

***Lolita* and Interpretations of Morality**

Asma Alameroo

Bisha University

Saudi Arabia

In the decades following the decline of New Criticism as the dominant mode of critical practice in the United States, new ways of reading have emerged and have, in some cases, led to interesting new readings of classic texts. The influence of culture—of both text and readers—has become an important topic of discussions about literature. As a Saudi Arabian woman, I read *Lolita* according to my cultural view, which is affected by my religion (Islam). In Islam, a sexual relationship between a father-in-law and a daughter is forbidden and is called incest. Incest should be punished, and there is a specific punishment for both the man and woman who commit incest.

With this background, my reading reflects differently than that of a western secular reader. From the point of view of a Saudi woman who follows Islam, the novel teaches various important lessons. In the novel, Humbert is the father; he is an adult man who must control his sexual desires. Meanwhile, Lolita's clothes are not modest but are lewd. Even though she is only 12 years old, she should care about her clothing and her behavior. Her careless behavior leads her to have sex with two men who are older than her (one of them is her father). On the other hand, Humbert is the father, and he should behave as a father and protect her, not rape her. He should teach her about how, when, and with whom she can have sex. As a result, both Humbert and Lolita are guilty. However, Humbert regrets having sex with Lolita, whereas Lolita starts another relationship with Clare Quilty. She gets pregnant, which shows she does not realize the severity of her carelessness. The outcome of the novel is the death of the two men and Lolita. *Lolita* taught me the significance of explaining sexual issues and their results to our children, so they can deal with rape correctly if they face it.

Although unique to my particular culture, this interpretation highlights several points about the novel. *Lolita*, published in 1955, is one of the most interesting and controversial novels of Vladimir Nabokov. Although many critics (And Nabokov himself) reject the idea that the novel should be read in terms of its "values" or "morals," there are nevertheless some critics who believe that *Lolita* educates its readers, while others believe that it is an immoral novel. Before interpreting Nabokov's novel (or his intent in writing it) as moral or immoral, it is necessary to define morality. This paper proposes that morality can be defined as the differentiations of values, decisions, actions, and intentions according to a concept of what is right (good) and what is wrong (evil). Morality is furthermore usually derived from a particular philosophy, culture, or religion (or all three). *Lolita* can be considered a moral novel to the extent that its content is presented as a cautionary tale and with disapproval. The fate of Humbert Humbert provides the framework of a cautionary tale, in which there is incest between a girl (Lolita) and her father-in-

law (Humbert), and there is a crime in which Humbert murders Lolita's lover, Clare Quilty. Ultimately, readers can obtain moral benefits from reading *Lolita*, even if Nabokov did not believe this was the intent of the work.

First, we will analyze Humbert's character. Humbert himself is a professor in French poetry and earlier studied psychiatry and English literature. Therefore, Nabokov's "purpose" is not this lesson, but Humbert can be read this way. In *Lolita*, Humbert wants to educate readers concerning the potential immoral acts and behavior. Colin McGinn, a British philosopher who teaches in England and America, finds his students' reaction to *Lolita* "instructive," also stating that "they [McGinn's students] soon come to appreciate the moral dimensions of the text..." (McGinn 39). This emphasizes that *Lolita* has moral lessons that one has to consider.

At the beginning of the novel, Humbert writes his confessions in jail as a defense for his crimes, admitting a certain sort of immorality (and culpability) and describing Lolita as the "light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin ..." (Nabokov 7). In fact, Humbert has realized his mistakes too late. He also confesses that "Humbert Humbert tried hard to be good. Really and truly, he did. He had the utmost respect for ordinary children, with their purity and vulnerability, and under no circumstances would he have interfered with the innocence of a child, if there was the least risk of a row" (Nabokov 19). These confessions are directed to the reader for consideration; Humbert wishes his "audience" (the reader) to see that he tried hard to be a good person, and the statement reflects the fact that Humbert has lost self-respect and the respect of others as a result of his acts. Moreover, these initial confessions (and the novel as a whole) illustrate that a man who follows his sexual desires without regard to morality will destroy his future. Humbert feels guilty and miserable because of this forbidden relationship. His feelings of disgust are also brought forth by the way Lolita treats him; sometimes, she engages in a relationship with him, other times she exploits and refuses him. The entire relationship is intended to provoke in the reader ideas concerning the potential consequences of having sexual relations with someone who is not of age. As Humbert's end proves, starting out on the wrong path will lead to tragic results.

Lolita continues as "a novel about morality and loss" by next reflecting on the nature of parents as role models (Hasty 228). Soon after Humbert's initial rhapsodic description of Lolita, Humbert states that he "had nobody to complain to, nobody to consult" (Nabokov 9). Here, the importance of family in teaching about sexuality is first emphasized. If a child grows up under healthy circumstances, with parents to provide guidance and show him/her the right way and the value of religion and moral action, the child will obtain strong principles and behaviors rooted in a particular culture. These values provide ways to deal with problems, especially sexuality and relationships. If Humbert had a person with whom he could share his feelings about sexuality and the sadness of Annabel's death (Humbert's childhood love), he may not have lost his way. Humbert's words concerning the absence of someone to assist him help the reader understand how parents can help mitigate pain and lead us into good decisions in dealing with our problems. Moreover, as a mother, I believe that Humbert's words increase my own belief that I should

share (and identify with) my kids' sadness before their happiness. Also, I should teach them step by step about sex, and how to deal with sex issues.

Annabel's death is somehow the turning point of Humbert's character: "Annabel's death came hard on the heels of a desire-enflamed summer on the French Riviera, and it is in terms of intense passion on the verge of consummation that the relationship is recalled" (Hasty 230). Humbert tells us that he was (or seemed to be) a really good boy during his childhood. His relationship with Annabel was perfect; however, Annabel's death leads to a pain in his heart that cannot be healed by time, but that is rather awakened when he sees Lolita for the first time.

James Tweedie asserts in his criticism of *Lolita* that Annabel's death and his unfulfilled desire are "the circumstances that bring about *Lolita's* tragedy [and] render it particularly poignant..." (155). Of course, the "circumstances" that surrounded Humbert make him behave badly with Lolita.

It was the same child-the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair. A polka-dotted black kerchief tied around her chest hid from my aging ape eyes, but not from the gaze of young memory, the juvenile breasts I had fondled one immortal day. (Nabokov 41-42)

One way of interpreting this passage is that the novel says that if a man or a boy has seen a girl with "the same silky supple bare back", he will want to have sex with her because she was not modest. An adolescent or young woman, in fact, may not realize what a man or boy will think if they see her "puerile hips"; he will want to kiss them as Humbert "had kissed the crenulated imprint left by the band of her shorts" (Nabokov 42). With respect to moral ideas and guidance, these passages in *Lolita* convey that readers should pay attention to how their children (especially little girls) dress, as men's sexual desires are sometimes easily stirred.

Lolita provides moral theory as "didactic theory"; Michael Rodgers illustrated that this theory aimed to show "*Lolita* as a text with 'the ability to morally educate its readers'" (105). It is clear that the narrator wants to educate his readers through the text of the novel about having forbidden sex and the results of it. Generally, this is conveyed by the author's addressing the reader directly with phrases such as "the reader learned". This leads us to understand that one of the narrator's purposes is to inform readers about the mistake that destroyed his life. Some of his thoughts reveal his regret:

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 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. (Nabokov 199)

Here we understand Humbert's regret. He learns that the result of his relationship is "nothing". He gets only the fear of the others such as Lolita's friends and teachers. This fear is a fear about his relationship; if he was trusted as doing well, he would not be afraid. Moreover, this relation has "ruined both Humbert and Lolita. He realizes that his trip with Lolita has "defiled" all the streets that they drove. Furthermore, from these words, "we emerge from reading it with a better understanding of human sin and its consequences" (Rodgers 106). His life is destroyed, and he gets "nothing" from this "sin," as Humbert confesses in the beginning of the novel (Nabokov 7).

To the extent that Humbert has become Lolita's father, *Lolita* addresses the incest issue. In fact, we as readers can attribute Humbert's sin to losing Annabel, which means he lost his first love at the age of 16 years. Annabel's death caused a shock to Humbert; because he did not have anyone to guide him and listen to him, he went the wrong way. However, Lolita facilitated Humbert in his downfall by moving him to start this forbidden relationship.

Now, we will discuss Lolita's character. We can confirm through Humbert's description that Lolita was very alluring: "She was thinner and taller...", and "[she] was all rose and honey, dressed in her brightest gingham, with a pattern of little red apples, and her arms and legs were of a deep golden brown, with scratches like tiny dotted lines of coagulated rubies..." (Nabokov 125). Moreover, she in some scenes leaves her thighs uncovered, bringing out the male sexual instinct. She does not realize the danger of wearing such clothes. For instance, on one Sunday morning in June, Lolita is dressed in a particularly enticing fashion:

She wore that day a pretty print dress that I had seen on her once before, ample in the skirt, tight in the bodice, short-sleeved, pink, checkered with darker pink, and, to complete the color scheme, she had painted her lips and was holding in her hollowed hands a beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple. (Nabokov 63)

Unbelievably, although Lolita does in fact just care about her beauty (mainly for reasons of vanity), Lolita looks like this without realizing that she is still young and the look may not just tempt boys but also men. In this case, we should pay attention to the mother, Mrs. Haze, who did not recognize her daughter or advise her about the sexual affairs that she may be drawn into in the future. In addition, Mrs. Haze cares for her own beauty, body, and how to make Humbert fall in love with her. Therefore, she sends Lolita to camp to keep Lolita far from her romantic plans for Humbert. Instead of taking care of her daughter, she sends her and does not teach her daughter how to be a respectable girl and how to deal with sexual affairs. Generally, parents are very important in helping children avoid these affairs.

The neglect of Lolita's character leads her to her tragic end. I admit that Humbert often lies or misunderstands his own feelings and desires. Ultimately, however, Humbert was mostly searching for love, as he confirms: "I am not concerned with so-called 'sex' at all" (Nabokov 151). However, Lolita has exploited his emotions, which are his weakness. He loves her too much because his heart is wounded by Annabel's death. Moreover, Humbert explains that Lolita

is the one “who seduced me” (Nabokov 150). In my point of view, there is no doubt that she has “seduced” through her clothes and manner. She lacks consciousness and behaves like a child with an adult’s sexuality:

I seemed to have shed my clothes and slipped into pajamas with the kind of fantastic instantaneousness which is implied when in a cinematographic scene the process of changing is cut; and I had already placed my knee on the edge of the bed when Lolita turned her head and stared at me through the striped shadows. (Nabokov 145)

What she does in Humbert’s room clarifies “Lolita’s lack of awareness or her ill-use” (Jenkins 220). It is probably not a good decision by Humbert to be alone in a hotel room with a little girl, but what would Humbert or any man think if they saw that a girl was observing them? They may think (or not think) that she wants to have a sexual relationship, but the first thing they will think about is sex.

With his sexual instincts out of his control to a great extent (due to a combination of Lolita’s behavior and his own character weaknesses), Humbert and his life become controlled by Lolita. He states that “[my] life was handled by little Lo in an energetic, matter-of-fact manner as if it were an insensate gadget unconnected with me” (Nabokov 151). This emphasizes that Lolita has exploited his emotions toward and love for her. She treats Humbert as if he was “the spider sat down beside her, but she frightened poor Humbert away” (Jenkins 219). Through this treatment, the reader can understand that one should not trust, have strong feelings for, or love someone who is not worthy of love. It could happen that you love and trust someone, but discover that he/she is not worthy. Once you discover that you should stop loving him/her, not letting him/her controlling your life and fate as Humbert has done. He realizes that there is a man, Quilty, driving behind them, and he continues loving her and trusting her by asking her who Quilty is. He thinks that she will tell him about her plan. Moreover, he confesses that:

I should have known (by signs made to me by something in Lolita—the real child Lolita or some haggard angel behind her back) that nothing but pain and horror would result from the expected rapture. (Nabokov 141)

He gets some “signs” about the truth that this child is poisoned. She arranged for escaping from Humbert to another man who is older than her. Regardless of Humbert’s desires of having sex with a young girl, we can interpret these events as Lolita being ill and very atypical; she loves having sexual relations with men who are much older than her. Furthermore, she exploits Humbert and gets money from him whenever she wants. Getting money is evidence that Lolita is an exploitive girl. Additionally, Humbert wants to tell us “how he failed her, because he wants us to perceive as slowly as he did that he loves this Lolita, a girl left to peculiar desires of her stepfather” (Dyer 10-11).

Lolita presents an excellent life lesson in the end as, by the conclusion of the novel, both Lolita and Humbert are punished because of their forbidden relationship. For Humbert, he is punished through “his conscience and in the realization of the privation he causes her to undergo” (Benson 359). He is punished because he allows himself to have sex with his step-daughter. In spite of the pain he experienced in the past due to Annabel’s death, he did not have the right to start loving a teenager; now, he is having a sexual relationship with his step-daughter while traveling with her. His incarceration helps him realize his mistake, but it’s too late. He starts to “recognize the depths of his turpitude” (Benson 360). Moreover, he dies in jail, a result of his killing of Quilty and his “turpitude”. On the other hand, Lolita also gets punished for her guilt. She seduces and exploits Humbert, eventually planning for an escape from him with another man who is older than her. She did not refuse Humbert’s love, nor did she accept it; rather, she played with him when she needed money. Moreover, instead of moving toward any association that could help her turn the right way, she got pregnant, getting pregnant at seventeen as a result of her misbehavior. In the end, Lolita dies during childbirth. Therefore, readers can understand the outcome of incest or forbidden relationships, the outcome of not following a religion or respecting a “marriage pact” is pain, and nothing more than pain and the torment of self-consciousness.

To summarize, *Lolita* presents lessons that can apply to our lives. Although *Lolita* is about incest which means a sexual relationship between a father and his daughter, Humbert and Lolita, it educates its readers through Humbert’s regret, Lolita’s illness, and their tragic end.

I wish to conclude with one final point: if the United States is a Christian country, why is the novel not discussed from this point of view? After *Lolita* was published in 1955, some people and critics did typecast *Lolita* as an immoral novel. If we turn back to American society in 1950 to 1960, we see that Americans deeply cared about church and family:

Americans in the 1950s attended church more regularly. Church attendance doubled between 1945 and 1960. The religious revival of the 1950s can be explained from a number of perspectives. For some, church attendance was what one did because everyone else was doing it. The 1950s was also the decade of the family. The nuclear family was celebrated as the ideal. This was also the “baby boom.” American culture had become child-centered and child rearing had changed along with the times. (“Chapter 27: The Consumer Society: The 1950s.”)

The respected status of religion in America during the decade of the 1950s may have been one reason *Lolita* was considered an immoral novel. Americans likely did not want their children to read a story of incest and murder as they wanted children to grow up with morals, respect, and religious belief. Moreover, during that time (1950), Americans were starting to watch television (which was coming to replace the radio as the first source of entertainment in the home), and many adults were troubled by “pre-martial sexual exploration” (“Chapter 27: The Consumer

Society: The 1950s”). Possibly, Nabokov wanted to educate adults about the sexual issue in order that they may avoid engaging in taboo behavior. In addition, Nabokov said that he is “trying to be an American writer and claim only the same rights that other American writers enjoy” (Wepler 79). American writers at that time were realistic, and Nabokov’s topic was relevant (and realistic) then as it is today.

Even though some readers feel that “*Lolita* is purely aesthetic and amoral...” (Green2), Christian readers may see that *Lolita* is not about morality. According to Christianity, Humbert is the one responsible for having sex with a young girl under the legal age of having sexual relationships. However, as a Muslim woman, I see that both Humbert and Lolita share the responsibility. Although Humbert is an adult man, Lolita should be careful in her behavior and her clothing. She is 12 years old, which in Islam is an age of acting modestly with both men and boys. Islam considers this age as being able to behave as a responsible girl.

Nabokov’s writing was very purposeful in *Lolita*; he tried to educate adults and instruct them. In Iran, most of Azar Nafisi’s Students recognize that *Lolita* is a moral novel that warns them about their future, while some students see that it educates women concerning what to do if facing this situation (DePaul 89-90). Ultimately, *Lolita* is full of lessons that one can take a moral from. It shows us how to deal with love that is forbidden, and how to deal with someone who is exploiting us. We can obtain moral lessons through the story even as the story talks about incest and crime, as Nabokov shared with his readers that “One had to choose between him [being as his/her primitiveness] and H. H., and one wanted H.H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations...” (Nabokov 352). Nabokov wants us as readers, mothers, and fathers, and at all levels of society, to be cautious; to have a good society as he assigns guilt and ends his confession: “this is only immorality you and I may share, my Lolita...” (Nabokov 352).

Works Cited

- Benson, Sean. “Augustinian Evil and Moral Good in *Lolita*.” *Renascence* 64.4 (2012): 353-367. Print.
- “Chapter 27: The Consumer Society: The 1950s.” *Prenhall*. N.p., n.d. Web. 22 Sept. 2014.
- DePaul, Amy. “Re-Reading ‘Reading *Lolita* in Tehran’.” *MELUS* (2008): 73-92. Print.
- Dyer, Gary R. “Humbert Humbert’s Use of Catullus 58 in *Lolita*.” *Twentieth Century Literature* (1988): 1-15. Print.
- Green, Jennifer Elizabeth. “Aesthetic Excuses and Moral Crimes: The Convergence of Morality and Aesthetics in Nabokov’s *Lolita*.” (2006). Print.
- Hasty, Olga. “Memory, Consciousness, and Time in Nabokov’s *Lolita*.” *KronoScope* 4.2 (2004): 225-238. Print.
- Jenkins, Jennifer L. “Searching High and Lo: Unholy Quests for *Lolita*.” *Twentieth Century Literature* (2005): 210-243. Print.

- McGinn, Colin. "The meaning and morality of Lolita." *The Philosophical Forum*. Vol. 30. No. 1. Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. Penguin Books, 1955. Print.
- Rodgers, Michael. "Lolita's Nietzschean Morality." *Philosophy and Literature* 35.1 (2011): 104-120. Print.
- Tweedie, James. "Lolita's Loose Ends: Nabokov and the Boundless Novel." *Twentieth Century Literature* (2000): 150-170. Print.
- Wepler, Ryan. "Nabokov's Nomadic Humor: *Lolita*." *College Literature* 38.4 (2011): 76-97. Print.