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Aesthetic Bliss: How Vladimir Nabokov Uses Unreliable Narration in *Lolita* to Create Better Readers

Ryan Saladino

University of Maryland, Baltimore County, rysalad1@umbc.edu

Abstract

In his most famous novel, *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov created one of the most intricate, memorable, and maddening narrators in literature. By firmly positioning Humbert Humbert as a mis-handler of fact and purveyor of his own skewed perspective, Nabokov encourages perceptive readers to reject the narrator and actively seek out the truth of the story for themselves. Subtle yet undeniable clues (such as holes in the narrative arguments, clear exaggerations, and logical fallacies) saturate this story, undermining the credibility of the first-person perspective and pointing toward its deception. Once we as the audience recognize that Nabokov is guiding us away from his grasp, we are free to wander through the world the author has created and interpret its meaning for ourselves, and as such, evolve into more attentive and thoughtful readers of fiction.

Keywords

Vladimir Nabokov, unreliable narration, *Lolita*, literary immersion, literary interpretation

Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

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Vladimir Nabokov's most famous work, *Lolita*, the story of a literature professor's obsession with a twelve-year-old girl, has continuously enamored and proven enigmatic to decades of readers. The novel has provoked enduring and nearly constant debate and discussion since its publication over half a century ago. Though audiences have almost unanimously diagnosed its narrator as a deluded madman, Nabokov's gifting to him an eloquent and hypnotic use of language has enabled the professor to captivate and seduce readers into hearing him out time and time again. However, at the end of the day, most listeners would classify this story as the desperate (albeit engaging) defense and ravings of a lunatic, which raises the question: why did elusive Nabokov make him so? I will argue that Nabokov's end in providing us with one of the most unreliable narrators in literature (and he does have an end, despite his assertions in the endnote after the conclusion of *Lolita* that his molding of a narrative constitutes nothing more than mere "aesthetic bliss") is to give us grounds to separate ourselves from the likes of narrator Humbert Humbert (Nabokov 315). Through his narration, Humbert inadvertently reveals his illusory spell over the reader and, in trying so hard to convince us of his authenticity, he effectively distances himself from us. The audience then becomes grounded in a state of willful literary investigation, which in turn allows us to look at how we read, perceive, and interpret our surroundings, even in Nabokov's imaginary America. When readers are encouraged to participate actively in the story, form their own opinions, and figure things out for themselves, a more immersive experience emerges and the reader has the means to become more skillful and discerning in the story world.

Since its first polarizing publication in 1955, the subject matter of *Lolita* – that is, the exploitation of a girl through the eyes of the exploiter – has incited heated debate. The story follows the European Humbert Humbert, who suffers the death of his childhood love to typhus, which ignites within him an obsession with a certain type of girl, aged nine to fourteen, which he terms a "nymphet." When he becomes a literature professor and moves to Ramsdale, a fictional New England town, he ends up boarding with a widow, Charlotte Haze, and her daughter, the titular Dolores "Lolita" / "Lola" / "Lo" / "Dolly" Haze, whom he recognizes as the nymphetic paragon. Humbert marries the widow to solidify himself in Lo's life and when the mother dies in a freak accident, he takes custody of the daughter. From there the two embark on a journey back and forth across America to outrun any suspicion, and start a turbulent relationship in which Humbert takes sexual and situational advantage of Lo. Eventually they are separated when Lo forsakes Humbert for another man, whom Humbert kills in a comically botched confrontation. We finally learn where Humbert is telling the story from – his jail cell, awaiting trial – before he dies of heart failure upon concluding his tale.

Critical reception of the novel was split into a rarely precedented divide. The novelist Graham Greene, who by the time *Lolita* was published was one of the most respected authors of the twentieth century, called it one of the three best books of 1955. In response to this, the editor of the *Sunday Express*, a London newspaper, called the novel "the filthiest book I have ever read" and "sheer unrestrained pornography" (qtd. in Behrens). Arguments escalated to full literary bans on the book (although they did not last long, nor did they dampen *Lolita's* popularity; it continued to fly off the shelves). The debate over the book's merit raged for some time. While many like Greene saw the makings of a masterpiece, critics who decried the book for its perceived moral aberration betrayed their misinterpretation of one of the major facets required to understand *Lolita*: the fact that Nabokov actively encourages the audience to distance themselves from Humbert through the narrator's own prose, by casting doubt and disagreement onto many of his claims.

Traditionally, in fiction, the narrator is the audience's conduit to the objective events of a story. In any first-person narrative, we initially expect the character relating the plot to us to be illuminating his or her experience of events as they occurred, and thus to be the most readily relatable character in the story. *Lolita* subverts this convention to the highest degree by identifying

Humbert from the beginning as a morally compromised and unreliable narrator. Literary critic Wayne Booth coined the latter term in order to describe those storytellers who defy trustworthiness, defining it as when there is a rift between the pervasive morals and perceptions of the narrator and those of the implied author (qtd. in Wasmuth 2). By contrasting fictional man and flesh-and-blood author, we can certainly see that Humbert fits this definition. In the controversy following the initial release of *Lolita*, Nabokov articulated that he had taken great care to separate himself from Humbert, specifically highlighting their differences by making fun of his creation for mislabeling a certain type of bird in the story. “I would never do that, being an entomologist!” he exclaims in a 1958 interview (Berton 03:15 – 03:43). Not only is this a clever way to dismiss baseless accusations that Nabokov shared Humbert’s obsession with young girls and was writing the character by tapping into personal experience, but it also highlights how Nabokov and Humbert are completely disconnected from each other on nearly every psychological and ideological level. “Humbert is a foreigner and an anarchist, and there are many things, besides nymphets, in which I disagree with him,” the author said in a 1956 explanatory letter appended to the American edition of *Lolita* (315). Humbert’s presence both exalts Nabokov’s creative genius in his ability to mold such a believable character completely unlike himself, and also proves that character and creator are separated by a considerable rift and thus implicates Humbert as an unreliable narrator by Booth’s definition of the term. This separation also becomes critically important when we consider Nabokov’s intent with his narrator.

Of course, the very act of the author himself interceding in the debate to clarify things like this shows us the gravity of the debate itself. From the very beginning, theories of the book’s purpose flew back and forth. Most readers saw through Humbert’s veil of perfectionism to the paranoia that lurked beneath, and were able to identify the different thematic forces clashing in cold war in the novel. “One critic called it a satire on sex, a mirror of human frailties,” Berton says in the aforementioned interview, beginning to rattle off a variety of understandings of *Lolita*. “Another said that it was a joke on our national camps about youth. A third that it was a cutting exposé of chronic American adolescence and shabby materialism” (00:35 – 00:49). Indeed, as the years have wandered on, only more potential allegories and interpretations have popped up and become further excavated by diligent readers and researchers, and these have flourished despite the fact that Nabokov himself has denied the existence of any didactic element within his book at all. “I don’t wish to touch hearts, and I don’t even want to affect minds very much,” Nabokov announces in the interview, dismissing Berton’s list of possible takeaways. “What I want to produce is really that little sob in the spine of the artist reader” (00:55 – 01:07). His minimalist and idealistic description gives us the sense that in molding the world of *Lolita* and, as he puts it, breeding characters like Humbert and Lol herself in his laboratory (01:40 – 01:46), his simple aim is to allow us to share in his central concept of “aesthetic bliss” afforded to him by the transfer of her ordeal and adventures from his head to the page. He wants us to be seated in the back of Humbert’s car, to be taken through his enrapturing invented America in a catalogue of motel rooms, to be firsthand witnesses to Humbert’s motivations and manipulations, to simply live in the world he has created with the characters acting out their initialized lives. “I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and... *Lolita* has no moral in tow,” he conclusively declares in the endnote to the book (314-315).

So that’s it then, Mr. Nabokov! – Or is it? Legions of studious scholars have refused to accept this assertion. Matthew Beedham articulates in an article on teaching *Lolita* that “some will . . . point out that Nabokov often misled the gullible in just such a way” (160). The incredibly complex themes and ramifications of *Lolita* make Nabokov’s avowal of its silence in the moral and historical conversation seem almost crude. One of the most beautiful and productive aspects of the novel is that it can be interpreted in a vast variety of ways simultaneously: one can see it as about foreign policy with old Europe debauching young America; one can see it as about materialism with

Humbert and Dolores's relationship being held together by his investment in milkshakes and matinee movies to keep her happy; one can see it as a satire on love with their destructive relationship exalted by Humbert as true love; one can see it as a deconstruction of pedophilia with Humbert's manipulation and Dolores's fickle childish nature ultimately running their relationship into the ground. There are essentially infinite allegories, each that take the elements of the source material and look at them in a different light.

So, we know that Humbert is an unreliable narrator, but we cannot say that this is an aspect he takes on in order to prove what the novel is trying to say about this or that – sly Nabokov has removed that conclusive element entirely. If we take the body of scholarly work as a way to read the novel, we have infinite takeaways; if we take Nabokov's route literally, we have none. Therefore, we must look at what Humbert's narration is actually achieving in the novel to properly place its importance. On the subject of Nabokov's use of unreliability, Daniel Aureliano Newman states that “it combines the moral energy of satire with the indirection of a riddle” (55). Indeed, Humbert's narration is something we as the audience must deconstruct and deduce in order to see how Nabokov is deconstructing our charismatic pedophile.

One of the most frightening overall aspects of Humbert's character is his ability to enrapture the reader into sympathizing with him. If we take the man at face value – a mild-mannered foreigner harboring a dark obsession beneath the surface, which leads him to child molestation – we could be quick to dismiss him as an odious but forgettable criminal. However, Humbert invites us to spend time with him, to take a tour of his tainted mind and make ourselves comfortable while we hear him out. At the point of narration, he is backed into a corner; his guilt is evident, his trial is about to begin, and he is fully aware that his audience is an infinite jury with their gavels poised for condemnation, but with a suavity and levelheadedness that permeates his frantic moments throughout the novel, he prompts us to hear a doomed man's last confession, and this is where his trap first ensnares us: “You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style,” he famously declares on the first page (9). James Phelan explains that this introduction instantly gives the narrator an advantage over the reader: “Nabokov's stylistic virtuosity which he allows Humbert to share . . . disposes the authorial audience to regard Humbert as a reliable interpreter” (233). The initial link between author and narrator automatically gives Humbert's story a layer of legitimacy, which allows our madman to hold over us from the outset.

Throughout his winding narrative, Humbert remains acutely aware of his audience. Rather than let them sit idly by and form their own opinions, he exhibits, as John Wasmuth identifies, “a desire . . . to engage the reader, make him a participant in the story” (8). The detailed world Nabokov constructs in the novel is undeniably immersive, and Humbert's narration only makes it more so by pulling us into scenes and having us poke our heads around. The narrator calls out to the reader often, encouraging us to take note of certain facts and details that he describes. For example, the following plea is projected as Humbert describes his bumbling navigation of his first hotel room night with Lolita: “Please, reader: no matter your exasperation with the tenderhearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect hero of my book, do not skip these essential pages! Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me; try to discern the doe in me, trembling in the forest of my own iniquity; let's even smile a little. After all, there is no harm in smiling” (129). Anthony Moore accurately describes this address as “an insinuating coercive which begs endorsement of his attitudes” (76). In our imagining of Humbert, we simulate his thought processes and search for identification with him. We begin subconsciously to align ourselves with him via spectral empathy. He evokes the sense that he is mapping out the story specifically for us, the skeptical third party, and assuaging our concerns with an air of calmness and confidence. Questionable scenes, such as his recounting of his sexual thrill at having Lolita's knees on his lap shortly after moving in with her mother, are introduced with words like “careful” and “chaste” (57) that paint his actions in golden

colors and seek to diminish his slippery involvement in the theft of her childhood. Through these small but effective accentuations, the narrator chips away at the reader's preconceptions of him and forms a bond of familiarity and understanding. In addition, Humbert often addresses the readers with respect and politeness. He accentuates our title with words like "learned" (57) or "astute" (272) to flatter our intelligence and appreciation of his writing style and creep onto an academic patch of common ground. At times he even exalts us: "oh, winged gentlemen of the jury!" (125) he exclaims, following his lament over the nebulous omen of ruin at the start of his sexual relationship with Lolita. This gives us an impression of Humbert supplicating himself at our feet, placing himself at our mercy.

In the spirit of persuasion, Humbert even gives prompts us to fact-check him at times, as if we can confirm or deny details of his fictional world: "the reader may check the weather data in the Ramsdale *Journal* for 1947" he says when launching into a day-by-day account of his secret summer observations of Lolita amid warm temperatures (40). Wasmuth notes that the narrator is "confident enough to offer an opportunity for the reader to verify his claims, prompting the reader not simply to take note but actually to take action" (8). Humbert's willingness to cite his source helps to verify his claims in our minds and suggests that more of Humbert's story can be backed up by hard evidence, even though we know that both the source and Ramsdale are fictitious.

While Humbert develops a persuasive defense of his pubescent preoccupation through opulent wordplay, when our attention is drawn to these manipulations, the tenets of his character betray themselves and his trustworthiness begins to falter. The first red flag is that he is clearly very biased, and this is evident if one looks at how he is presenting his case. His obsession with Lolita and nymphets in general clouds his judgement at every turn in his twisted journey. Every decision he makes – marrying Charlotte, taking Dolores around the country, making financial transactions with his charge, settling for a time in Beardsley, eventually leaving there out of paranoia – is in the interest of securing or maintaining his possession of the girl. And while he claims that her nymphetic powers are what drive his journey, Phelan deconstructs his infatuation in arguing that "'soul-shattering, insidious charm' [as Humbert describes it] should not be so 'elusive' that it is evident only to the bewitched—unless of course there are no such things as nymphets" (235). In other words, the very rarity of Humbert's obsession rescinds his argument, since if these adolescent creatures really had a magical magnetic pull everyone would be able to recognize it, and thus his glamorized preoccupation devolves to misdirected lust. Additionally, Amit Marcus notes how Humbert's otherworldly definition of nymphets becomes unintentionally detrimental to his case; the narrator conceptualizes Lolita into "aesthetic terms, which enable him to refer to his object of desire not as a subject with feelings, thoughts, and wishes of her own but as a work of art" (189). He elevates Lolita with holy reverence to a pedestal that transforms her into a symbol of physical and emotional desire and does away with her personality completely, a tendency he often tries to distract the reader from, but one that we are able to recognize by taking an objective view of events.

Furthermore, we eventually realize that we may not be able to trust all the facts that Humbert confidently bestows upon us. There is, of course, the infamous "56 days" discrepancy, which in short presents an impossible timeline for Humbert's jailed period in which he claims to have written the narrative: counting the days between his arrest and death brings us to only 51, and he asserts he wrote the entire work while imprisoned over the course of 56 days. This can be attributed either to a definite sign of Humbert's unreliability in that he presented us with incorrect information and possibly even a completely falsified final confrontation with his villain, or to a rare Nabokovian error. Scholars seem unable to come to a unanimous verdict on this point, but if the former is true, it is not unheard of, as Humbert's murky memory and general mental instability have already reared their heads elsewhere in the novel. Though he recalls some events with inhuman clarity, at other times he estimates dates or struggles to divide days, claiming "my calendar is getting

confused” (109). He openly admits that he has been committed to asylums in the past (“a dreadful breakdown sent me to a sanatorium for more than a year; I went back to my work—only to be hospitalized again”) (32-33). After Lo is taken from him, he does not try to conceal his spiral into depression and despair and his “losing contact with reality” (265), which highlights his unhealthy reliance on her and undermines his credibility.

In addition, we see often that Humbert is an adept and charismatic liar; he must be in order to pull off the migrating ruse that he does. When settling in Beardsley he masterfully presents himself as Lo’s father, and manipulates other parts of his story in Ramsdale (such as how he met Charlotte and why he married her) to avert others’ eyes from his true goal. As the recipients of his final confession, we automatically assume we see everything that the characters around him are blind to, but since we already have viewed veiled signs of Humbert’s manipulation, it would not be outlandish to assume he is outright lying to us (or himself) in portions of this tale also. And while Humbert is a changed man by the time he finishes telling his narrative—his documentation of his time with Lolita dawns on him that he singlehandedly ruined her life—even on the penultimate page he is unable to fully hold himself accountable for his actions. He decides, “Had I come before myself, I would have given Humbert thirty-five years for rape and dismissed the rest of the charges” (308). While the realization of his botched affair shatters his preconceptions about nymphets, Phelan notes that “his willingness to dismiss the murder charge shows that he is still an unreliable evaluator of his own actions” (236). Even at the completion of his arc, he shirks responsibility for the collateral damage he caused and shows remorse for no one but Lo. In these cases, our identification with Humbert begins to fracture, and we are left to pick up the pieces from his lively world.

So, now we are familiar with Humbert, his desires and his delusions, his worship of Lolita and his contempt for essentially everyone else, and his subversion of all around him. We have heard his clever and flattering plea for mercy and recognized how his desperation, paranoia, and biases have sculpted his story into one we almost trust, but break away from when we realize we are being conned. We can see that he certainly is one of the most unreliable of narrators, but he would be even more accurately classified as Dorrit Cohn’s coined term of a “discordant narrator.” Cohn defines this type as when “the author intends his or her work to be understood differently from the way the narrator understands it: in a way that can only be discovered by reading the work against the grain of the narrator’s discourse, providing it with a meaning that, though not explicitly spelled out, is silently signaled to the reader behind the narrator’s back” (307). By having Humbert undermine his own defense with his personality and morals, Nabokov intertwines the character’s narration with how we are to understand the story as a whole.

Since we are meant to realize we cannot trust Humbert, the clever reader becomes obsessed with playing detective with the warped memoir that Hum lulls us into. The audience’s sense of inquiry becomes even more intense and pronounced when Humbert launches an investigation of his own. For much of Humbert’s road-tripping with Lolita, an air of increasingly suspicious scopaeesthesia drapes itself over our paranoid protagonist. This begins at the Enchanted Hunters hotel, the first destination Humbert and Lolita go to when left to their own devices, where Humbert encounters a man who seems to be trying to mask his interest in the girl. Later in the story, Humbert becomes obsessed with the notion that someone is following him and Lo—perhaps a lawman, perhaps not, but either way he is clever enough to remain on the peripherals of our protagonist’s vision. This spurs Humbert into looking for clues as to his pursuer’s identity, and attempting to reconstruct the journey his shadow is taking behind him by analyzing motel ledgers for names he perceives to be cleverly imagined. Humbert never solves the mystery himself, but by the end of the novel, a nearly adult Lolita reveals that the culprit was one Clare Quilty, another pedophile who used his success as a playwright to get away with his crimes.

These strange but fruitless stepping stones that are left for Humbert are mirrored in similarly surreal ones left for the reader. For example, the reader should note the impossible coincidence of *The Enchanted Hunters*, a name which pops up in two separate instances: the first hotel visited, and the name of a school play in which Lolita participates during their downtime in Beardsley. Neither Humbert nor Lolita seems interested in investigating this fantastical connection, and they do not realize Quilty's involvement in it, as Lo mentions that she thinks the play was written by "some old woman - Clare Something" (209). In his book on Nabokov's American work, Brian Boyd agrees that "as we search through the novel for Quilty's trail, something eerie, enchanted, and rather disconcerting seems to emanate from *The Enchanted Hunters*" (246). Boyd speaks on the link between the two homonyms, as Quilty's play "culminates in a scene that seems to echo what happened at the hotel" (246-7), where Lolita proves to Humbert she is "unforeseeably real and independent of his imaginings" (247) and more than the fantastical image Humbert has constructed of her. But Boyd points out that there is no way Quilty could have known what happened that night between Humbert and Lolita to recreate it in his play, not to mention the startling unlikelihood of the stage production itself happening to alight in the one town at the one school that Lolita happens to attend for a brief window of time.

Of course, this is the part of the novel where Humbert begins to become an even less reliable narrator than he already was. His dark desperation to keep Lolita from wandering out of his grasp brings his phantom pursuer to the forefront of his mind, and this marks a turning point where Humbert is no longer in control, reduced to, as Boyd puts it, "no more than a character in one of Quilty's plays, a figment of his imagination. To anyone such an idea is repellent; to Humbert, doubly so" (248). Therefore, it is no surprise that this would spark Humbert's downward spiral and propel the breaks with reality he describes late in the book. But whether the link between the *Enchanted Hunters* (destination) and the *Enchanted Hunters* (play) is some convoluted conspiracy by Quilty or a delusion of our narrator, the fact that it is such an obvious coincidence that goes uninvestigated by any character in the novel indicates that it is a mystery intended not for the main characters to solve, but rather for the audience lurking in the background—us.

Cohn writes that such discordant narration involves "a self-conscious reading that understands the choices involved, a reading aware of the fact that there are choices involved, that the problems created by certain types of narrators . . . can be resolved in different ways" (312). Humbert's defense is only that—a defense, which may be cross-examined and judged for its convincingness, and one that becomes less stable the longer it goes on. We reserve the right to believe him or not, and once we realize we have this power, we can decode the narrator's biases and understand better what motivates him to tell the story in the way that he does. The doubling of the *Enchanted Hunters* is only one such example, one invitation to take a closer look at the case under the surface. Many of the characteristics surrounding Quilty arouse suspicion, especially considering that he is Humbert's mortal enemy being described by Humbert himself. Boyd suggests that one of Humbert's aims in telling his story is to "put the dead Quilty to his command as he never could in life" and that he "exacts a revenge more soothing than the murder itself" (considering how awry the actual assassination went) (249). This suggests that Humbert could be skewing the story to resist the control he felt Quilty exert over him during the plot. However, we cannot say outright that this is true one way or another—the only way to explore this claim sufficiently is to investigate, to theorize and find proof. Despite its inconclusiveness, Cohn defends discordant narration as such: "An awareness of the two ways open to the reader for understanding texts of this type may provide not only their most satisfying interpretation, but also the most convincing reason for their status as fictional masterpieces" (313). The definitive answer, it would appear, is not as important as mere interpretation—the specific interpretation that resonates the most with us.

Of course, now it makes sense why Nabokov refused to announce any particular meaning for his work – providing a solution to the mystery would negate the need for investigation in the first place. One could still argue that this lesson of questioning and analyzing a book's narrator is in itself didactic, even though Nabokov has already disavowed any didactic element in *Lolita* altogether – but on the other hand, who is to say this claim isn't still part of the puzzle? Who is to say, if Nabokov is capable of creating and puppeteering Humbert Humbert, that the author isn't himself cleverly unreliable? In teaching us not to trust Humbert, has Nabokov taken his enterprise a step further, and taught us not to trust his own statements in the shadowy realm of authorial intent? Either way, his claims seem only to make us search that much harder for answers, leading us ever further down the spiral staircase into his world, playing us right into his hand. Nabokov himself is certainly too smart not to realize he is synthesizing these better readers.

In his lectures on literature, Nabokov described the attentiveness of his ideal reader: “a good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader . . . In reading a book, we must have time to acquaint ourselves with it” (3). His emphasis on absorbent attentiveness and understanding through multiple viewings points toward encouragement to dig deep below the surface level of the book. The author's “aesthetic bliss” may be a stylized tool for enjoyment, but it is also a calculated conduit for the immersion necessary for the reader to feel like part of the story. While Humbert may be charismatic, conniving, and convincing at times in his extravagant verbiage, ultimately the good reader is encouraged to break identification with him as he crosses certain lines. This does not end his story, but rather embeds us deeper into his world. With a story that actively goes to great lengths to trick and mislead the reader, maximum immersion in its fictional world is required in order to decode the thought process of the author himself. We are allowed to sit in the back of Humbert's car, in his motel room with Lolita, to watch over his shoulder as she talks to a mystery man at a gas station; we are able to look around in these enrapturing settings for ourselves, to act as literary detectives on an invited journey, to explore Ramsdale and Beardsley with our magnifying glasses and conduct our own character analyses, concentrating on our own experience of the events unfolding and picking out this or that from Nabokov's meticulously crafted details. We are all, at once and over great lengths of time, sharing in the author's aesthetic bliss, just as he wanted. We are the phantom population that inhabits Nabokov's America.

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