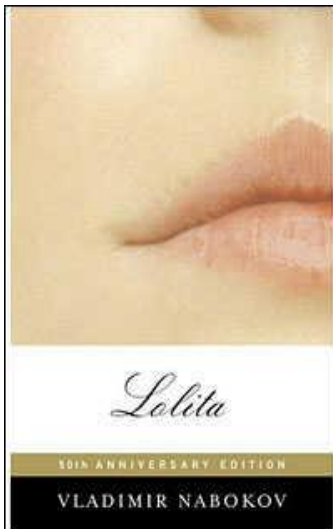


Curiosity from Controversy: A Quarantine Read of Nabokov's Infamous *Lolita* Guided
by One of the Most Unreliable Narrators in Literature, by E.P. (pseudonym).

Doctor O'Donnell

Advanced Composition

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Title: *Lolita*

Published: 1955

Author: Vladimir Nabokov

Genre: Novel

Length: 317 pages

Paperback and hardcover copies available at Books-A-Million, Amazon,
Barnes and Noble

Paperback beginning at \$13.59 (Amazon) <https://www.amazon.com/Lolita-Vladimir-Nabokov/dp/0679723161>

Hardcover beginning at \$23.49 (Barnes and Noble)

<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/lolita-vladimir-nabokov/1100068690>

*If you read this book and view it as a tragic love story, you need to read the book
again.*

That statement was the general consensus of the comments under a video of book
recommendations I watched back during the later months of the initial lockdown in 2020. I was

looking for a new read, and the controversial *Lolita*, published in 1955 by Russian author Vladimir Nabokov, has garnered quite a reputation for its contentious content. It was the nature of the book, the debates about the topics it covers, and the varying opinions and reviews of it that drew me to make a trip to an always vacant Books-A-Million and pick up a copy.

I bought the only copy they had: a paperback, 50th anniversary edition. I flipped to the back and read the review *Vanity Fair* had to say: “The only convincing love story of our century”. The fact that there was such a review on the back shocked me when the only key information that I knew about the novel was that it centered on the narrator’s crazed, sickening obsession for 12-year-old Dolores Haze. How could a book centered on such a horrid and appalling subject even be *considered* a love story, and why was it so widely talked about if it had such a theme? That review solidified my resolve in finishing it and seeing for myself what it was truly all about.

A Summary

The book begins with a fictional foreword from a psychology book editor Dr. John Ray, Jr., who explains that the writer of “*Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male*” died in legal captivity before he was to go on trial. Automatically, the reader knows the narrator of the memoir, under the pseudonym of Humbert Humbert, is guilty of some sort of crime. Humbert Humbert begins his story by recounting his childhood on the French Riviera. There he meets Annabel Leigh, a childhood love that tragically ends when she dies of typhus. Ever since then, Humbert harbors an attraction for girls that fit the haunting mold Annabel Leigh left in his mind. He describes himself as a charming, intellectual, respectable, intelligent, and a handsome individual— the pinnacle of a vain European erudite who has never had a lack of attention from

the opposite sex. He has relationships with women of his own age, but those relationships always dissolve due to his sickening obsessions and desires. The most notable relationship, the one that introduces the central story of *Lolita*, is his relationship with Charlotte Haze and her daughter, Dolores.

While he is in the process of searching for a new home in a New England town, he meets Charlotte Haze, who is accepting tenants. Upon seeing her daughter, twelve-year-old Dolores, he is immediately drawn to her and moves in with them. Time passes and Humbert's obsession with Dolores, or "Lolita" as he dubs her, only increases to the point where he marries Charlotte to stay close to her. In his diary, Humbert writes about his so-called "love" for Lolita and how he even contemplates the desire to kill Charlotte so he can have Dolores all to himself. After finding the shocking and disturbing diary, Charlotte writes letters to her friends to warn them about Humbert, but those letters are never sent. Humbert is presented with the opportunity he has been waiting for: Charlotte is out of the picture and thus Dolores is under his thumb. He takes Dolores on an extensive cross-country road trip where he justifies abusing the young girl.

The Unreliable H.H.

It is imperative to read this story with the mindset that Humbert is *not* a reliable narrator. Deranged and delusional, I would go even further to describe him as mentally ill. Through the guise of his ornate writing style chock full of classical literary references and wit, the reader has to look at the events that are occurring and open their eyes to the reality of what is actually happening. Nabokov writes Humbert in a way that almost begs the reader to take pity on him. In Humbert's mind, he never did anything wrong. He makes statements describing himself as "a thoughtful friend" and a "passionate father" (Nabokov 165). It isn't until the very end of the story

that Humbert recognizes the damage he brought on Dolores Haze's life after playing the role of savior.

It is that very aspect that makes *Lolita* such an interesting read, despite its appalling nature. The trap lies in the words Humbert uses, as a villainous master of prose. Even the fictitious Dr. John Ray Jr. in the foreword expresses "how magically his [Humbert] singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author" (Nabokov 5). When I was reading it, it felt like I had to have an annotated version by my side to understand the allusions to classical literature and mythology, the French expressions and sentences, and the overall elaborate language. To be distracted by the writing is exactly what Nabokov intended. Humbert is not an ordinary villain; he is a villain with an extreme power of the pen, and despite all that he does, the reader cannot condemn the genius of his writing style.

Things Left Unsaid

Since Humbert is an incredibly unreliable narrator, how does one know what exactly is happening? The answers are found in the very little that is left unsaid by Humbert. It is incredibly difficult to pinpoint exactly what to infer through the gaze of such a flowery narrator. I went through the book over a span of a few months, and each time I picked it back up, remembering what had last happened is what allowed me to draw conclusions on what was actually occurring. That sort of reflection is key in seeing past the charming words.

Some aspects are easier to catch onto than others, such as the cause of Humbert's fixation on Dolores is connected to the death of Annabel Leigh. He refers to her at one point as "Annabel Haze, alias Dolores Lee, alias Loleeta" (Nabokov 167). Others include the relationship of

Humbert and Dolores after Charlotte is dead. Humbert insists that Lolita is in charge of the relationship, and she is manipulating him by using her charm and wit to bribe him. As a reader looking in on this, it prompts questions such as: “Is Dolores *really* in charge of this situation because she knows she can bribe Humbert through acting a certain way?”; “Is Humbert imagining that she is in charge and is misinterpreting her actions to comply with his own desires?” We as readers know that Dolores does not have control over things such as money and her own freedom, so how could she possibly be in charge of such a situation? Additionally, Dolores’s true thoughts and feelings are never expanded on. Everything is through the lens of Humbert, who insists that he is completely at Lolita’s tempestuous behest, but readers know that is absolutely not the case.

Controversy

Once I caught on to the fact that Humbert was totally out of his mind— which was fairly soon into the story— is when I started to look at the story from the perspective of a psychological book dealing with an insane person that caved into grotesque desires. Humbert’s appalling transformation as the story continues brands him as a psychopathic murderer with disturbing and criminal tastes and tendencies. Reading it from that standpoint made *Lolita* one of the most interesting books I have ever read. Keeping that in mind, do I believe it deserves the controversy that surrounds it? *Yes*.

One of the most obvious controversies surrounding the novel is obviously its subject matter. Grooming, pedophilia, abduction, and sexual assault are all highly sensitive subjects that the book does not shy away from. Reading *Lolita* from the standpoint that the most educated, seemingly nonthreatening people can be capable of monstrous deeds is what makes it so

sobering. It is not often that criminals who dabble in such horrible crimes contained in the book are depicted as being highly intellectual and with traits that are depicted as belonging to the most harmless individuals; far fewer depictions use the criminal's point of view in such a warped fashion. That point of view is also another unique aspect of *Lolita* and what makes it so captivating to read. The central conflict and complexity of Humbert's character is like a bad accident—it is hard to take your eyes away. Nabokov did an excellent job getting into the mind of such a criminal, almost uncannily so. Everything was so well laid out, so detailed, that it almost makes me wonder about Nabokov himself and how he was able to write such a character. How did the inspiration for such a book to be written in such a way strike him?

Additionally, the controversial nature stems from the fact that some people genuinely do view it as a tragic romance between a fatally flawed, psychotic man and the young girl he sees his dead lover in. Those who view *Lolita* in that fashion, such as the *Vanity Fair* quote mentioned at the beginning of this review, fall right into the trap Humbert set out from the beginning. They fail to see Humbert as a man driven by a gross obsession and the murderous rage that accompanies it.

Thoughts

Upon finishing *Lolita*, I was disgusted and saddened. I thought to myself, *I will never read a book like this ever again*. Being forced to read about the sexual abuse of a child who suffered such a tragic fate through the lenses of a disgusting man was an uncomfortable experience. Regardless of the subject matter and how the nature of it caused me to feel, *Lolita* remains one of the best, astoundingly well written books I have come across. If it was Nabokov's intent to make his readers feel uncomfortable and disturbed, he did an excellent job in creating

the novel. The combination of the craftiness of the language used and the disturbing subject matter and narrator balanced the horrors of *Lolita* to create a unique and horrifying literary classic.

Works Cited

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. 50th anniversary ed., Vintage, 1955.