

The Influence of American Popular

Culture in *Lolita*

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Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel *Lolita* has faced controversy from its initial release in France; the book has given "rise to debates over censorship, pornography, appropriate subjects for fiction, and the definition of art and literature." (Fine 196). Among the book's most controversial elements is the fact that many readers find themselves reluctantly sympathizing with the book's narrator, the pedophile Humbert Humbert. *Lolita* is rife with references to both high and low culture; references to American popular culture in particular are used by Humbert to characterize his stepdaughter and victim, Dolores 'Lolita' Haze. These references both allow Humbert to justify his actions, and open him up to more sympathy from readers – a phenomenon which was particularly prominent at the time of the novel's initial publication. However, in the present day, readings of the novel tend to lend more empathy to Lolita, perhaps due to the diversification of voices within academic and intellectual circles.

In the novel, Humbert recounts his abuse of 12-year-old Lolita while on trial for the murder of Lolita's second, similarly inappropriate lover, Clare Quilty, who also serves as a double for Humbert. Humbert is a European émigré to America, and he never allows the reader

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to forget it, making frequent mention of his Old World manners and sensibilities. Humbert is a professor, with his principal focus being French literature. He laments of Lolita's resistance to high culture, and consistently condescends Lolita's mother Charlotte Haze, whom Humbert marries in an attempt to get closer to Lolita. To Humbert, Charlotte is "a wondrous example—an ideal type—of the person trying to be something other than herself" (37), as described by David Castronovo in his article "Humbert's America". Castronovo also describes Charlotte as "the embodiment of pretentiousness" (37); however, Humbert sees through this performative pretension to a deeply insecure woman trying to be more cultured than she is.

Humbert is also highly condescending towards Lolita's tastes for American popular culture; on page 148, Humbert states that Lolita "was to whom ads were dedicated; the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster" (Nabokov 148). Humbert sees Lolita as a "disgustingly conventional little girl" (Nabokov 148), who enjoys "hot jazz, square dancing, gooey fudge sundaes, musicals, movie magazines and so forth" (Nabokov 148), and this disgusts him. Lolita and Humbert's respective cultural tastes are perhaps best demonstrated in their radically different descriptions of one another; whereas Lolita thinks that Humbert looks like the movie idol she hangs on her wall, Humbert describes Lolita as having "the same soft nose, the same blurred beauty" (Nabokov 270) of "Botticelli's russet Venus". This demonstrates Humbert's pretentious, and likely false, cultural approximations, alongside Lolita's fairly typical American sensibilities. Daniel Horowitz's book *Consuming Pleasures: Intellectuals and Popular Culture in the Postwar World* suggests that Humbert's view aligns with European perceptions of American popular culture, and America more broadly, in the post-war period; Horowitz quotes historian C. L. R. James, who states that many Europeans at the time attempted to mold America

“into ‘old world’ categories, dismissing it as a brash, new society, a cultural wasteland deficient in all those features of social life which they identified with civilization.” (qtd. in Horowitz 109).

However, for all Humbert’s derision of American sensibilities and culture, he is not exempt from its influence; he agrees with Lolita with regards to his striking, movie-star good looks, and focuses on them significantly more than she does. Further, on page 222, while looking at a poster of a sex offender in a post office, Humbert informs the reader that “if you want to make a movie of my book, have one of these faces gently melt into my own, while I look”. This line shows that, for all that he pretends to be above American pop culture, Humbert is at least familiar with standard cinematic techniques and clichés, and is not above being influenced by Hollywood film just as Lolita is, given that they watch “one hundred and fifty or two hundred” films together in the course of a single year (170); for instance, Humbert’s description on page 156 of “ante-bellum homes [...] the kind down which movie ladies with sun-kissed shoulders run in rich Technicolor,” suggests familiarity with the features of such films. In his book *The Post-Utopian Imagination: American Culture in the Long 1950s*, M. Keith Booker states that Humbert is more naïve than Lolita given that “she is still able to perceive a difference between the world of ads, movies, and magazines and the real world in which she lives” (Booker 60), while Humbert “literally attempts to act out desires that, for Lolita, remain mere fantasies” (Booker 60).

Humbert’s actions in *Lolita* are obviously despicable and irredeemable, and often render the book difficult to read; he kidnaps and emotionally and sexually abuses his 12-year-old stepdaughter for two years. Not only that, but Humbert is also the narrator of the majority of the novel; thus, all the action of the novel is filtered through his twisted worldview. Most importantly, his narration, including the popular culture references, are crucial in shaping the

reader's perception of Lolita. In Gary Alan Fine's book *Difficult Reputations: Collective Memories of the Evil, Inept, and Controversial*, he analyzes numerous reviews of the novel, written at the time of its release. Many reviewers have extremely negative perceptions of Lolita, indicating not only the impact of Humbert's narration on Lolita's characterization, but also how the reviewers' own preconceptions and biases impact their interpretation.

Many of the reviews Fine examines, particularly favourable ones, depicted Lolita as "a sexually precocious, unpleasant, and ill-willed girl even though she is known only through Humbert's presentation of her." (Fine 198). One reviewer quoted in Fine's book, Richard Schickel, went so far as to call Lolita "'that most repugnant of all females, a mid-twentieth century pubescent American girl-woman,' [...] (Schickel 1957)" (Fine 201). Given that "in many reviews, positive statements about Humbert were accompanied by comparative assessments of Lolita's faults" (Fine 202), it seems that many reviewers at the time of the novel's release agreed with Humbert's worldview and did not stop to consider how Humbert's biases impacted their perception of Lolita; this could also explain why more modern readers struggle with their sympathy towards Humbert. In her 2016 article "Lolita Reading *Lolita*: Rhetoric of Reader Participation," Kate Kokinova frames Humbert not only as a character, but as a narrative instrument who "appears to be just as interested in seducing and subordinating the reader as he is in seducing and subordinating Lolita." This suggests that, particularly for readers who may see elements of themselves in Humbert, it is all too easy to be seduced by Humbert's narration and disregard his heinous crimes. Articles such as Kokinova's suggest that modern readers and scholars may analyze the text with more awareness of how Humbert manipulates the reader, perhaps reflecting the broader perspectives and experiences of such readers.

Readers' own biases can also help readers to justify or minimize the extent of Humbert's actions allowing them to accept him as a more conventional protagonist. As Fine states, "Admirers of the book could not endorse Humbert's socially unacceptable desires and behavior. They could, however, ignore, redefine, or justify them according to the prevailing moral standards of the time." (Fine 97); though Fine's text was published in 2001 and standards have evolved in the two decades since, such analysis of contemporaneous reviews remains relevant. Teenage girls are consistently stereotyped as vapid and easily influenced by popular culture, and *Lolita* is no exception; by defining *Lolita* in large part by her relationship to American consumerism and popular culture, Nabokov makes her easily influenced by readers' previous notions about American teenage girls. Nabokov admitted ignorance of American youth culture, stating, "'I did not know any American 12-year-old girls, and I did not know America; I had to invent America and *Lolita*.'" (*Strong Opinions* 22)" (qtd. in Simonetti 151). This admission did not, however, stop many, though not all, contemporaneous and modern readers from interpreting the novel as depicting reality, and the "perception of *Lolita*'s disreputable qualities was sufficient to turn her into a character based on teenagers" (Fine 203) that readers imagined to be real. In his article "Artist in Exile: The Americanization of Humbert Humbert", John Haegert states that Humbert's "denigration of America is designed, at least in part, to rationalize his relationship with *Lolita* and endow his criminal conduct with a sense of high heroic purpose" (786); clearly, many readers, particularly those bearing similarities to Humbert, accept this at face value and treat *Lolita* in a similar manner, based on their own opinions of teenage girls and popular culture. It is difficult to say whether or not Nabokov intended for *Lolita* to be viewed in such a derogatory manner, given the author's staunch position as an aesthete and reluctance to acknowledge any

deeper meaning or intended social message in his work. In fact, Nabokov wrote an entire essay, 1959's "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," in which he "argues that the sole purpose of *Lolita* is "aesthetic bliss"" over any ethical or moral purpose (qtd. in Meek 153). However, as the fact that Nabokov felt the need to write an essay explaining his perspective on the novel suggests an assumption that readers will feel compelled to impose moral judgments on the text and its characters in one direction or another. As Michele Meek addresses in the article "Lolita Speaks: Disrupting Nabokov's "Aesthetic Bliss"," feminist scholars and readers in more recent years have encouraged reading the text through Lolita's perspective and interpreting her as an abuse victim rather than as a love interest.

As feminist scholars responded to readings of the text which favour and sympathize with Humbert's perspective, I wrote this essay in response to the teaching of *Lolita* in ENGL 100, where my professor repeatedly framed Humbert Humbert as objectively sympathetic despite the persistent resistance of students in the class to this idea. I think that varying interpretations of *Lolita* since its publication demonstrate the importance of diverse voices and perspectives and voices in academia; if the voices which dominate critical discourse belong to individuals who are at least superficially similar to Humbert Humbert, then critical interpretations are likely to assign their sympathy accordingly. With this paper I aimed to directly counter dominant narratives and assert my own perspective, one which may not be as commonly heard in academia.

If there is a moral value or social message in *Lolita*, it has certainly been influenced, for better or for worse, by the use of popular culture and the portrayal of Lolita as an American teenage girl. It is likely that many readers and reviewers have brought their own biases about

these topics to their interpretations of Lolita; further, because many of them likely relate more to Humbert as a middle-aged, male 'intellectual', they are more likely to be sympathetic towards him, appreciate his European, high culture sensibilities, and accept his interpretations as the truth. However, as a young woman to whom popular culture has been very influential and important, it is much more difficult to relate to Humbert Humbert without considering my own similarities to Dolores Haze.

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