Lolita as an American Road Novel

by

Jodi Delman

Considering the controversial subject matter dealt with in the novel *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, several themes are ripe for prospective discussion. Incest, sexual perversions, European old-worldiness versus American post-war commercialism, and numerous others top the list. However, one possibility not frequently discussed is that of Lolita as a specimen of the American "road novel." This perspective transcends the obvious assertion that the hero (or anti-hero) Humbert Humbert and his stepdaughter and object of obsession, Lolita, travel across the United States and experience many of its beauties and wonders. The poor Humbert, trapped by his fixation on young "nymphets," shares with other "road warriors" the desire for escape from social constraints keeping him from attainment of satisfaction and ecstasy. In his case, though, this "ecstasy" takes the form of a sexual aberration vehemently condemned in puritanical mid-twentieth century America.

It has been said of another road novel (a predecessor of Lolita and the founding work of the road novel genre), *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac, that the hero of such a work "dashes down the road [in] flights of panic, the fear of never making it. . . [the flights] are quests for ecstasy, which is itself an escape from fear and the frustrations of desire" (Hipkiss 43). The characters of Kerouac's novel are "dashing" for some sort of identity in cold War America, a nation that was at that lime mentally grappling with the issue of nuclear warfare and the possibility of imminent world annihilation. This describes Humbert's actions also, except that his "dashes" are of a different nature: he is attempting to outrun all potential interference in his affair with a young girl, and consequently his stepdaughter, Dolores (Lolita) Haze. Humbert is on an impossible, endless search for a destination that will cause the headstrong yet insouciant pre-teen to finally give in to his adoration and obsessive love. He is also searching, less obviously, for something to fill the void left by his prematurely-deceased childhood girlfriend, Annabel Leigh. From her loss he has never recovered, and he seeks fulfillment through improper relations with young girls like Lolita; in Lolita, though, he has apparently found an adequate facsimile of his first love, and pursues her with vehement vigor both physically and emotionally.

Like other "travelers," Humbert seeks to evade conventional American mores, particularly the sexual ones, by running from those who might enforce them. He considers himself somewhat "elite," a superior expatriate of the Old World (which, he seems to infer, fosters a more tolerant attitude toward sexual perversions, or perhaps just everything in general). Additionally, he views the unique ability to discern nymphets from ordinary girls as a result of being "an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy" (Nabakov 17). The stuffiness of American morals at the time, in his view, is not *his* problem, but that of the rest of the country. He is simply reacting to his fine, "artistic" senses which manage to allow self-rationalization of his actions and behavior as "exceptional," which society dictates lewd and inappropriate. This makes him an outcast, alienated by normal society. Through creating his own world, as it were, in the road trip, he avoids contact with those who would "bring him down" to a level of ordinary existence full of limits and boundaries that would render him helpless and hopeless in terms of pursuing his desires.

The road trip across America is the vehicle by which Humbert actualizes his sexual fantasies with the initially-willing but soon-resentful and recalcitrant Lolita. The state of constant movement is a completely decadent indulgence for Humbert, because it provides the necessary anonymity for him to avoid any potential suspicion which might result from meddlesome neighbors in a long-term residence. He does, interestingly, develop a friendship with another sexual eccentric, Gaston Godin, in Beardsley during one of the longer-duration residences they experience. Gaston's company provides "a spell of absolute security...on [Humbert's] secret" (Nabakov 181), considering that Gaston has a predilection for young boys. Humbert avoids confidences with other people who might suspect his abnormal behavior.

While being conducive to Humbert's plan, this nomadic lifestyle is detrimental to Lolita, whose development as a young girl is impaired by not having "roots" at a crucial age (not to mention, obviously, the irreparable mental damage caused by Humbert’s forced sexual escapades). While he does experience remorse for this, his desire for her always overcomes his reservations. However, the "trip" itself later does become Lolita's escape from the claws of Humbert, as she enlists the help of her lover, Claire Quilty (also a pedophile), to chase the two across country and eventually take her away from her stepfather. While this is not a true escape (passed from one pervert to another), it does free her from the imprisonment imposed by the overly-controlling Humbert.

The "ecstasy" that Humbert seeks on his road trip is not, like Kerouac's characters, a search for a national identity lost in the shuffle of World War II and the nuclear scare. Rather, it is a more immediate, preposterously apparent sexual desire for Lolita Haze. His loins control his actions to such an extent that he marries the nymphet’s mother and feigns fatherhood simply to get closer to his beloved object. Taking her away from everything she knows, so that he can have his way with her whenever he wishes, is not a major sacrifice for him. Thus, rather than being a troublesome chore, the road trip on which they embark is for him a blessed relief and release. The road trip represents that much sought-after "escape from fear and the frustrations of desire."

A certain other-worldliness is conveyed in Humbert's depiction of his and Lolita's travels, reflecting their escapist purpose. Descriptions of the American landscape are presented in the context of Lolita and her presence in them, not in and of themselves. Portrayals of beauty in nature often correspond with sexual encounters between the two. For example, Humbert describes the American wilds as "heart-rendinqly beautiful, with a quality of wide-eyed, unsung, innocent surrender" but only before explaining that lovers in the forest trying to make love encounter "poisonous plants" and "nameless insects" that interfere with their comfort. Indeed, "crablike seeds of ferocious flowers cling... to gartered black sock and sloppy white sock alike" (Nabakov 168). For Humbert, nature is to be enjoyed only when Lolita is part of the scenery.

The numerous towns and cities encountered by Lolita and Humbert are depicted as being somewhat generic. Humbert being the link between the reader and the American travel experience, the perspective is once again biased to Lolita's inclusion in the various places. It is difficult to distinguish between the more inconsequential locales, because they are presented perfunctorily; one can only recall that in each place, Lolita enjoys partaking of the latest movies, shopping extravagantly, and eating at the most inviting (if not the most elegant) restaurants. Through such description, a melding effect of experiences takes place, wherein the actual places themselves are deemed indistinguishable and unimportant; rather, emphasis is placed on act of being on the road, being transitory, which is itself enough to pacify the obsessed Humbert for the time being.

Lolita's escape from Humbert marks the end of the road trip, and the beginning of his breakdown. When she manages to conspire with Quilty, while sick and in the hospital, to flee from Humbert's detrimental influence, he almost loses his mind and finds it necessary to enter a sanitarium. This also marks the point when Humbert decides upon murder for the mysterious person who stole his beloved from his "loving" arms. Thus, the ecstasy which he previously pursued via the liberating road trip comes to a disturbing termination and actually does end in Quilty's murder (and consequently, Humbert's incarceration). The end of the road trip represents the end of Humbert's search for his own private world in which he can enjoy Lolita without guilt or punishment. After that, he is willing to take ridiculous risks (like murder) without fear of censure, because at that point his life has lost its meaning and potential for happiness.

The novel Lolita can be considered akin to other road novels because of the reasons behind the hero’s quest. Like Kerouac’s characters, Humbert is attempting to gain some kind of meaning and satisfaction by taking to the road, though the circumstances are slightly less honorable. Nevertheless, he does view the road as a sort of escape from the restrictions of normal American life, wherein he can act as he pleases. But rather than embarking on a more mature and satisfying period of life through his travels, Humbert actually deteriorates as a person; in this, his road trip is unsuccessful. The murder of Quilty represents the suicide of Humbert. With the end of his road trip comes the end of his quest to capture an impossible life built on unbreakable American taboos, effectively ending his ability and willingness to function in the real world.

**Works Cited**

Hipkiss, Robert A. *Jack Kerouac: Prophet of the New Romanticism*. Lawrence: Regents of Kansas, 1976. Print.

Nabakov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. New York: Random House, 1997. Print.