Humble Humbert: Mastermind Behind Lolita Essay, Research Paper

Humble Humbert: I Think Not.

Humbert Humbert. A delusional, sick, middle aged man obsessed with a self created love for pre-pubescent girls he has namely dubbed nymphets. Right? Wrong, this is only the skin-deep image we are given of the main character in Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita. Rather, He is a highly intelligent chess master who is constantly aware of his environment and is able to manipulate it with minute actions bringing him the results he desires.

Humbert’s obsession for the opposite sex starts in chapters three and four when we are introduced to his first love – Annabel. As Humbert recalls his beloved nymphets, he talks of two kinds of visual memory pertaining to remembering a face. One that a person, with their eyes open, must recreate, piece by piece, taking little details of vivid moments in time and putting them all together. The other, an instant glimpse, as if a flash bulb goes off inside your head, and instinctively, an “objective, absolutely optical replica of a beloved face, a little ghost in natural colors” appears “on the dark innerside of your eyelids” (Nabokov 11). I would like to expand on the latter of the two ideologies, saying that this image, the more one thinks about it, the clarity soon fades. The reasoning for this being emotional attachment, one’s mind begins to wander about things that occurred in the past. Perhaps why he isn’t looking at the face in real life right then, instead of picturing it in his imagination. These emotional ties to that person may be for various reasons, but those aren’t important, it is the depth of them that bears the significance. He remembers Lolita’s face in the second of the two ways because of the extreme feelings he had built up for her throughout the time he was with her. Humbert recalls Annabel’s face with the first method simply because she was his first. Not because of any serious feelings for her; at least compared to the magnitude of those for Lolita.

Writing from the confines of a jail cell, Humbert Humbert tells us this story of his sex-capade across the country with little Dolores Haze. He fills his pages with incredible detail, often wandering on certain subjects seeming unimportant, but written as if crucial to understanding his point. An example of this is Humbert’s recollection of the lake and its splendor, being more than just a place to swim and relax; but also an opportunity to be alone with Lolita. The lake, to Mrs. Haze, was ironically a place to be alone with Humbert. The reason Lolita was such a revolutionary novel is because Nabokov has so much control over everything that is going on through Humbert’s eyes. He manipulates the story to twist the reader’s opinion. By incorporating such rich detail and full imagery through scholarly grammar and vocabulary, he somehow tries to escape fault for his sins against an innocent girl. “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the majority of sex offenders that hanker for some throbbing, sweet-moaning, physical but not necessarily coital, relation with a girl-child, are innocuous, inadequate, passive, timid strangers who merely ask the community to allow them to pursue their practically harmless, so-called aberrant behavior, their little hot wet private acts of sexual deviation without the police and society cracking down upon them…. We 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” (Nabokov 87-88). I think most are able to see through this smoke screen, and realize that although Humbert is not deranged or psychotic, his obsession for and actions against young girls is horrifying and wrong.

As we progress through the novel, we learn just how much of a game it is for Humbert to have Lolita. Before the death of Charlotte Haze, Humbert had something to restrain him from Dolores. Since what he truly wanted was unattainable, he had to venture, prolong if you will, his experiences with Lo to get everything possible out of each confrontation. He made it into a perverted game of cat and mouse. Humbert sets up situations where he and Lolita will be alone. For instance, he would leave the door to his room cracked while he would write, an almost irresistible piece of cheese for a twelve-year-old curious girl. Once “the trap works”, and Lolita is peering over his notes at his desk, he is so aware of her every movement (Nabokov 48). He knows the spatial point where every key body part of hers is at all times. He makes fake movements like scratching an itch, or yawning, just to get a brief brush of her soft skin. Another gleaming example of this is when Lolita comes to visit Humbert on the sofa just after his shower. Humbert warns the reader to “examine its [the situation’s] every detail and see for themselves how careful, how chaste, the whole wine-sweet event is if viewed with…”impartial sympathy” (Nabokov 57). She brings in an apple, tossing it in the air, and Humbert intercepts it on the second throw. I need to point out that the apple is the forbidden fruit, and Nabokov not only uses it purposefully, but also makes a biblical reference to its “Eden-red” color (Nabokov 58). He is constantly looking for an opportunity to be closer to her; in this instance, it only took him one throw of the fruit to realize that this could be one. She mimics his thieving behavior by snatching his magazine, and Humbert immediately associates this with their destined coexistence and some ill-hearted personality traits they have in common.

I can’t stress enough how aware Humbert is. He knows what people think of him, and what to say to calm their nerves. Humbert Humbert has a very good sense of social tact, how to evade a conversation politely but concisely. He isn’t humble about it either, he knows his own intelligence, and makes sure the audience knows too. He pounds into the reader’s mind that he is physically attractive, very intelligent, and equipped with first-class social manners. So, as we digress from the obvious, let me talk of yet another idiosyncrasy Humbert Humbert so viably possesses.

Humbert’s jealousy plays such an important role in the story. It causes many things to occur that perhaps normally wouldn’t have. Humbert’s jealousy forbade Lolita to participate in the school play for fear that it would lead to dates with boys her age. This obviously caused the unannounced visit by a disguised Clare Quilty, putting in danger Humbert’s most enjoyable lifestyle by threatening to have a team of Psychiatrists observe Lolita’s daily home life. Humbert’s jealousy was actually a weakness. His fear of losing her causes him to give into her every whim and desire. Along the many weeks they spent on the open road, Lolita’s both literal and figurative appetite drained Monsieur Humbert’s bank accounts quite rapidly. How could he say no? What choice did he have? None. When taking into account the immorality of all the things he was receiving on their voyage, and their inherent value to him, he would have paid any price for the insignificant souvenirs and pointless tours of monuments they encountered along the trip. He couldn’t risk being caught; it isn’t far fetched to imagine Lolita throwing a fit and spilling her guts to an official for the mere refusal of an ice cream cone Humbert wouldn’t buy her.

So, in coming to a conclusion, I feel that Humbert Humbert isn’t crazy, or emotionally disturbed, but rather a bit vulnerable. His original fling with Annabel had such a strong impact on him, that from then on, he had a predetermination of what beauty in the opposite sex was – a nymphet. He has a strange fetish, which he allows to turn into obsession. Being immoral and illegal, his actions are condemned by all. Imagine all that he has taken away from a little girl’s growing up. He turned her into a personal prostitute, and forced her to become more mature than anyone her age. In the end, Humbert Humbert gets what is deserved and goes to jail; but not for reasons pertaining to his deeds with Lolita. His jealous murder of Clare Quilty finally sees him to his prison cell where he is sentenced to life. From there, the only way to embrace his obsession is through writing, and thus we are given the novel Lolita.