonial imagery, thereby conjuring a metaphorically ambiguous image. Following the ritualistic imagery, his gruesome offering of his flesh, in a literal sense, provides a dark impression of the royal symbolism by tainting the image with death. Due to his inability to properly process the pain of her passing and the sexual frustration, he describes himself in a position to offer her everything, but instead he offers her sex. With this intention, he prostrates himself before her, as if in the presence of a queen: "was it then, in the glitter of that remote summer, that the rift in my life began; or was my excessive desire for that child only the first evidence of an inherent singularity?" (p. 12).

As demonstrated, Humbert Humbert's psychological defenses hinder him from knowing what went wrong in his life and what kind of impact that love had on his sexuality. In other words, he considers the possibility of his time spent with Annabel to have triggered the development of his pedophilia. However, he also considers their involvement as merely the first evidence of his obsessive and violent behavior towards love, which shows that he cannot move past the obstacles created by his defenses to truly consider the subject.

Although he refers to his love interest as a "child", he identifies himself as a pedophile in action rather than in words:

I knew exactly what I wanted to do, and how to do it, without impinging on a child's chastity; after all, I had some experience in my life of pederosis; had visually possessed dappled nymphets in parks; had wedged my wary and bestial way into the hottest, most crowded corner of a city bus full of strap-hanging school children. (Nabokov 60-61)

Nevertheless, Humbert Humbert never shows signs of shame towards his deviant sexual desires in his memoirs. Despite his lamenting the problems that arose in his life, he is in denial over the consequences of his actions that the recipients of his sexual interests had to endure. Because of this, he specifies the rift in his own life, rather than in theirs. In other words, his main concern is how this has affected his life and not the lives of the children that were subjected to his sexual abuse.

Further in the novel, however, Humbert Humbert addresses the "able psychiatrist" directly. He assumes that this psychiatrist will be anxious for him to return to the seaside, the metaphorical French Riviera, to find the "gratification of a lifetime urge" (p. 188). This, supposedly, will release him from his "subconscious obsession" that involved the incomplete sexual intercourse, thus completing the circle (p. 188). As Humbert Humbert confesses that this was indeed part of his plan, he rationalizes his decision by claiming it to be a "rational pursuit of a purely theoretical thrill" and not the search for a "Sublimated Riviera" (p. 188). Despite how this 'case study' may have been constructed by Nabokov as a mockery of psychoanalysts, the readers' perception of Humbert's trauma differs from how he presents his trauma to justify his subsequent behavior.

# Incarnation

As was previously stated, the parody of a case study provides the readers with a trauma that could account for Humbert Humbert's pedophilia. However, this does not account for the sexual abuse that he later inflicts on Lolita, but is merely a motive for his actions.

Additionally, the sexual abuse of Dolores Haze does not begin with his obsession with her, but as a result of his psychological regression and denial of the death of his childhood sweetheart. Humbert believed that Lolita was the incarnation of his lost love Annabel, who haunted him throughout his life (p. 14). As he watches Lolita, he remarks on the similarities between her and Annabel: "a blue sea-wave swelled under my heart and, from a mat in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses" (p. 41). He highlights their resemblance with a metaphor of seaside waves that reference the French Riviera, reenacting the traumatic event with his lost love. Although the simplicity of the reference is clear, the imagery of the observations invokes the picturesque portrait of his childhood days. This can be interpreted as an evident link between Humbert Humbert's sexual preferences and his childhood trauma like the case study suggests. However, this connection can be read as an attempt to validate his attraction to the child by connecting her image with Annabel's. By reincarnating her, and, thereby, anchoring her spirit in Lolita, he denies her death and is unable to psychologically move on from the trauma.

However, as he sees Lolita for the first time, he experiences psychological regression: "The twenty-five years I had lived since then, tapered to a palpitating point, and vanished" (p. 42). As the first sight of her induces him to regress to a former psychological state, into another psychical age entirely, it is essential to take account of this regression in the analysis of his mentality and, thereby, consider why he believes her to be a willing participant in his sexual abuse. By merging her and her opinions with the dead Annabel's, he creates an opportunity for himself to interpret her actions in a way that benefits him. In other words, the psychological defense against the death of Annabel manifests itself here as denial against the real identity of Dolores Haze to repress the pain of the past. As, according to Couturier, he sees her not as she is but as the reconstruction of his unsatisfied sexual desire for his childhood love (p. 29). Specifically, Couturier explains that he sees in her the features of Annabel (p. 29).

Additionally, the intensity of his emotions is, again, revealed with the very scent of her. "My darling, my sweetheart stood for a moment near me — wanted the funnies — and she smelt almost exactly like the other one, the Riviera one, but more intensely so, with

rougher overtones — a torrid odor that at once set my manhood astir...” (p. 45). Here, Humbert Humbert, again, undergoes psychological regression and seems to pick up on the scent of his childhood sweetheart that allows him to relive his sexual childhood memories. Although this might be obvious, and perhaps a simplistic reference to the connection between Annabel and Lolita, it is an essential observation of how he perceives the two children’s characteristics.

The description of Lolita’s fragrance as nearly identical to the scent of Annabel, with harsher and more intense undertones is, in reality, a description of Lolita herself as it may also apply to her personality. This distinction between Lolita and Annabel is very similar to the distinction between the intensity of lust he harbors for them both. Additionally, the feelings that he previously harbored for Annabel are completely overshadowed by the intensity of his lust for Lolita: “My heart seemed everywhere at once. Never in my life — not even when fondling my child-love in France — never —” (p. 47). By comparing the lust he had for Annabel during the years of his childhood innocence to this perversion, he simultaneously continues the relationship he had with Annabel and elevates it.

Aside from the continuation of the lost love from the years of his youth, the recreation of Lolita from the ashes of Annabel is also an excuse to keep her. “Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child” (p. 7). In other words, it is essential to point out that the references to the feelings that were born during the time of his childhood innocence could be interpreted as no more than an excuse for Humbert Humbert’s current feelings for Lolita. Rationalizing his infatuation of Lolita as his experiencing the echo of his past relationship, with whom he was involved when they were both equals in age, allows him to interpret his feelings as innocent.

However, as Humbert Humbert has never expressed shame for his deviant sexual desires, this defense mechanism could be read as an internalized shame. Based on Tyson’s statements, culture establishes the rules of sexual behavior and what is and is not normal sexual conduct (p. 25). These standards and definitions regarding sexuality shape the internalized taboos and social values and determine what one might experience as right or wrong (p. 25). As mentioned, the reason for Humbert Humbert’s rationalization is due to internalized shame. However, as the novel is based on his unreliable narration of the events, the core issue of the internalized shame may be, in actuality, fear of abandonment.

Furthermore, in his attempts to rationalize his behavior towards Lolita, he is trying to convince himself, and perhaps even the readers and Lolita herself, of his devotion to

her in fear of her abandoning him. By explaining it in innocent terms, he is subconsciously rationalizing his behavior towards her, in fear of her not caring for him, which is, as stated by Tyson, the fear of emotional abandonment (p. 16). Although it is an irrational fear due to her lack of choice in the matter, the fact that his position of power holds her emotionally and psychically hostage remains irrelevant to his subconscious mind.

## Justification

A child's sexual activity is an uncomfortable subject to broach. However, as the sexist representation of female sexuality is often intimately connected to the morality of "the lady" in question and the ownership of her body, the representation of Lolita's sexuality becomes a very important aspect to the manner in which Humbert Humbert abuses her. As explained by Goldman, Humbert presents Lolita's sexuality as deviant, instead of his own (p. 87). He projects his pedophilia to the promiscuity of a child in order to justify his abnormal sexual preferences and abusive actions. By presenting Lolita as promiscuous, and believing it, he can manage to convince himself of her willingness to engage in sexual intercourse, and, thereby, deny her obvious protests. "I should have understood that Lolita had *already* proved to be something quite different from innocent Annabel, and that the nymphean evil [is] breathing through every pore of the fey child..." (p. 141).

Goldman points out that Nabokov occasionally provides the readers with scientific studies related to female sexuality, suggesting that Lolita's sexuality is not, in fact, deviant (p. 87). Furthermore, Goldman continues to explain that the readers see Lolita portrayed in Humbert's perspective, and thereby see her as a temptress and a childlike *femme fatale* and proceed to mistake it as her true image, instead of as the false image that is provided by the mentally unstable pedophile Humbert Humbert (p. 87).

There my beauty lay down on her stomach, showing me, showing the thousand eyes wide open in my eyed blood, her slightly raised shoulder blades, and the bloom along the incurvation of her spine, and the swellings of her tense narrow nates clothed in black, and the seaside of her schoolgirl thighs. Silently, the seventh-grader enjoyed her green-red-blue comics. (Nabokov 45)

In this example, as Dolores lies down to read comics, Humbert interprets her actions as promiscuous by showing him the curves of her body. Although it is clear that the child does



not harbor any such schemes and is unaware of his ill-intentioned presence, Humbert transforms comic-book reading into a play of seduction. By deliberately interpreting Dolores actions as promiscuous, he is able to merge her actions into Dolores's sexual attraction of the young Humbert Humbert.

Furthermore, as Humbert searches for indications of Lolita's attraction to him, he describes the physical resemblance between himself and a handsome actor. "I have all the characteristics which, according to writers on the sex interest of children, start the responses stirring in a little girl: clean-cut jaw, muscular hand, deep sonorous voice, broad shoulder. Moreover, I am said to resemble some crooner or actor chap on whom Lo has a crush" (p. 46). By projecting his own attraction of her towards himself, he justifies his deviant sexual behavior towards the girl and presents it as a normal affair. "I was aware that mother Haze hated my darling for her being sweet on me" (p. 58). He paints a vivid picture, describing them almost as ill-fated lovers, and not a middle-aged man with a sexual obsession towards an underage girl. This method of psychological projection is, as Tyler would see it, a way to condemn Lolita, in place of himself, for his guilty desire (p. 15).

The psychological projection of his attraction creates the promiscuous nymphet and presents her as a willing seductress, instead of a victim.

What drives me insane is the twofold nature of this nymphet — of every nymphet, perhaps; this mixture in my Lolita of tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity, stemming from the snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures, from the blurry pinkness of adolescent maidservants in the Old Country (smelling of crushed daisies and sweat); and from very young harlots disguised as children in provincial brothels; and then again, all this gets mixed up with the exquisite stainless tenderness seeping through the musk and the mud, through the dirt and the death, oh God, oh God. And what is most singular is that she, *this* Lolita, *my* Lolita, has individualized the writer's ancient lust, so that above and over everything there is — Lolita. (Nabokov 48)

According to Couturier, Humbert Humbert presents a list of characteristics that specifically describe the sort of nymphet he feels attracted to, which is not a specific sort of girl, but a distant, inexperienced and forbidden object that is not yet sexually mature (p. 25). Couturier describes Humbert Humbert's desire as tragic, yet never properly expressed (p. 1). It includes, according to Couturier, Humbert Humbert's desire for Lolita as well as the combination of

aesthetic and erotic desire that is shared by the readers (p. 1). However, this interpretation of his desire fails to include Lolita's role as the personification of lust. Taking this role into consideration, Lolita's purpose as a passive object becomes more apparent.

Moreover, the manner in which he describes himself contrasts starkly with how he describes Lolita. "Despite my manly looks, I am horribly timid. My romantic soul gets all clammy and shivery at the thought of running into some awful indecent unpleasantness" (p. 58). In contrast to Lolita's description, he presents himself as docile and childlike. And similar to Lolita's description, this is far from reality. By describing himself with her innocence and portraying her as someone with ulterior sexual motives, he is able to project his negative qualities onto Lolita and, and thus give her the agency that she lacks in reality.

Nevertheless, Humbert Humbert felt a sense of joy when he succeeded in sexually groping her one morning without her knowledge: "I felt proud of myself. I had stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor. Absolutely no harm done. The conjurer had poured milk, molasses, foaming champagne into a young lady's new white purse; and lo, the purse was intact" (p. 68). The sexual imagery of pouring a milky white substance into the purse of a girl is unmistakable. However, the euphemistic description does not only allude to the girl's virginity but also to Lo herself and his belief that sexuality equates with morality. For instance, the use of the word "lo" could perhaps also refer to Lolita, meaning he did not break her. Yet he describes himself as a thief who successfully evaded justice.

Thus had I delicately constructed my ignoble, ardent, sinful dream; and still Lolita was safe — and I was safe. 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 68)

After he declares both himself and Lolita safe from the consequences of the sexual abuse that he inflicts on her, he does not clarify what it is that they are safe from and lets the reader ponder over issues such as justice or guilt. Above all, he continues to describe Lolita as an upgraded creation of his own making, without either consciousness or life. This preferred form of Lolita has no will of her own and cannot protest his sexual abuse. By creating a dummy version of Lolita, he ponders if this version is more real than Lolita. This indicates that Lolita is, in a similar manner, a creation of Humbert's own making.

This creation of Dolores, neither a living nor a feeling girl, with the sole purpose of pleasuring the perverted Humbert Humbert is a way for him to morally distance himself from his abusive actions. Indeed, the function of this psychological defense mechanism reaches beyond protecting Humbert Humbert's mind from his guilty desires but also functions as a way to gradually ease his conscience due to his abusive behavior, leading to the justification of his sexual abuse. "The child knew nothing. I had done nothing to her. And nothing prevented me from repeating a performance that affected her as little as if she were a photographic image" (p. 68). According to his denial, he is able to continue to take advantage of her if he thinks of her as a body without a conscious mind. In this manner, he is likewise able to ignore the issue of consent and not experience any consequences of his sexual abuse, either by deflowering Lolita and, thereby, soiling her or by experiencing the guilt that accompanies the action.

To illustrate, the first time Humbert Humbert raped Lolita, he blamed his actions upon his victim. "I had thought that months, perhaps years, would elapse before I dared to reveal myself to Dolores Haze; but by six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers. I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me." (pp. 149-150). In addition, the justification of his actions continues in the aftermath of the rape. "Did I deprive her of her flower? Sensitive gentlewomen of the jury, I was not even her first lover" (p. 153). His sexually abusive behavior is used in this manner as a psychological defense against his guilty sexual desires. By not taking responsibility for his actions and by repressing his deviant sexuality, he places the sole blame on the victim of his sexual abuse. As he indicates that the child's supposed promiscuity is equivalent to her consenting to the rape, he psychologically denies his guilt.

## Imitation

The imitating behavior in the novel, both done to defend against sexual abuse and to stalk a potential prey, also needs to be taken into consideration. Meyers argues that Nabokov's fascination with mimicry in the study of butterflies is evident in the portrayal of Lolita and Humbert Humbert (p. 1). Parallel to the relationship between prey and predator, Lolita's behavior towards Humbert Humbert mimics the defensive techniques of camouflage to protect herself from her abuser (p. 1). Meyers suggests that Lolita displays this form of mimicry as a mask of innocence while sexually tormenting her abuser by kissing him and holding his hand (p. 1). However, this behavior does not constitute the fact that Humbert

Humbert had not yet, to her knowledge, sexually abused her. Therefore, this behavior would merely establish the actions of a cheeky child and not a defensive technique against a predator. In contrast, the behavior that Lolita exhibits after Humbert Humbert thoroughly establishes himself as a sexual abuser conflicts with her playful and bold actions that she had previously demonstrated to rile up her mother.

In fact, her behavior towards Humbert, prior to and following the sexual assault, is vastly different and indicates a massive change in attitude towards him. At first, she expresses a fondness for him, despite his kissing her against her will, and believes their kissing to be a game (pp. 130, 135). However, according to Humbert Humbert's observations, her face contorts on the edge of ire and disgust when he suggests they sleep in the same room (p. 134). Further, she realizes the truth of his predatory nature after he sexually assaults her. "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" (p. 159).

Although Humbert Humbert denies his involvement in this by purposefully interpreting it as a joke, and, thereby, as a consensual act, Lolita's declaration of blame is far from superficial. According to Meyers, Lolita's behavior involves mimicking the behavior of butterflies through imitation and deception to escape from Humbert Humbert, who is her predator (p. 1). For instance, to survive in the care of her abuser, Lolita mimics the sexual acts that Humbert inflicts on her when he withholds giving her things that she likes until she "performs her morning duties" (p. 186).

Humbert Humbert, on the other hand, mimics the role of a father, not only to gain the benefits from a familial relationship with Dolores but to rationalize his abusive behavior towards her. More importantly, he does not only do this as a psychological defense against his guilt and blame but also as a defense mechanism against his fear of abandonment. This is done by embodying the role of a parent to connect Lolita to him through the imitation of a sheltering relationship. To illustrate, Humbert Humbert describes her presence in his mind as a daughter residing in the womb of a mother. "(So that, in a sense, I was always 'with Lolita' as a woman is 'with child'") (p. 121). By embodying the role of a pregnant mother, he imitates the intimacy and familiarity that he lacks in his pseudo-relationship with his stepdaughter, thereby creating a bond between them that is similar to the nonexistent bond between Lolita and Annabel.

However, the bond between father and stepdaughter, unlike that of mother and child, is one that can be acknowledged outside of the borders of Humbert Humbert's mind.

Lo. Look, I've a learned book here about young girls. 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... will encourage a companionship between father and daughter, realizing... that the girl forms her ideals of romance and of men from her association with her father. Now, what association does this cheery book mean – and recommend? I quote again: 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. (Nabokov 168-9)

Aside from the incestuous thrill he feels when he takes on the role of a father, the parental role offers him the convenience of touching Dolores in plain sight of society (pp. 78, 90). Indeed, to lure her into a sexual relationship, he attempts to rationalize sexual relationships between fathers and stepdaughters to fabricate the normality of sexual abuse in their everyday life. Specifically, by imitating fatherhood, he positions himself in the role of caregiver to mimic a perverse intimacy and, thereby, by violating his position as her only father figure. This abusive sexual manipulation of a thirteen-year-old child is not only done as a means to control her as his sex slave but also to control his guilt through the defense of rationalization.

Humbert's predatory behavior indicates the psychological rift in his mind between his actions and his sense of self. Falk states that the variety of names that Humbert Humbert calls himself in third-person points to a separation of self (p. 10). By separating his sense of self from his sexually abusive actions, he is able to protect himself from the actions by projecting them to another version of himself.

## **Inconsistency**

Despite Humbert Humbert's dominantly unapologetic narration, it is important to note how his actions are described in an inconsistent manner. The duplicity of his actions is another aspect that must be taken into account when considering his sexually abusive behavior.

When accepting, rather than denying, his actions, Humbert Humbert acknowledges the effect of his abuse on the child without putting a stop to it: "Pathetic — because despite the insatiable fire of my venereal appetite, I intended, with the most fervent

force and foresight, to protect the purity of that twelve-year-old child” (p. 69). This is done by rationalizing his restraint as an act of valor and appointing himself with the role of a tragic hero: “We [and the likes of me] are unhappy, mild, dog-eyed gentlemen, sufficiently well integrated to control our urge in the presence of adults, but ready to give years and years of life for one chance to touch a nymphet” (p. 98). By describing himself, and others like him, as different from “adults,” he surrenders his agency by relinquishing control of his actions so as to psychologically defend himself from the guilt of his sexually abusive actions.

Since the result of psychological rationalization is a gap between his identity and his actions, Humbert Humbert remains inconsistent and uncertain regarding his sense of self and, thus, remains similarly inconsistent with his feelings and how he acts upon them. In fact, the inconsistency of his feelings towards Lolita is another aspect of his separated identity. As he remains psychologically untarnished by guilt, he rationalizes his feelings for Lolita through separating the physical attraction he feels for Dolores towards Lolita, the nymphet: “I knew I had fallen in love with Lolita forever; but I also knew she would not be forever Lolita” (p. 72). By simultaneously dreading the matter of Lolita’s advancing age, he declares everlasting love to her ageless characteristics and categorizes her childish attributes as those of the “eternal Lolita,” an image of her that can neither die nor age (p. 72).

Above all, Humbert declares his inconsistent feelings as insanity:

I could switch in the course of the same day from one pole of insanity to the other — from the thought that around 1950 I would have to get rid somehow of a difficult adolescent whose magic nymphage had evaporated — to the thought that with patience and luck I might have her produce eventually a nymphet with my blood in her exquisite veins, a Lolita the Second... (Nabokov 196-97).

Through this description of insanity, he is able to relinquish the burden of responsibility, rendering his conscience free from guilt.

However, as he finds Lolita years older, he expresses himself differently:

...until I am gagged and half-throttled, I will shout my poor truth. I insist the world know how much I loved my Lolita, *this* Lolita, pale and polluted, and big with another’s child, but still grey-eyed, still sooty-lashed, still auburn and almond... No matter, even if those eyes of hers would fade to myopic fish, and her nipples swell and crack, and her lovely young velvety delicate delta be

tainted and torn — even then I would go mad with tenderness at the mere sight of your dear wan face, at the mere sound of your raucous young voice, my Lolita. (Nabokov 317)

According to Bertham and Leving, Nabokov stated that although he would condemn Humbert Humbert to hell for the sexual abuse of Lolita, he would permit him one day a year in Paradise due to the miniscule amount of real love that he felt for that child (p. 11). This is further stressed by Bertham and Leving as they state that mankind is equipped to harbor terrible qualities that can coexist with the purity of love (pp. 11-12).

However, despite acknowledging the fact that sexual abusers are able to feel love, the inconsistency of Humbert Humbert's feelings for Lolita is due to his separated identity. This separation between actions and identity is further illustrated when comparing his love for Lolita to his love for other nymphets, exemplifying the inconsistency of his love.

compare Lolita to whatever other nymphets parsimonious chance collected around her for my anthological delectation and judgement; and today, putting my hand on my ailing heart, I really do not think that any of them ever surpassed her in desirability, or if they did, it was so two or three times at the most, in a certain light, with certain perfumes blended in the air — once in the hopeless case of a pale Spanish child, the daughter of a heavy-jawed nobleman, and another time — *mais je divague* [I digress]. (Nabokov 182)

Despite comparing Lolita favorably, the comparison itself further emphasizes the rift in Humbert Humbert's mind. In other words, Humbert Humbert's inconsistent feelings towards Lolita highlights his unreliable narration through the psychological rationalization of his sexually abusive actions towards Lolita as expressions of love.

This is further emphasized when Humbert Humbert portrays his sexual abuse as the actions of a lovesick man: "Never did she vibrate under my touch, and a strident 'what d'you think you are doing?' was all I got for my pains" (p. 187). By presenting himself as suffering from unrequited love, he displays the incident as Lolita's rejection of his romantic advances rather than her resisting the sexual abuse of a criminal. On the other hand, this inconsistency is not only shown through the rationalization of his sexually abusive actions towards Lolita but also through his manipulative behavior:

Only the other day we read in the newspapers some bunkum about a middle-aged morals offender who pleaded guilty to the violation of the Mann Act and to transporting a nine-year-old girl across state lines for immoral purposes, whatever these are. Dolores darling! You are not nine but almost thirteen, and I would not advise you to consider yourself my cross-country slave... I am your father, and I *am* speaking English, and I love you. ‘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 kidnaped and raped you? Let us suppose they believe you. A minor female, who allows a person over twenty-one to know her carnally, involves her victim into statutory rape, or second-degree sodomy, depending on the technique; and the maximum penalty is ten years. So I go to jail. Okay. I go to jail. But what happens to you, my orphan? Well you are luckier. You... (Nabokov 169)

As illustrated, he rationalizes his sexual abuse as both the everyday actions of a father as well as the actions of a rapist. Thus, Humbert manipulates her into accepting his actions or accepting the blame. This is done, as previously explained, by projecting the blame on Lolita by severing his actions from his separated identity. In other words, as he projects the responsibility for his sexual abuse away from himself to appear as the victim, he reverses their roles, highlighting his supposed lack of control over his actions.

Despite distancing Lolita and other victims from the consequences of his actions by categorizing sexually attractive children as “nymphets”, he is not unaware of his sexual abuse. “Had I come before myself, I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years for rape, and dismissed the rest of the charges” (p. 352). Severing his identity into both offender and judge, Humbert Humbert psychologically defends himself from guilt through rationalization and remains distanced from the responsibility of his actions. “One mercifully hopes there are water nymphs in the styx” (p. 284).

## Conclusion

The psychological trauma that Humbert Humbert experienced with the death of Annabel forces him to repress his sexual feelings towards her and find another outlet for the sexual frustration that he associates with death and pain. This association causes him to develop psychological defenses that hinder him from processing certain events rationally and serves to



further the reason for his abusive actions. This is exemplified by Humbert Humbert's psychological regression and the denial of Annabel's death through the imagined connection between Annabel and Lolita that sets out to mend the rift in his unconscious mind by replacing the dead and willing Annabel with the living and unwilling Lolita. This is further illustrated by Humbert Humbert's projecting his deviant sexuality on Lolita's imagined promiscuity, thereby justifying his sexual abuse by melding Lolita's actions with Annabel's attraction towards him, condemning her for his guilty desire.

Both Humbert Humbert and Lolita exhibit imitating behavior in order to cope with sexual abuse in different ways. As such, Lolita protects herself against the sexual abuse by mimicking the defensive techniques of camouflage whereas Humbert Humbert mimics the role of a father to psychologically rationalize his sexually abusive behavior through projecting his actions on another, separated, version of himself. This separation of self indicates a gap between his sense of self and his actions and creates an inconsistency in both his thoughts and actions that contributes to his sexually abusive behavior.

In previous studies, Humbert Humbert's sexuality has mainly been approached through feminist theory and has, thus, been limited to that particular perspective. This essay's approach to Humbert Humbert's massive denial is through examining his repetitive actions through psychoanalysis to show that due to the close connection between his sexuality and sexual abuse, Humbert Humbert's unconscious defense mechanism is exhibited to subjugate his guilt towards the consequences of both.

Despite Nabokov's aversion towards Freudian psychoanalysis, Humbert Humbert's use of psychological defense against his repressed sexuality and the guilt of his sexually abusive actions is prominent in many ways. Future research could, therefore, benefit from approaching Nabokov's other literary works through this method by constructing an in-depth analysis of the psychological defense mechanism of other characters and, thereby, continue to contribute to a deeper understanding of Nabokov's works.

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