Ang Yan Sheng A0144836Y
UWC2101J: Sites of Tourism
A/P Lo Mun Hou
Paper 2
14 Mar 2016

Wanderlust:
Boorstin's Tourist in *Lolita*

In his essay "From Traveler to Tourist: The Lost Art of Travel," Daniel Boorstin explains how the changing nature of travel in the past 150 years brought about "the decline of the traveler and the rise of the tourist" (85). As one of the first academic studies of tourism, it is perhaps surprising that Boorstin's essay cites Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* as offering a "brilliant[] caricature[]" of motels in the context of domestic travel in America (114). This hints at the possibility that Nabokov has an intuitive understanding of the modern tourist, even before Boorstin's landmark work. In this essay, I will argue that Nabokov indeed constructs the main character of the novel, Humbert Humbert, in analogy with Boorstin's tourist, thereby indirectly anticipating many of Boorstin's arguments.

Boorstin's essay presents an account of the traveler and the tourist, which has its basis in the history of travel. For Boorstin, the difficulty and cost of foreign travel before 1850 (84) explains why the traveler of the past took a "serious attitude" to travel (81), and looked for "sophisticated pleasures" to educate himself and broaden his own horizons (80). However, while travel has been made easier, cheaper and more accessible to the middle class in the last century, it has also become more packaged and commoditised (85). The modern person who travels is thus not a traveler but a tourist, for whom "the [travel] experience has become diluted, contrived, prefabricated" (79). According to Boorstin:

> The traveler, then, was working at something; the tourist was a pleasure-seeker. The traveler was active; he went strenuously in search of people, of adventure, of experience. The tourist is passive; he expects interesing things to happen to him. (85)

The tourist "sees less of the country than of its tourist attractions" (102), and "gets there without the experience of having gone" (94).

In order to relate Boorstin's framework to Humbert in *Lolita*, we now recall the exceptional circumstances in the novel up to the travelogue. Humbert, the narrator of the novel, is an European intellectual who moves to America and finds himself lusting over his landlady's 12-year-old daughter, Dolores Haze (whom Humbert affectionately calls Lolita). While Lolita is away at camp, her mother is killed in an accident, leaving Humbert as Lolita's *de facto* guardian. Taking full advantage of this situation, Humbert has sex with Lolita after her camp ends, before informing her of her mother's death. To extend the relationship with Lolita that he had always longed for, he then takes her on a year-long tour of America (7–199).

Boorstin states that "the tourist's appetite for strangeness... seems best satisfied when the pictures in his own mind are verified in some far country" (109). Nabokov seems to anticipate this point by describing Humbert's search for European artifacts in America, a recurrent motif in the travelogue section. For exaple, describing his experience in motels, Humbert writes:

> ...every now and then I would take a bed-and-cot or twin-bed cabin, a prison cell of paradise, with yellow window shades pulled down to create a morning illusion of Venice and sunshine when actually it was Pennsylvania and rain. (163)

This reveals how Humbert prefers to have an European setting ("Venice and sunshine") even if he is undoubtedly aware that he is in America ("Pennsylvania and rain"). At another point in his travels, Humbert recounts how "treasured recollections of my father's palatial hotel sometimes led me to seek for its like in the strange country we travelled through" (165). Even if Humbert "was soon discouraged" (165), he did not seem to realise beforehand the implausibility of finding an American hotel modelled after a palace. Humbert finds it unproblematic to expect distinctly European things in distinctly un-European settings; this trait can thus be unambiguously identified as Nabokov's, not Humbert's, addition to the narrative.

The fruitless search of Europe in America reappears in a more metaphorical sense with Annabel Leigh, Humbert's first teenage love with whom he had formative, albeit unsucessful, sexual experiences. Although Humbert is not sure whether his paedophilia is a direct cause of these encounters, he does concede that "in a certain

magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel" (12), and that he only "broke [Annabel's] spell by incarnating her in [Lolita]" (14). Humbert also experienced "that impact of passionate recognition" of Annabel's image in Lolita when he first met Lolita (42). Hence we are led to believe that Humbert intends to model his relationship with Lolita after his relationship with Annabel, completing what was left unfulfilled from his teenage years.

However, we know that this attempt at "incarnating" Annabel in Lolita was a failure. Humbert recalls his sexual encounters with Annabel, and also later with virgin Lolita, fondly and in great detail. However, in the travelogue, where Humbert emphasises how difficult it is to deal with teenage Lolita, descriptions of sexual encounters are kept to a minimum. As such, it is hard to believe Humbert when he says that "in the possession and thralldom of a nymphet the enchanted traveler stands, as it were, *beyond happiness*" (188), since if "there is no other bliss on earth comparable to that of fondling a nymphet" (188), Humbert clearly does not give that impression in the travelogue. Thus Nabokov's construction of Humbert suggests how and why Humbert deceives himself and his reader. This anticipates Boorstin's argument about how "[t]ourists... are willing gulls, if only because they are always secretly fearful their extravagant (and expensive) expectations may not be fulfilled" (107), although here the price that Humbert has to pay by admitting his unhappiness with the situation is more than just monetary.

One of the most striking differences between Boorstin's traveler and tourist is that the latter "is prepared to be ruled by the law of pseudo-events, by which the image, the well-contrived imitation, outshines the original" (107). We have already seen how Humbert looks for Europe in America and for Annabel in Lolita, but perhaps the most direct and revealing comparison lies in Humbert's idea of the "nymphet." In his own words:

> Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many ties 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 "nymphets." (15)

He goes on to call the nymphet "the little deadly demon among the wholesome

children; *she* stands unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power" (16). In pushing the blame for his own paedophilia to the nymphet, Humbert makes his own mental image of the girl, the "well-contrived imitation" which he subscribes to.

From the same description, it seems that by declaring a certain girl (such as Lolita) a "nymphet" in his mind, Humbert views her as less human than a normal girl without this status. Indeed, throughout the novel, we are hard-pressed to find a situation in which Humbert treats Lolita more as a person than as a sexual object. On some level, Humbert was aware of this; for example, after masturbating to Lolita without getting caught, he reflects upon how he views her:

> What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own. (68)

Before the travelogue, Lolita was only revealed indirectly to be a cheeky, rebellious girl. Even though we might reasonably expect that the year-long tour of America should give a more nuanced view of Lolita, Humbert does not seem to have added anything to this description by the end of the travelogue. Monologues about Lolita such as the following are typical:

> ... it would take hours of blandishments, threats and promises to make her lend me for a few seconds her brown limbs in the seclusion of the five-dollar room before undertaking anything she might prefer to my poor joy.
>
> A combination of naïveté and deception, of charm and vulgarity, of blue sulks and rosy mirth, Lolita, when she chose, could be a most exasperating brat. (166)

Once he possesses Lolita, he superimposes his mental image of the nymphet with the real Lolita, thereby denying her "a life of her own." Later in the novel, Lolita gets external help and runs away from Humbert, something that a character as flat as Humbert's mental image of Lolita would never conceive of, let alone succeed in.

This shows decisively that Humbert has been consistently unable to see who Lolita truly is, due to the problematic concept of the "nymphet."

Through Boorstin's perspective, we have been able to better understand the true nature of Humbert Humbert as Nabokov intended, leading to the unfolding of the unhappy events in *Lolita*. Beyond the description of the American motel, we see a deeper significance of Nabokov's commentary on the tourist that Boorstin has missed. Humbert's fatal flaw is not his paedophilia; it is his tendency, shared by Boorstin's modern tourist, to confuse fantasy and reality, to expect the world to conform to his own mental image. And this is, perhaps, Nabokov's true warning for tourism.

Works Cited:

Boorstin, Daniel. "From Traveler to Tourist: The Lost Art of Travel." In *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: Atheneum, 1987. 77–117.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. 1959. London: Penguin Books, 2011. Print.

Cover Letter

Prof Lo,

Part of Nabokov's *Lolita* is a satire on travel literature, where the protagonist Humbert, instead of gaining new insights on people, places, and ultimately himself, seems to be as lost at the end of his travels as he was at the start. Boorstin picks out Nabokov's sharp critique of the American motel, but one might ask, as in the **motive** of my essay, if that is all *Lolita* has to say about modern travel. My **thesis** is that by analysing Humbert's character in detail, we see that Nabokov does in fact foreshadow many of Boorstin's arguments about the modern tourist.

This time I have adopted a more freewriting approach to the essay, writing in the order which ideas occur to me, instead of having a backbone for the entire essay in the form of topic sentences, or writing sequentially top to bottom. This gave me more freedom to explore new ideas and incorporate them into my writing as they turned up, and I discovered a couple of new supporting arguments which were not in my initial plans. However, this might have affected the **structure** of the essay, specificaally the logical flow between sections. I had to put correspondingly more work into **stitching** my points together into a coherent whole.

I believe that the **evidence** as presented in my essay is sufficient and concrete, and that my **analysis** is accurate and consistent with the intention of the source material. Given more time, I would have liked to explore the relation of the travelogue section to the novel, and its relations with the touristic traits of Humbert as established in this essay.