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## **Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*: Humbert Humbert's Psychological Transition from Desire to Remorse**

### **Abstract**

This research paper is an evaluation of the psychological transition in Humbert Humbert's character - the protagonist of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Humbert is initially driven by his obsessive desire for nymphets. His untamed lust results in the victimization of his stepdaughter. The research attempts to explore the behavioural and emotional change in Humbert's character. This change is analyzed with respect to the conflicting emotions of 'desire' and 'remorse' which, according to Humbert, are the characteristic features of his personality. By establishing the narcissistic element as the defining factor of Humbert's character, it has been deduced that he is incapable of remorse.

### **Introduction**

This paper is an examination of Humbert's psychological journey from desire to remorse. The aim of the research is to delineate the thought processes which stimulate Humbert's obsession with Lolita, alias, Dolores Haze to undergo a transformation, and to unravel how his conscience reprimands him. The objective is to establish that Humbert's journey in the novel is an emotional and behavioural movement from a lustful obsession to self-admonition. Apart from this, there is emphasis on the obtruding nature of his desire for Lolita, and it has been inferred how his compulsively preoccupied yearning for the young child ironically results in the shattering and debilitation of his own personality.

Humbert's character has proved feasible in comprehending the dilemma which engulfs pedophiles, particularly those haunted by the 'Lolita Complex' - the perverse infatuation of adult males with very young female children. By using his attractive skill of ingenious expression, Humbert 'dehumanizes Lolita' (Tamas 2016, 11) and tries to create an aura of ambiguity pertaining to his destructive character. He repeatedly indulges in self-loathing to gain the audience's sympathy. And unfortunately, Humbert emerges out successful in this regard by undermining the traumatic effects of his ferocious behaviour. He harbours the notion that a person has to be an artist - a true aesthete - to decipher a pedophile's mind-set. Humbert 'only seeks what he has created in his world of imagination and is not really moved by forces outside of himself' (Roberts and Saeverot 2018, 89). Furthermore, the elaborate memoir composed by Humbert, can be juxtaposed with an absurd trial in which a suspect is both the defendant and the judge. Such behaviour is typical of dangerous offenders who, in order to absolve themselves of guilt, perpetually resort to pseudo self-justification.

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Metaphorically, Humbert exemplifies human crookedness, the malevolent and unscrupulous streak, which uses whatever means possible to satisfy its yearnings. Moreover, during the course of his criminal behaviour, Humbert's thought processes persistently vacillate between gratification of his lust and self-hatred, which adds to the validity of his life-like persona. At various instances in the novel, Humbert uses his aura to manipulate the less perceptive readers into believing that his eventual metamorphosis has no ulterior motives attached to it. Above all, *Lolita* as a psychological movement 'underlines the essential, inefficient, painstaking and pain-giving selfishness of all passion, all greed- of all urges, whatever they may be, that insist on being satisfied without regard to the effect their satisfaction has upon the outside world. Humbert is all of us' (Janeway 1958).

According to the American Heritage dictionary, desire means 'to wish or long for; to want, or the object of one's desire' (2001, 236). 'In desire, we wish to change something in ourselves or in our environment or both' (Russell 1989,174). It is note-worthy that people, who blindly pursue their desires, often negate the existence of those around them. Such people are termed as solipsists. 'Solipsism' is a philosophical theory resting on the belief that the self is the only reality. Humbert repeatedly uses this term throughout his narrative, to refer to his abuse of *Lolita*. For instance, after using her as an aid to masturbation for the first time, Humbert claims that, '*Lolita* had been safely solipsized' (Nabokov 1997, 60). He uses her as a means to satisfy his 'paroxysm of desire' (Nabokov 1997,12). Moreover, as asserted by Bertrand Russell, Humbert wants to model his environment in a way which will compliment his desire. In other words, he wants to experience sinful bliss, by subverting the will of an innocent and vivacious child, without being reprimanded. Tragically, he is able to meet the demands of his carnal yearnings by disregarding 'all laws of humanity' (Nabokov 1997, 287).

Throughout the narrative, Humbert's utterances are saturated with 'over-elegant language', which alludes to the 'glossy falsity' of his distorted version of events (Bloom 1987,17). He forms forced associations between prominent literary and art works and his own plight. One of the most outstanding of these references is Humbert's intermittent insistence on the notion that *Lolita* is Carmen- the protagonist of the French opera '*Carmen*'. Carmen is a beautiful young gypsy with a fiery temperament. She expresses her love for Don Jose and then deserts him for a bullfighter. Don Jose is unable to cope with Carmen's betrayal and falls prone to madness. Humbert identifies himself with Don Jose who is portrayed as an inexperienced soldier in the opera and who undergoes a transformation from a faithful lover to an obsessed lunatic. Likewise, Humbert also alleges that *Lolita* (similar to Carmen) is an extremely cruel nymphet, whereas he is the pitiable abandoned lover who has to undergo much agony and suffering (like Don Jose).

Based on the above discourse, Humbert's flamboyant style corroborates with his malicious intent (of hunting nymphets), which he so easily masquerades in 'the presence of adults' (Nabokov 1997, 88). Moreover, it can be said with certitude that Humbert's personality as delineated by him, is similar to the image apparent from a kaleidoscope, since at various instances he introduces a succession of changing patterns of his character. According to him, for most part of his life he had to veil his craving from the alien world, which to his dismay, led to his

'monstrously twofold' existence (Nabokov 1997,18). Thus, like a spy and an 'imposter' he struggles to hide his true identity from the enviroing world (Fowler 1974,167) and lives in a perpetual state of anxiety and fear.

Humbert superimposes his much-prized private vision on the world around him and transforms everything. There is a disparity between his public and private self. Hence, the abominable monster within him remains undetected by the teaching staff at Beardsley College, and escapes scrutiny by the attendants at numerous motels where he indulges in an illicit relationship with his stepdaughter. He regretfully states that, 'my world was split' (Nabokov 1997,18). This is why, Peter Roberts and Herner Saeverot are of the view that Humbert 'deceives by way of concealing' (2018, 98).

However, the unassailable reality is that the relationship between him and Lolita is one of perpetual torment and painful insecurity, which proves to be bitter and utterly unrewarding in the long run. Unwilling confrontation with this blatant incongruity in their relationship, results in a disastrous destruction of Humbert's illusions thereby cornering him into a psychologically disturbing enclosure, where he is 'his own best tormenter' (Sharpe 1991, 64). The only truth acceptable to him is that which ratifies the obtuse nature of his vision. It leads him to the false conclusion that he has catered to his basest needs 'without impairing the morals of a minor. Absolutely no harm done' (Nabokov 1997, 62). Due to his profound conviction in the pride of flesh, he elicits great joy from scenes of vile vulgarity; from illustrations of 'adolescent maidservants ... (smelling of crushed daisies and sweat); and from very young harlots disguised as children in provincial brothels and ... the exquisite stainless tenderness seeping through the musk and the mud'(Nabokov 1997, 44). This is why, Tony Sharpe has maintained that 'it is difficult to be sure whether the dreamer or the demon in him (referring to Humbert) has the final word' (1991, 77).

According to Elizabeth W. Bruss, on a metaphorical level, Humbert 's infatuation with little girls represents his urge to fulfill his dreams coupled with his need to relieve himself of dreadful nightmares. The non-realization of this need pushes Humbert to the brink of 'vengeful guilt and disappointment' (1987, 34). Humbert is a true dreamer in the sense that he conceives, imagines and thrives on fanciful ideas. The moral compass in Humbert is completely shattered by his haunting demons to such a degree that obscene mental images of Lolita do not suffice to quench his thirst for the young victim. He longs for an actual physical consummation of his dark imaginings, and his night long broodings on devising plans for hunting Lolita are similar to a 'predator that prefers a moving prey to a motionless one' (Nabokov 1997,42). The truly despicable demonic aspect of Humbert is highlighted in the preceding utterance, 'I am like one of those inflated ... 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' (Nabokov 1997, 49). It is note-worthy that despite the obvious examples of Humbert's serpent like nature, critics such as Douglas Fowler have asserted that the most poignant crime committed by Humbert is against his 'own ethical sense rather than against Lolita' (1974,165). Moreover, Fowler has also suggested that Lolita is not perturbed by Humbert's violation of her childhood rights. This theory contradicts Humbert's own narrative in which he has vividly reproduced Lolita 's letter to him, which

ends with the following painful statement, 'I have gone through much sadness and hardship' (Nabokov 1997, 266).

The reader is provided with the sole stance of Humbert, and based on his record, to formulate a notion conceding that Lolita is not disturbed by Humbert's abuse, would be an enormous flaw on the interpreter's part. Humbert does not at any point in the novel exemplify the naivety, which is characteristic of children. While his uncompromising desire for Lolita may appear to resemble a child's fixation on the object of its desire, the father's manipulation, calculation and abuse of power cannot be paralleled with the purity of child's motives. Moreover, in Humbert's case, the desire is a sexual one, which serves as a contrast to a child's innocent yearnings. To pay absolute servitude to his desire, he adopts an expression, which epitomizes his inclination towards artifice.

'A sexually abusive parent is an immature creature, obsessed with self-gratification, for whom others are but players in the drama of his life' (Wade 2002, 56). This statement can aptly be applied to define Humbert's psychological state, which predominantly resembles that of an emotional and abusive father. For the most part of the novel, he appears as a functional pedophile who derives a narcissistic pleasure by engaging in repeated sexual encounters with a youthful and promising target - Lolita. During the course of his recollection he claims that after imprisoning Lolita, 'nothing mattered anymore, and everything was allowed' (Nabokov 1997, 268). Contrary to this, Humbert also makes repeated claims that, 'I loved her. It was love at first sight, at ever and ever sight' (Nabokov 1997, 270). This proclamation suggests that for Humbert 'pedophilia is a routine' (Tamas 2016,13). It prompts one to question if there is an element of love underlying Humbert's abusive behaviour, and can he be redeemed on the basis of the painful remorse, which according to him haunts him.

It is note-worthy that Humbert is emotionally retarded as far as his relationships with the people around him are concerned. His emotional understanding is restricted merely to his own being. Furthermore, he is a narcissist whose supreme quest in life is to achieve self-gratification. The factors which constitute narcissistic behaviour are: 'vanity, conceit, craving for admiration, a desire to be loved in connection with an incapacity to love others...creative desires, anxious concern about intellectual faculties' (Thorpe 1938, 88). One of the most striking attributes of a narcissist is his yearning to be considered as the absolute love-object. In the initial section of his memoir, the narcissistic tendencies in Humbert are apparent at various instances. He takes immense pride in the fact that he is a strikingly appealing man who has a seductively captivating effect on women. Such exaggerated expression of one's physical attractiveness is a manifestation of an inward craving for self-love, which Tristan Gans finds to be 'tricking psychologists into thinking he is gay' (2011).

In addition to this, narcissists resort to extreme measures in order to elicit profound prestige from others, and often times create fantastical illusions in which they themselves are the ultimate heroes. Humbert likewise, harbours grandiose illusions pertaining to his personality. As a 'nympholept' (Orozco 2017, 8), he declares himself 'an artist, a madman' (Nabokov 1997, 17) who can recognize the 'nymphet' (Nabokov 1997, 17) among numerous school children. Furthermore, in

order to satiate his self-created fantasies, Humbert also attributes fantastical qualities to his much-prized Lolita whom he treats as a personal 'possession' (Orozco 2017, 8). He negates her true existence and identity, by showering multiple names upon her, such as Dolly, Lola and her defining title- her name tag Lolita. The multiplicity of Lolita 's identity is explicitly demonstrated when he exclaims that, 'She was Lo, plain Lo in the morning...She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms, she was always Lolita' (Nabokov 1997, 9). She becomes his incarnation and psychological vision towards whom he expresses a self-centered wish that she 'never grow(s) up'(Nabokov 1997, 21). He profusely rejoices by exclaiming to himself that, 'What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita - perhaps more real than Lolita ... having no will, no consciousness- indeed no life of her own'(Nabokov 1997, 62). Wilson Orozco is convincing when he concludes that 'Humbert has possessed Lolita too – first physically and then finally for eternity...' (2017, 9).

Humbert's lustful infatuation is inextricably linked with the concept of fanciful desires, which often assume the nature of taboos - 'which are unacceptable and which if fulfilled, would result in chaos' (Meyer and Salmon 1984, 291). In addition to this, by relegating the rational self to a secondary position, the destructive nature of these desires, utterly disregards the integrity of the living organism and demands of the social laws (Klages 2006). Moreover, a sense of accomplishment accompanies the fulfillment of such forbidden desires.

This pattern is generally followed by most criminal offenders. Prior to his meeting with Dolores Haze, Humbert in his mind, ponders again and again over the idea of capturing a nymphet. However, as time lapses, the mere thoughts and imaginary feelings- 'pseudo liberations and pseudolibidoes' (Nabokov 1997, 18) - are not sufficient for him. He longs for a 'live subject' on whom he can 'safely' (Nabokov 1997, 60) exercise his malicious intentions. He parades a highly likable persona of himself in front of Charlotte Haze- Lolita 's mother. In return, he is granted an enormous degree of confidence, which subsequently leads him to conclude that he is invincible and can easily escape.

In addition to winning the reverence of adults, a compliance on the victim 's part is also paramount to the child molester, which is secured either through 'overt force' or 'through more subtle coercion' (Meyer and Salmon 1984, 289). In the beginning of their so-called liaison, Humbert buys Lolita ' four books of comics, a box of candy... a manicure set ... transparent raincoat... all kinds of summer frocks' (Nabokov 1997, 141-142). Moreover, he also keeps her at ease, by occasionally slipping into her hands, 'quite a few pennies' and 'dimes'(Nabokov 1997, 138). This abhorrent practice of monetary bribes (Nabokov 1997, 148) coupled with sexual favours soon reduces Lolita to act the role of a 'matter-of-fact young whore' (Nabokov 1997, 23). However, the moment Lolita starts surveying his 'world' of 'umber and black Humberland ... with a shrug of amused distaste' (Nabokov 1997, 166) and dwells on asserting a will of her own, he creates a revenge scenario by using aggression to certify her subservience towards him. The incentive behind child molesters' use of aggression is that their 'individuality' and uniqueness reside in their inwardly guarded desire and 'desire opposes a barrier to

jouissance' (Klages 2006), where jouissance refers to extreme pleasure or enjoyment.

In Humbert's case, this aggression assumes the manner of emotional and physical violence against Lolita. The emotional trauma he inflicts on Lolita is explicit from the following threat: 'In plainer words, if we two are found out, you will be analyzed and institutionalized ... You will dwell, my Lolita will dwell...in a dirty dormitory' (Nabokov, 1997, 151). Retrospectively, he professes that after her mother's demise, he had manipulated Lolita into believing that, 'she had absolutely nowhere else to go' (Nabokov 1997, 142). The physical abuse implemented by him occurs during one of their heated arguments during the course of which Humbert states that, 'I held her quite hard and in fact hurt her rather badly' (Nabokov 1997, 205). His lust for power is so immense that he entertains the belief: 'better destroy everything than surrender her' (Nabokov 1997, 235). Thus, in a way Humbert's 'field of vision gets distorted by his privileging of his own impulses' (Tamas 2016, 6).

This desire to entirely own one's object of love, renders Humbert, painfully unoblivious of the workings of his 'darling's mind' (Nabokov 1997, 284). He also limits her access to the 'dangerous children in an outside world' (Nabokov 1997, 284), thereby leading her into an unfortunate situation where she is sworn to silence about her agony and fears. This perturbing phenomenon of an exhaustingly futile love creates much remorse and guilt for him, especially during the term of his imprisonment. The pangs of guilt, which repeatedly stalk him are best expressed in the following stanza composed by him:

Dying, dying, Lolita Haze,  
Of hate and remorse, I'm dying.  
And again my hairy fist I raise,  
And again I hear you crying. (Nabokov 1997, 256)

Furthermore, his remorse is exacerbated by the painful knowledge that had he truly cared for Lolita; he might have provided her with a better of familial relationship. By utter betrayal of Lolita's trust, Humbert claims that he had crushed Lolita's will- her 'will to win' - and she would have been a much livelier person 'had not something within her being broken by me- not that I realized it then!' (Nabokov 1997, 232). It is essential to highlight the fact that there is no greater misery than to suffer in misery for the past offences.

Thus, Humbert insists upon the fact that upon encountering Lolita in her new role - as a wife and an expected mother - his lustful feelings for her changed dramatically. This last encountering with Lolita gives rise to one of the most poignantly remorseful passages from Humbert's point of view. Numerous striking confessions are revealed during this last encounter. Humbert exclaims that 'I have hurt too many bodies with my twisted poor hands to be proud of them' (Nabokov 1997, 274). He observes Lolita for the first time in his life and feels that he has broken 'her life' (Nabokov 1997, 274).

It should be taken into consideration that remorse entails emotional growth. It leads to pity, compassion and a bitter sense of realization pertaining to past

misdeeds (The American Heritage Dictionary, 2001). Humbert, remains till the end, fixated on Dolores Haze. His memoir, which he claims he has written after feeling bitter and agonizing realization, does not indicate promising change in his perception of Lolita. He still refers to her as an extension of his own fantastical ideas. He ardently refers to her by insisting that 'she was mine, mine, mine' (Nabokov 1997, 161). It remains incomprehensible to him that Lolita is an individual - an independent entity - who makes it abundantly clear during their last encounter that she does not want to maintain a lasting union with him.

Humbert uses Lolita's memory to assist him in his grandiose artistic ventures. He unabashedly incorporates his portrait of Lolita. He uses her to secure his 'immortality' so that he might be able to 'live in the minds of later generations' (Nabokov 1997, 309). Once again, he narcissistically takes advantage of Lolita. Moreover, he uses art as a 'palliative'- a means through which he can absolve himself. He cannot make peace with the fact that his actions destroyed an innocent child. Therefore, he fervently adopts an artist's stance, to extenuate himself - to lessen the degree of his crime. He is proposing the notion that in aestheticism, moral considerations are not to be taken into account. Art or creation according to him, is done merely for its own sake; therefore, a person cannot be a true artist and cater to a strong moral sense simultaneously, thereby reinforcing his insubstantial belief that felicity derived from worshipping beauty need not be condemned. Thus, like a true 'obsessive man' he 'lies or dissembles the truth - in the guise of always telling the truth' (Klages, 2006). Hence, he does not undergo a psychological journey per se.

The concept of journey involves a development - a positive change. An ability to transcend one's own being by embracing the existence of a variety of people is also an essential requisite of a journey. Till the end, Humbert seems to remain ignorant of the sanctity of human values. From the beginning till the end, there is not a single instance during which Humbert apologizes to Lolita. He immerses himself in elaborate monologues, which are devoid of sincerity and any commendable emotion. And his arrested emotional sensitivity is evident from the fact that he refrains from publishing the memoir in his lifetime, only because such is the agreement between him and the so-called authorities. Humbert without any tinge of guilt, trespasses on her fundamental human right (of privacy) and unrelentingly exploits her painfully guarded secrets by making them public knowledge.

One of the most definitive factors of remorse is that it is independent of circumstances and is governed by our moral sense of right or wrong. In Humbert's case, his regret is conditional and belated. It arises only when he becomes absolutely certain of Lolita's emotional indifference towards him. Had she yielded to his request of living with him, he would never have made an attempt to retrace the intense propensity of his actions. In addition to this, the minute increase in his self-knowledge would have been not only improbable but impossible. Apart from this, remorse in one area of life pervades humility in most other aspects of life as well. Humbert's perception, even in prison, does not signify a humble demeanour.

Shame is also a crucial emotion experienced in cases of genuine remorse. It is a painful emotion caused by a strong sense of guilt, embarrassment, unworthiness or

disgrace. Towards the end of his memoir, Humbert, exclaims without the slightest degree of embarrassment that 'the reader will be a fool to believe that, the shock of losing Lolita cured me of pederosis ...My heart was a hysterical unreliable organ' (Nabokov 1997, 256). He equates this shameless declaration with honesty. Instead of undergoing a public trial, Humbert very conveniently passes a sentence of thirty-five years upon himself. He assumes the roles of a judge and culprit simultaneously. He is unwilling to pay the actual penalty for his crime, so he forgives himself by verbally convicting himself. If each man can be regarded as a law unto himself and is given the right to set up a subjective criterion of innocence (as is implicitly evident in Humbert's case), then as asserted by Humbert, 'life is a joke' (Nabokov 1997, 284). 'As a rule, pedophiles are usually not inclined to change their behaviour until legal coercion occurs or is anticipated (Meyer and Salmon 1984, 290). In addition to this, Humbert fails to come to terms with the fact that 'a new life is not given for nothing; that it has to be paid dearly for, and (is) only acquired by much patience and suffering and great future efforts (Dostoyevsky 1997, 434).

As far as Humbert's guilt is concerned, it has 'a narcissistic and self-sustaining' quality (Dollimore 1983, 77). Similarly, his remorse is not genuine, as it does not ensure a guarantee of a reformed character. Thus, both his guilt and remorse lack the redemptive quality, and as such, Humbert cannot anticipate true redemption. Furthermore, as assented earlier, his testimonies and confessions are merely a means of ventilation for his psychological claustrophobia. In addition to this, on a metaphorical level, Humbert's craving for attention is a manifestation of the conflict between the expression of aggressive and pleasure-seeking physical impulses, and the much-dreaded fear of reprisal by the society and the law enforcing agencies. Humbert's character appears more of a 'caricature' (Bloom 1987, 135). His diverse literal allusions, along with the immense complexity in his language, serve to make a 'parody' of him, and his character seems to satirize the human predicament to the point of absurdity.

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