Fixing *Lolita*:
Reevaluating the Problem of Desire in Representation

Laura Ratcliffe
English Senior Essay Advised by Dorian Stuber
Haverford College
April 6, 2004
Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Dorian Stuber, whose guidance and influence helped me “fix” this project, in more than one sense.

And I would like to thank my parents, whose immeasurable support made this all possible.
“The first little throb of Lolita went through me late in 1939 or early in 1940,” writes Vladimir Nabokov in the afterword to his most famous novel, Lolita. First published in France in 1955, Lolita tells the story of a European émigré’s sexual affair with a 12-year-old American “nymphet,” Lolita, and the subsequent murder of his rival, Clare Quilty. Nabokov’s “initial shiver of inspiration” for his novel came from a newspaper article about an ape in a Paris zoo, who, “after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature’s cage” (Lolita, Afterword 311).1

By describing the novel’s conception in these sexually suggestive terms (“throb,” “shiver of inspiration”), Nabokov foregrounds the central concern of Lolita, and this paper: the interaction between desire and language. The anecdote of the ape is a useful allegory for Lolita, which can be read in terms of Humbert Humbert’s desire to depict, and escape from, his literal and figurative imprisonment. He is referred to as an “ape” by both Lolita and Quilty, and the novel’s foreword tells us that he “died in legal captivity,” further evoking the zoo parallel (3). Like the ape’s captivity, Humbert’s imprisonment, both within his prison cell and his solipsistic consciousness, is made evident through his representation of it. Humbert’s “drawing” comes in the form of a confessional narrative that invites its readers into the untrustworthy yet tantalizing realm of his consciousness. It is easy, as many critics have done, to fixate only on the disturbing content of Humbert’s narrative and overlook its presentation.2 It is crucial, however, to examine the artifice

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1 For convenience, I will refer throughout this paper to The Annotated Lolita, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr., as Lolita.
2 Orville Prescott’s review of Lolita in the daily New York Times on August 18, 1958, illustrates the initial wave of outrage regarding the novel’s subject matter: “there are two equally serious reasons why [Lolita] isn’t worth any adult reader’s attention. The first is
itself, because language is not only our entrance into Humbert’s world, but it is the only way for Humbert to communicate, and attempt to escape from, his confinement. Yet Humbert is conscious of the fact that his attempt to defy his imprisonment through representation is doomed to failure, for by recreating his reality through language he is simultaneously reinforcing its existence. The enigma of Lolita lies in the tension between its disturbing yet moving reality and the novel’s self-conscious undercutting of that reality by constantly drawing our attention to itself as artifice.

Lolita’s language not only has the power to evoke an emotional response to the ruin of Lolita, but also makes us question our relationship with a text we know to be fictional. How does a (fictional) pedophile elicit our sympathy and disgust? Why do we feel so compelled to move through and make sense of Humbert’s confession, when it so often undercuts its own coherence and order? By looking closely at desire in Lolita, both in terms of Humbert’s desire to represent, or “fix” Lolita in language, and the reader’s desire to impose order on the text, we can garner some insight into the relationship between representation and reality and better understand our reactions to the text. I will argue that the structure and language of Lolita are inseparable from Humbert’s desire to defy the limits of his artifice, which, due to the nature of representation itself, is impossible. Although Humbert’s impossible desire to escape language through language is doomed to failure, Lolita demonstrates how desire and language are simultaneously generative, for Humbert’s inability to fully posses Lolita or “fix” her in language that it is dull, dull, dull in a pretentious, florid and archly fatuous fashion. The second is that it is repulsive” (Appel, Background, 20). While the intense controversy surrounding Nabokov’s choice and treatment of subject matter has slackened since the 1950’s, critics like Gladys Clifton, Martin Green, and Andrew Field continue to debate Lolita largely in terms of Humbert’s moral reprehensibility or his final “breakthrough…into normalcy” (Clifton, citing Field, 345).
constantly propels him to try again, proliferating meaning and text. This movement occurs both within the text and at the level of its consumption, as the reader desires to fix its meaning through reading. By self-consciously mimicking the destructive and generative nature of desire, *Lolita* succeeds in implicating the reader in its creation of meaning as well as the very act of consumption we want to denounce, an implication that has and continues to provoke anxiety in many of its critics.

The novel’s controversial history—beginning with its rejection by four American publishing houses before being published in France, ending as an international bestseller—demonstrates how readers have reacted with moral outrage as well as fascination and appreciation for the novel’s complex psychological and linguistic design. Rather than condemning the novel for its content, contemporary critics have aptly turned their attention to what has made *Lolita* such a phenomenon: the persuasive power of its language. Fifty years after its original publication, however, the relationship between language and morality continues to be at the heart of *Lolita*’s critical debate.

Alfred Appel, Jr., whose annotated version of *Lolita* helps contextualize its extensive literary allusions and cross-references, has been a leading contributor to the discussion on the language of *Lolita*. Yet more recent critics like Kevin Ohi point to Appel’s attention to *Lolita*’s textuality as an attempt to recuperate the moral value of the novel. Appel claims that “many readers overlook the deep moral resonance of

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3 Ellen Pifer and Alfred Appel, Jr. describe the evolution of *Lolita*’s critical reception following its belated release in America in 1958. Although Graham Greene lauded *Lolita* in the winter of 1956 as one of the best books of 1955, the novel did not begin its rapid climb to the top of the best-seller list until its release in America, England, and Italy in 1957-1958. In the decade following its publication in America, Pifer writes, “the novel achieved widespread critical acclaim,” despite being charged with obscenity and banned on three occasions (Pifer 185).
[Nabokov’s] novels,” and writes that Lolita’s linguistic elements are meant to help us understand the “parodic design” that surrounds Humbert’s journey to “transcend his obsession” (Appel, “Springboard,” 205; 231). Appel is a participant in the ongoing discussion about the sincerity of Humbert’s remorse and true love for Lolita: “miraculously enough, one believes in his love, not because of any confession, but in spite of it” (Appel 226). Much of the novel’s criticism, according to Ohi, centers on whether Humbert’s proclamations of love and remorse (“I loved you. I was a pentapod monster, but I loved you” (284)) are sincere or meaningful, turning the discussion of Lolita into a question of innocence or guilt.

Ohi cites Michael Wood as one of the few critics who consciously refrains from moralizing Humbert’s sincerity and tone. Wood does not attempt to answer the question of Humbert’s ultimate redemption; rather, he emphasizes the effects and interplay of Lolita’s language. Wood discusses the “complicated mischief” of Humbert’s wordplay, which often invites our skepticism and double readings (Wood 118). Yet in the end, he argues, the instability of the truth or sincerity of Humbert’s confession does not disallow condemnation: “his shabby selfishness, his alternately brilliant and inflated prose, his unavailing bid to lift himself into high romance, all add to the sadness rather than lessen it. We don’t have to admire Humbert in order to feel his pain” (Wood 141).

Like Wood, Ohi addresses the aesthetic ramifications of Humbert’s wavering confession. He eschews the question of Humbert’s innocence or guilt to evaluate instead the novel’s “intricacies of guilt, confession, desire, and pleasure,” as well as our reaction to its complexities. Ohi posits that the desire to moralize Nabokov’s novel, like the public’s initial outrage to Lolita’s publication, “suggest[s] an anxiety about being
seduced” by a narrative that refuses to be “univocal” (Ohi 161). In other words, the fact that we cannot pin down the sincerity of Humbert’s confession incites anxiety about linguistic as well as sexual seduction. Ohi claims that the effects of Humbert’s excessively sentimental confession “exceed our efforts of demystification” because “guilt and confession endlessly proliferate,” a process that *Lolita* “does not so much demystify...as overinflate” (Ohi 189). Rather than pinning down the question of Humbert’s guilt or sincerity, that is, trying to “fix” *Lolita* in a definitive moral light, Wood and Ohi look at Humbert’s unreliable and contradictory confession in terms of the generative nature of representation.

By approaching the novel in terms of its textualization of desire, I am following the lead of Ohi and Wood, who take a critical step away from the question of Humbert’s moral redemption. By contesting the dominant way of reading the novel that Appel and others have established, I am able to analyze the reader’s reactions to Humbert’s story without falling into the debate of the novel’s moral ramifications. Rather, I am considering what *Lolita*’s representation of both Humbert’s solipsistic imprisonment and his entrapment of Lolita can tell us about the interaction between artifice and reality. By examining desire both within the text itself and in terms of our interaction with the text, we can see how the desire to “fix” or capture something is a consumptive yet unstable act, for total consumption is impossible. *Lolita* demonstrates the necessary limits of language and desire as well as the generative effects of such limitations, since their moments of failure give way to another impossible attempt to “fix” the desired object. Through *Lolita*’s self-conscious recognition of these moments of failure, or disillusion,
we are reminded of the text as artifice and pointed toward the reality that language cannot
access.

“Fixing” *Lolita in Time and Language*

The temporal unfolding of *Lolita* provides some insight into how Humbert and
Lolita are both composed and broken down through the novel’s language. Humbert is
simultaneously a character within the story and the self-conscious creator of the story,
creating a disjointed temporality that vacillates between the story’s “past” as the plot
unfolds, and Humbert’s narration of his “present” as a writer in a jail cell. Because
*Lolita*’s protagonist exists in multiple temporalities, the reader often experiences a single
moment in time from a number of conflicting vantage points, where it is often hard to tell
which Humbert is narrating or what has actually happened. His attention to specific
moments in time, rather than its progression, is indicative of Humbert’s ongoing attempt
to fix, or pin down, what is necessarily in flux. This obsession to defy time stems from
his desire to immortalize nymphets, in general, and Lolita, in particular, through his
confession. Rather than describe the “animality” of his sexual relationship with Lolita, he
writes, “a greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once for all the perilous magic of
nymphets” (134). The unidiomatic phrasing of this sentence: to “fix once for all” rather
than “once and for all,” is perhaps not accidental; his “slip” indicates the impossibility of
his project. While he wants to fix his nymphets once and for all (for eternity), he is faced
with the fact that to do so is impossible, both because of the nature of language and the
“un-fixable” nature of nymphets themselves.
Humbert introduces the term “nymphet” at the beginning of the novel, a term which has made its way into common parlance: 4

Now I wish to introduce the following idea. Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as “nympha.” (Lolita 16)

The “perilousness” of nymphet-love lies not only in its legal repercussions (“oh, how you have to cringe and hide!” (17)), but in the transience of nymphets themselves. Humbert’s love for nymphets always outlasts the physical state of nymphetcy, for they only exist fleetingly between the boundaries of “nine” and “fourteen.” Humbert particularly mourns the fleetingness of Lolita’s nymphetcy: “I knew I had fallen in love with Lolita forever; but I also knew should would not be forever Lolita. She would be thirteen on January 1. In two years or so she could cease being a nymphet” (Lolita 65). Humbert’s love object, Lolita the nymphet, will cease to exist when the physical Lolita grows up. Humbert knows that his everlasting love for her exists within himself, not in the “real” world of Lolita the child: “the word ‘forever’ referred only to my own passion, to the eternal Lolita as reflected in my blood” (65). This bifurcation of Lolita as fantasy and reality highlights the irreconcilable tension between Humbert’s solipsism and the world outside of it.

In addition to their transience, nymphets necessarily appear as a kind of mirage, for they can only be seen from a “certain distance.” Between the nymphet and the “nympholept” there must be “a gap of several years, never less than ten” (Lolita 17).

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4 Humbert’s definition, quoted here, is included in the OED’s definition of “nymphet,” under the description “a sexually attractive or sexually mature young girl.” This is perhaps one entirely unforeseen way Humbert does succeeded in immortalizing nymphets.
Thus, the borderlines of nymphetcy, and the distance between them and their admirers, are impermeable limits. Humbert’s dilemma lies in the fact that these boundaries necessarily mean the death of his ephemeral creatures. He fantasizes about escaping his imprisonment in time, in order to stop the flow of death and age: “Ah, leave me alone in my pubescent park, in my mossy garden. Let them play around me forever. Never grow up” (21).

In addition to fixing his nymphets forever, the ambiguity of Humbert’s command, “never grow up,” also points to his own longing for immortality—it could be directed at the nymphets in the park, or to himself. Humbert too yearns to escape time, for the magic of nymphets can only exist insofar as someone is there to desire them. This line highlights the contradiction inherent to Humbert’s scheme: he wishes both to fix his desire in time and to prolong that moment indefinitely. Yet desire necessarily functions on the concept of lack—there must be something we don’t have to keep us in pursuit of it. Desire, in other words, is constantly in motion, for if it is fulfilled it is depleted of its intrigue, and therefore killed. Like Humbert’s erotic desire for Lolita that can never be fully realized or quenched (“somewhere at the bottom of that dark turmoil I felt the writhing of desire again, so monstrous was my appetite for that miserable nymphet” (Lolita 140), his ability to “fix” his nymphet through representation is subject to constant rupture, or disillusionment, each time he fails to possesses her fully. By describing the perpetual onslaught of desire as “writhing” and “monstrous,” Humbert expresses his dismay at his inability to ever fully, or finally, capture Lolita.

Since he cannot stop the flow of time, and the objects of his desire are destined to grow out of their nymphetcy as they mature, Humbert’s only recourse is to immortalize
their “magic” through language. At the end of his confession, he addresses Lolita directly, saying that the reason for his life and confession is “to make you live in the minds of later generations” (309). Humbert writes that “the refuge of art,” not reality, “is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita” (309). Language, then, is Humbert’s only tool; he proclaims at one point “Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!” (32). While he recognizes his imprisonment in art, language also grants Humbert the seemingly endless ability to create meaning and images. He takes great pleasure in his ability to produce puns and neologisms like “at first wince,” “my west-door neighbor,” “crippling” for the way a wounded spider walks, and “mauve-mail” for light blackmail (87; 54; 71). His penchant for riddles and alliteration illustrates the pleasure he takes in the intricacies of language; he puns using both the meaning of words (in English and other languages) and the appearance of the words themselves. He notes several times, for example, that the distinction between “therapist” and “the rapist” is only “a matter of nice spacing” (Lolita 150).

Humbert’s control over language is particularly evident in his manipulation of Lolita’s name, Dolores Haze, one of his favorite linguistic leitmotifs. Her name, Dolores, is derived from the Latin, dolor, meaning sorrow or pain. He visits Dolores, Colorado, refers to Lolita as “my dolorous and hazy darling,” and plays endlessly with her nickname, Lo: “loquacious Lo,” “little limp Lo,” “there was no Lo to behold” (53; 140; 159; 223). Lolita’s name becomes entwined with his desire for her, evinced by the fetishization of her name in the opening lines of the book:

She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. 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.

(Lolita 9)

The novel’s famous opening immediately conflates sexual desire with linguistic seduction. The alliteration of l’s and t’s is both playful and seductive; in the third line Humbert invites his reader to physically participate in his linguistic, and erotically charged word play. Humbert’s fetishization of the name “Lolita” differentiates Lolita, the nymphet, from the Lolita that exists outside his embrace, “at school” or “on the dotted line.” This distinction again sets Humbert’s world, the fantastic world in which he is in love with a Lolita who is “not human” but “daemonic,” at odds with the external, physical world where Lolita really exists. Through the split between Humbert’s mythic world and the “real” world, Lolita succeeds in rendering both worlds plausible; we are able to read against Humbert’s solipsistic representation to access the Lolita who exists beyond Humbert’s fetishized desire—the “disgustingly conventional” American Lolita who loves movies and hot fudge sundaes, and who, to Humbert’s chagrin, “could be a most exasperating brat,” often exploding in “tornadoes of temper” (Lolita 148; 149).

Yet here, again, we must be wary of overly trusting this picture of Lolita; Humbert’s playfully alliterative description of Lolita’s tantrums reminds us that any access we may have to the “real” Lolita is filtered through his language and consciousness, and that even the “reality” beyond Humbert’s imprisonment is part of Lolita’s artifice. Through these ruptures in the text, Lolita self-consciously reminds us that Humbert’s project to defy time and merge reality with language is impossible, for our only access to that reality is through language, or more text. Yet it is precisely through this doubly self-conscious move (the text not only knows that it is artifice, but
knows that it knows its limits as such), that the novel is able to initiate its interaction with
the real. By being conscious of its limitations, *Lolita* forces its reader to recognize those
limits and postulate an existence beyond its language. Michael Wood describes this
process in relation to the doubling of Lolita, and offers a solution to the solipsistic prison
of Humbert’s language:

Lolita is Humbert’s obsession and what escapes it, she is its name and its
boundary. The ‘actual’ Lolita is the person we see Humbert can’t see, or can see
only spasmodically. In this sense she is a product of reading, not because the
reader makes her up or because she is just “there” in the words, but because she is
what a reading finds, and I would say needs to find, in order to see the range of
what the book can do. (Wood 117)

Lolita, then, becomes real to us by reading her both within and beyond Humbert’s
textualized desire. Yet is it possible that we are not giving Humbert the narrative credit he
deserves? Rather than locating the “actual” Lolita that Humbert “can’t see,” perhaps
Humbert wants us to see both Lolitas, and his apparent “failure” to see, with the intention
that we then make this move to create her through reading. If this is the case, then
Humbert proves to be more than an ape in a cage. Nabokov claims that the central
distinguishing feature of human beings is “being aware of being aware of being. In other
words, if I not only know that I *am*, but also know that I know it, then I belong to the
human species” (Parker 9). In this quote, Nabokov explicitly mentions the ape in relation
to man: “In this respect, the gap between ape and man is immeasurably greater than the
one between amoeba and ape.” Considering the self-consciousness of Humbert’s
narrative complicates the allegory of an ape who merely depicts what he sees, for
Humbert also plays the role of the zookeeper, attempting to “capture” Lolita. Humbert’s
desire to escape his confinement through language certainly gives the impression that he
is aware of both his imprisonment and the limitations of his art. Rather than merely
drawing the bars of his cage, is he possibly depicting what he wants us to see, sketching
glimpses of the world outside those bars for his reader to decipher? Are we “freeing”
Lolita from Humbert’s solipsism by reading outside his fetishization, or does our desire
for her mean we, too, are attempting to “fix” what is necessarily out of reach? The self-
awareness of Humbert’s narrative, and Lolita as a whole, questions the relationship
between freedom, imprisonment, and representation by constantly generating these
ambiguities. Despite his confinement, Humbert describes his state as “boundless
misery,” which could refer to both the endlessness of his psychological suffering and the
boundlessness of textualization, for he is unable to capture his reality in language. Like
Humbert, we also discover that any attempt to read or “fix” Lolita or Humbert gives way
to multiplicity and contingency, foregrounding the perpetual slippage of language and
desire.

_Humbert Humbert and the Proliferation of Language_

The repeated name of Lolita’s narrator, Humbert Humbert, aptly captures the
multiple and mirrored nature of his character. He is reflected externally by his
doppelgänger, Quilty, who resembles him both on a physical level, and more disturbingly
for Humbert, a psychological level. Clare Quilty is a famous playwright of children’s
plays (who shares Humbert’s interest in nymphets), who schemes with Lolita to
orchestrate her escape during her second road trip with Humbert. Quilty is said to look
like one of Humbert’s family members, “resembling Gustave Trapp, a cousin of my
father’s in Switzerland” and he is repeatedly referred to as Humbert’s “brother” (218;
Humbert plays on his relative’s name, naming Quilty “Detective Trapp” as he becomes the “shadow” he cannot shake on their second trip across the country (228; 215). Quilty’s wordplay and “sense of humor” mirror Humbert’s linguistic manipulations in *Lolita*: “his genre, his type of humor—at its best at least—the tone of his brain, had affinities with my own. He maimed and mocked me. His allusions were definitely highbrow. He was well-read. He knew French” (249). At times, Humbert isn’t sure if Quilty is real or a hallucination, a fabrication of his own mind. He writes “it would have been too foolish even for a lunatic to suppose another Humbert was avidly following Humbert and Humbert’s nymphet…over the great and ugly plains,” and says of one encounter that he is “not sure even to this day that the visit was not a drug-provoked dream” (217).

Quilty not only threatens Humbert’s sanity but the coherence of his identity; even in retrospect, Humbert is “not sure” where he ends and Quilty begins. Some critics have even wondered if Quilty might be Humbert’s creation. At one point during the scene in which Humbert murders Quilty they find themselves wrestling for a gun: “I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us” (299). Even after Humbert finally kills Quilty in an excessive, drawn out confrontation, he is not rid of the presence of his double (“I was all covered with Quilty” (306)). The mutable bond

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5 Martin Green writes, “The similarity of their mental habits and sexual tastes, the differentiation between their moral guilts, the hallucinatory atmosphere of their encounter, the cousinly and indeed brotherly relationship foisted upon them—by all these hints we are invited to believe that Humbert Humbert first invented Quilty, to take on the worst of his own guilt, and then kills him, to purge himself symbolically” (Fowler 153). Green’s reading demonstrates how critics have used Humbert’s textual doubling to read *Lolita* moralistically. Rather than evaluating Quilty in terms of Humbert’s moral transcendence, I am considering Humbert’s doubling in relation to *Lolita*’s representation of reality and art, as an indication of the fictionality of the subject in narrative.
between Quilty and Humbert emphasizes the solipsistic and subjective vantage point of this narrative; we can only struggle to decipher the “real” world through Humbert’s paranoid and fantastic world superimposed on it. Yet beyond the question of the reliability of our narrator, *Lolita* forces us to question our relationship with the illusion itself. Through the dissolution of its characters and framing devices, *Lolita* again forces its reader to question the interaction between text and reality.

In addition to Humbert Humbert’s physical and psychic fracturing within his narrative, traces of Humbert’s artifice also appear in *Lolita*’s framing devices, which ostensibly exist outside the bounds of his story. The novel begins with a foreword by John Ray, Jr., a psychologist and friend of Humbert’s lawyer, who edits Humbert’s “found” manuscript after his death. His commentary seemingly represents the moral antithesis to Humbert’s narrative, locating its “meaning” in the realm of justice and reason. He ends his introduction with a morally redemptive message: “‘Lolita’ should make all of us—parents, workers, educators—apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world” (*Lolita* 6). Yet the firm distinctions his foreword establishes between criminality and morality, and even the boundary between Ray and Humbert, are dissolved by the preface’s language. Even as Ray explains the moral and pedagogical purpose of the text, he can’t help but draw attention to its tantalizing aesthetic quality—the very thing that draws the reader into the text, and ultimately undermines his moralizing introduction, since we so often find ourselves sympathizing with, rather than “abhorring”, its author:

A desperate honesty that throbs through his confession does not absolve him from sins of diabolical cunning. He is abnormal. He is not a gentleman. But how magically his singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author!
The similarities between J.R. and Humbert’s language become evident shortly after Humbert’s confession begins; J.R.’s word choice (“diabolical cunning”) and interpolated French (“tendresse”), for example, remind us of Humbert’s vocabulary and style. The word “throb” in particular, reminiscent of Nabokov’s “throb” of creative inspiration, again conflates erotic and linguistic seduction. While John Ray’s introduction, and Humbert’s confessional mode of narration, sets the reader up to search for some kind of “moral apotheosis,” or redemptive value, the slippery nature of Lolita’s language penetrates all of its framing devices and makes it impossible for the reader to pin down any moral lesson or conclusion. John Ray’s introduction is ridden with traces of Humbert’s linguistic games; even his name, J.R., Jr., demonstrates the kind of nominal puns Humbert loves to insert throughout his narrative.

Humbert’s linguistic presence in J.R.’s commentary is an example of what Gérard Genette calls "metalepsis," the crossing of embedded boundaries within a narrative. The breakdown of the boundary between J.R.’s moral of the story and the story itself points to the impossibility of ever pinning down some final “meaning” or moral lesson that exists outside of the text. Nabokov strategically makes this point by turning J.R.’s pedagogical preamble into parody. In his own Afterword to the novel, “On a Book Entitled Lolita,”

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6 Genette describes metalepsis as “any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc), or the inverse” (Genette, 234-5). Debra Malina, who studies the effect of metalepsis in Breaking the Frame, characterizes it as “a collapsing, a blurring, or a dissolution of boundaries” or “an individual subject’s premeditated act of breaching borders.” She stresses the jarring, destabilizing effect of a technique that “disrupts narrative hierarchy,” yet also notes its creative effects, for metalepsis simultaneously “reconstructs our mental maps” of a text’s spatial framework (Malina 4; 19). The metalepsis in Lolita, I think, has both of these effects on the reader’s conception of the novel’s “reality.”
included in the first American publication of *Lolita*, he writes, “I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and, despite John Ray’s assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow” (*Lolita*, Afterword, 314). Of course, *Lolita’s* Humbertian language similarly permeates this afterword, and we are again confronted with hazy, permeable textual bounds. The author of the Afterword is self-conscious of this effect, and begins by noting:

> After doing my impersonation of suave John Ray, the character in *Lolita* who pens the Foreword, any comments coming straight from me may strike one—may strike me, in fact—as an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov talking about his own book. (Afterword, 311)

Just as Quilty threatens the reality of Humbert as a single, coherent subject, the intrusion of Nabokov in the novel’s framing devices questions the notion of an objective, detached “author.” The afterword suggests that all textualized figures are merely “impersonations,” alluding to the existence of another “reality” beyond the text itself. Yet the ambiguity of this suggestion (“*may* strike one—*may* strike me, in fact”) indicates that this configuration of text and reality *is* only a suggestion; Nabokov’s intrusion into the textual world simultaneously undermines and reinforces the coherence of reality both inside and outside the text. The involuted meta-narrative of *Lolita’s* frames forces the reader to wrestle with the limitations and possibilities of artifice, making us self-conscious of the relationship between text and reality.

The metaleptic quality of the afterword, like the foreword, problematizes any last word or final explanation. Like the circularity of Humbert’s first and last word, “Lolita,” the bookend commentaries play off of each other by looping back and resisting closure. These self-referential frames function to give Humbert’s narrative the appearance of reality, while simultaneously pointing to the novel as fiction. J.R. indicates to his reader on the first page that Humbert’s narrative is “presented intact,” with the exception of
“obvious solecisms” and “a few tenacious details,” creating the impression that the proceeding text is a “found,” albeit slightly censored, text (Lolita 3). Nabokov’s afterword, however, treats Humbert’s memoir as entirely fictional, a point highlighted by the title that explicitly describes Lolita as “a book.” Similarly, while JR proclaims that Humbert’s confession “warn[s] us of dangerous trends” and “point[s] to potent evils,” Nabokov warns us that in fact, the “dangerous trend” is to moralize his fiction (Lolita 6).

Through its metaleptic and involuted language, Lolita’s framing devices obscure the distinction between representation and reality. Humbert’s apparent ability to transcend the established temporal and spatial bounds of his own narrative obliterates his status as a trustworthy, coherent character in the fiction of Lolita. Yet this disruption simultaneously affirms his presence as self-aware of his limitations in language, because his obsession to defy the flux of time and representation is, paradoxically, what continues to reinforce his, and Lolita’s, presence in that perpetual movement of signification. As Debra Malina writes, “given the narrative nature of the subject, even the concerted effort to cease being inevitably results in continued self-production” (Malina 21). Through the tension created between the textualized presence of Humbert and Humbert the "physical" character, like the bifurcation of Humbert as both narrator and character, as Quilty and not Quilty, Lolita demonstrates the fallacy of a coherent linguistic subject existing within, or outside of a text. Through the self-conscious act of demonstrating these limitations, Lolita enlists its readers in Humbert’s impossible fixing project by forcing us to wrestle with the inherent contradictions and tensions that produce more questions than answers. Humbert’s dissemination as a coherent subject through Lolita’s metaleptic layers highlights the generative quality of fiction because Humbert, or the various forms of
Humbert, becomes more language, a constant proliferation of texts.

The Temporal Fracturing of Sequential Plot

The space and time of Lolita, and any novel, exist only so far as they are created through narration. The complicated temporality of Lolita necessarily unfolds through both Humbert’s narrative voice and style, for even the framing devices, it seems, are filtered through the lens of Humbert’s language. Yet what draws the reader through the text is not Humbert in the abstract form of embedded language. Rather, it is the story of Humbert, a middle-aged man who entraps a twelve year-old girl in a sexual relationship that lasts over two years. Plot, as several critics have noted, is crucial to Nabokov’s novels.\(^7\) Despite Humbert’s fractional and slippery presence in the text, the reader of Lolita cannot help but attempt to impose order on him, and his story, in an attempt to understand the events of this very compelling story.

How, then, are we to understand the strange balance between the sequential plotting of a story, and the fracturing and circularity that constantly undercuts its established boundaries? The temporality of Humbert’s detective story does not follow a straightforward, or even linear, trajectory. We are often given the clues to his mystery before we know what the mystery even is, or who the suspects are. This multidirectional telling has the effect of fracturing time into multiple and contingent instances, in which

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\(^7\) Brian Stonehill describes the “wonderful paradox” at the heart of Nabokov’s fiction: despite their self-conscious artificiality, his “preposterous, implausible, transparently fantastic stories touch us, move us, and stir our emotions as the work of few other contemporary writers do.” Stonehill tells us not to overlook the fact that “Nabokov tells stories” (Stonehill 83). Stonehill’s observation reminds us that just as a moralizing reading simplifies a complex text, overlooking Lolita’s captivating story is also to fail it.
Humbert’s forward-moving narration is, at times, in direct contradiction to his narrative commentary:

“I hurried on. I stopped again. It had happened at last. She had gone for ever. In later years I have often wondered why she did not go for ever that day.” (223)

The unfolding of *Lolita* often mimics Humbert’s pursuit of Lolita in this passage, hurrying ahead only to haltingly hit a dead end, or impossible contradiction in the next paragraph. His frustrated reader, attempting to piece together the sequence of events, knows that one or the other of these instances *must* have occurred, yet we are forced to rely on a narrator who sometimes can’t decide or remember himself. Humbert tells us conflicting things about his ability to relay the details of his past, claiming at times to have a “photographic memory,” yet often admitting to certain dim recollections and gaps in his story: “being a murderer with a sensational but incomplete and unorthodox memory…” (40; 217). Like the metaleptic quality of the narrative, the contradictions and gaps embedded in *Lolita*’s plot and sequential order are meant to remind us of its status as fiction, and make explicit our desire as readers of fiction to impose order and meaning on the text.

In “Narrative Desire,” Peter Brooks discusses the relationship between the plot of a narrative and desire. He conceives of plot as an “activity, a structuring operation elicited in the reader trying to make sense of those meanings that develop only through textual and temporal succession” (Brooks, “Narrative Desire,” 131). By focusing on the action of reading, he draws attention to the performative role of the reader, whose desire carries her “forward, onward, through the text” (Brooks 132). Like all narratives, *Lolita* unfolds by provoking this forward-moving desire in its reader. In many ways, *Lolita*
unfolds like a detective story, which compels the reader to find out what happens to Lolita in the first part, and solve the “mystery” of her disappearance in the second. Yet Humbert’s tale does not conform to the rules of the traditional mystery story, and in fact parodies the suspense-building narrative structure so integral to detective stories. The reader discovers again and again that the resolution they desire or expect is not what they’re looking for at all; the mystery here is its own inaccessibility. Appel describes the reader’s (and Humbert’s) frustrated attempt to figure out what happened to Lolita after she disappears, for the clues left behind in Quilty’s “cryptogrammic paper chase” only illuminate the farce of the chase itself:

Seeing the veracity of the narrative collapse, but not willing to grant that fiction is artifice, and rightly feeling that any cruelty is at his expense, the reader may anxiously wonder who is responsible for what here... The “information” provides a non-solution that parodies the reader’s need for a solution and our belief that either literature or life will ever reveal one, in a larger sense.
(Appel, annotations to Lolita, 430)

Appel’s observation describes the anxiety that Lolita’s involuted language provokes in its reader. The novel’s indeterminate tone and temporal progression compels its reader to search for determinacy and stability, a resting point that Humbert’s elusive language denies. Rather, Lolita exposes the artificiality of the standard heuristic devices that we rely on to decipher a text, like coherent characters, linear or causal plot lines, and the logical “solution” to the “crime.”

While Appel aptly describes how Lolita parodies the expectations and desires of its readers, he neglects to see how the anxiety he describes is manifested in his own readings of Lolita, in his attempt to recuperate Humbert’s remorse. Like the reader’s desire to pin down the novel’s unsolvable mysteries, there is an equally strong tendency
among Lolita’s critics to “fix” its moral or redemptive meaning (and, as John Ray’s introduction proves, Lolita also “parodies the reader’s need” for a moral solution by preemptively objecting to its own content). The multivalence of the term “fix” is helpful here, for to moralize Lolita in Appel’s sense is both to secure or pin down to Humbert’s confessional tone, and to mend or recuperate its morality. As I discussed earlier, Kevin Ohi claims that the anxiety caused by these two indeterminacies, the novel’s denial of straightforward representation and Humbert’s questionable sincerity or remorse, are both linked to the generative nature of language. Lolita is so controversial because the language it proliferates explicitly aestheticizes pleasure and seduction.

The Textualization and Aesthetic of Ruin

As I briefly described, the progression of Lolita, like the movement of desire, is a process of consumption that moves toward an end that constantly resists finality or closure. Peter Brooks calls this movement the “anticipation of retrospection:” the consumer of the text and the narrative itself move forward with a desire, or compulsion, for an endpoint that will retrospectively give meaning to all that came before (Brooks, Reading for the Plot, 23). Yet Brooks also points out the fact that any final “solution” or conclusion to a text is ultimately an illusion, for any meaningful ordering of the past artificially imposes a sequence of events on a boundless duration of time; a sequence of events that must, in retrospect, make causal sense. A narrative, in other words, moves

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8 Paul Ricoeur calls this the “paradox of contingency” that characterizes the reader’s acceptance and understanding of any story: “rather than being predictable, a conclusion must be acceptable. Looking back from the conclusion to the episodes leading up to it, we have to be able to say that this ending required these sorts of events and this chain of
toward its destruction (its end) while it simultaneously generates meaning and orientation through the reader’s proleptic and retrospective movements that make sense of that end.

In addition to our own evolving understanding of the novel through anticipation and retrospection, the readers of Lolita must also reckon with Humbert’s perception of his past and future. By filtering our search for Lolita through Humbert’s consciousness, our attempts to find or understand her must pass through his depictions, which both create and destroy Lolita’s title character. Ohi describes how textualization and aestheticization become entwined with the process of Lolita’s ruination, saying “Lolita’s ruin is her becoming Lolita” (Ohi 166). Lolita’s structure propels us foreword in search of closure, yet our progression toward that end often makes us uneasy because we, as readers and appreciators of Humbert’s text, become implicated in the process of Lolita’s consumption. By recognizing how this unease is created and perpetuated through the structure and language of Lolita, we can more critically evaluate our reaction to the text.

The textualization of Lolita’s ruin, fitting with the language of the novel, is often shrouded in aesthetically tantalizing and involuted language. Her sorrow is only implicitly alluded to within Humbert’s metaphoric and ironic mode of speech, hidden within descriptions of other places and things. A particularly poignant instance of this occurs in the passage below, in which Humbert reflects on his consumption of America during their pointless roadtrips:

And so we rolled East, I more devastated than braced with the satisfaction of my passion, and she glowing with health, her bi-iliac garland still as brief as a lad’s, although she had added two inches to her stature and eight pounds to her weight. We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing. And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime actions. But this backward look is made possible by the teleological movement directed by our expectations when we follow the story” (Ricoeur 40).
the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep. 

*(Lolita 175)*

This passage demonstrates Humbert’s interpolation of the past with the present, moving forward (“and so we rolled East”) while commenting on that past “in retrospect.” The ambiguity of that retrospect, too, complicates our understanding of the temporality of this passage. It could both mean “by now, in retrospect, the country was…” (Humbert’s present), or “by that time, in retrospect…” (a doubling of the past). This is an instance in which the narrative not only complicates which version of Humbert is thinking retrospectively, but at what moment in time. The temporality of this passage is particularly fractured by Humbert’s attention to the immediate temporal situation of his recollection and his writing process (“and I catch myself today”), highlighting the fact that he is still mentally working through these events.9 He is simultaneously decoding and encoding the plot for us, forcing the reader to actively decipher the events of the story through his solipsistic viewpoint. Although we cannot necessarily take Humbert’s “confession” at face value because of its contradictions and self-effacing tendencies, a close examination of its language and tone allows us to better comprehend Humbert’s strategic involutions.

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9 Wood and Ohi also address the ambiguous temporality of this passage in relation to Humbert’s consciousness. Ohi describes the “redoubled retrospection” both in terms of the passage’s “slippery temporality” and as a vehicle for exposing Humbert’s guilt: “Humbert, seemingly thinking in spite of himself, exposes or is exposed (as if retrospectively) in a ‘thinking’ of which, ongoing from an unspecified time, he has nevertheless remained aware” (165). The question of Humbert’s guilt, and its relation to pleasure, has been critical in the book’s reception; Ohi’s attention to the ambiguity of his guilt emphasizes the fact that we can never “fix” Humbert’s sincerity. Like Ohi, I am interested in what such ambiguity generates.
In addition to the tension between the forward-moving road trip narrative and the retrospective telling of it, this passage also couples the temporal signs of life and growth with consumption and decay. Humbert writes that after zigzagging around the country and back, covering “about 27,000 miles!,” they had really “seen nothing,” indicating stagnation rather than progress or growth (175). Their eastward direction, as opposed to the westward historical settlement of America, also points to regression or return. It seems that although Humbert measures the progression of their journey in terms of distance, time, and even Lolita’s physical growth, he is more concerned with what remains static. He emphasizes the retention of Lolita’s child-like features over her maturation by proudly pronouncing Lolita’s “bi-iliac garland still as brief as a lad’s.”

This anatomical reference to immaturity also serves to invoke death and loss, by its allusion to the last line of A.E. Housman’s “To an Athlete Dying Young” (1886). In the poem, the young athlete’s death allows him to transcend the world where “early though the laurel grows/ It withers quicker than the rose,” and achieve immortality. The final stanza describes how only in death is the transience of growth and decay halted, for on the young man’s “early-laurelled head” there lies “unwithered on its curls/ The garland briefer than a girl's” (Housman 16). For Humbert, Lolita’s growth is a kind of death, the death of his nymphet, which he wishes to defy by freezing her in her nymphetcy forever.

Humbert’s paradox, however, comes from the fact that to defy time, to retreat from the necessary growth and decay of life, is itself another consumptive act. In order to

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10 By “bi-iliac garland,” Humbert is referring to the distance between the iliac crests, which are the top of the hip bones. By comparing the width of Lolita’s hips to a young boy’s, he happily insinuates that she has not yet begun to mature.
fix Lolita as his object of desire, in other words, he must take away her life. In this passage, Humbert’s initial description of her, “glowing with health,” resembles other illustrations of her physical aura, as “sun-colored” and “all rose and honey” (*Lolita* 111), although Lolita’s “sobs in the night” show that she is not the picture of health. The mention of her sobs alongside the “ruined tourbooks” and “old tires” indicate that she, too, is part of the tattered remains of their trip. This passages further depicts how Humbert’s desire to fix Lolita as his object of pleasure necessarily impedes her growth and life, for although time is passing with each night, Lolita’s misery, “every night, every night,” remains unchanged.

The heart-wrenching repetition of “every night” draws attention to the irony of Humbert’s physical characterization of Lolita, as well as to his ambivalence toward the fact of her sorrow. Although he attempts to bring comfort and happiness to her through superficial treats and rewards, the fulfillment of Humbert’s own desire is contingent on Lolita’s captivity, and therefore her sobs. About their first night together after Lolita learns of her mother’s death, Humbert writes: “At the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go” (142). Humbert takes some perverse pleasure in Lolita’s isolation and the fact she has nowhere to turn, a situation he tries desperately to maintain. The fact that Humbert “feigns sleep” while she cries further indicates his ambivalence and possible pleasure in response to her pain; he knows its cause yet does nothing to stop it. Indeed, Humbert finds something “morbidly alluring” in Lolita’s tears, which he calls his “private aesthetic:” “I simply love that tinge of Botticellian pink, that raw rose about the lips, those wet, matted eyelashes” (64).
By aestheticizing Lolita’s pain, Humbert writes his perverse pleasure into some of the most touching scenes in the novel. This tension between Lolita’s consumption and Humbert’s linguistic seduction is at the center of Lolita’s controversial ambivalence. His tone, in some ways, invokes remorse by making his reader feel a pang of sympathy for Lolita. Yet we, like Humbert, are morbidly satisfied when he finally succeeds in capturing his nymphet because the story’s progression is linked with Humbert’s impossible desire to tell. Brooks writes that in addition to the reader’s desire to “consume” the narrative plot, the narrative itself exemplifies a “primary human drive” that “seeks to seduce and to subjugate the listener, to implicate him in the thrust of a desire that never can quite speak its name—never can quite come to the point—but that insists on speaking over and over again its movement toward that name” (Brooks, “Narrative Desire,” 137). Humbert’s frustration at his ability to capture Lolita, both in life and language, sends him circling back to his loss in an attempt to regain his nymphet through narrative. He retraces the original line they drew together across the country, both physically and then through his retelling, in a futile attempt to recreate his past. Drawn into his story, our desire to “fix” the meaning of Lolita implicates us in the textualization of her ruin at the same time that we sympathize with her. Like J.R., Jr, we are spellbound and disturbed by the linguistic aesthetic that provokes our unsettled sympathy for a pedophile.

Rather than anxiously object to Humbert’s erotic seduction of Lolita or his linguistic seduction of us, as criticism of Lolita has largely done, Ohi asks, “what if, in lieu of moralizing efforts to evaluate Humbert’s sincerity, we unreservedly relinquish
ourselves to the seduction of desire as a form of aestheticism or decadence (and of decadence as a mode of desire), of Humbert’s love as founded on an impossibility or loss structural to writing?” (Ohi 188). By “giving oneself over to seduction” and relinquishing the impossible tensions that linguistic seduction creates, we can read *Lolita* in terms of its successful textualizing of desire, rather than in terms of its moral or linguistic failure. To do justice to *Lolita* as a text, as I have said, it is crucial to investigate the interaction between its content and form; it is not enough to simply interrogate its moral or thematic components without also questioning the novel’s structure and language. By examining *Lolita’s* self-conscious configuration of desire and language we see how such a controversial and compelling text is generated, and how it plays with the border between text and outside text. Nabokov once said, “I think that what I would welcome at the close of a book of mine is a sensation of its world receding in the distance and stopping somewhere there suspended” (Fowler 175). The novel’s controversial reception, from the vocal objections to the anxiety-ridden criticism, indicates that readers of *Lolita* do indeed feel the perturbing presence of its fictional world impinging on their reality. Rather than appease this anxiety with moral judgment, I have followed the lead of Michael Wood and Kevin Ohi to consider the textualization of desire as an aesthetic accomplishment, in an attempt to “fix” the problem of the futility of “fixing” *Lolita*.

**Works Cited**


Works Consulted


