

Lolita

Author: Vladimir Nabokov

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.

I think it's important to start this review by emphasizing that enjoying a book depends largely upon interpretation. We are all entitled to our own opinions. The poor decisions of characters may be perceived as stupidity by some and a representation of humanity's imperfections by others.

With this in mind, I think I should also elaborate upon what *Lolita* is not. Foremost, *Lolita* is not a love story. Nor is *Lolita* an erotic. In fact, *Lolita* is as erotic as a sexual assault documentary is pornographic. I think these interpretations of *Lolita* misguidedly offer sympathy to the protagonist. Which is something that should not be done. Because he is a pedophile.

Many of us are aware that *Lolita* is supposed to be jarring, even revolting. Salacious fiction about pedophilia is no laughing matter. It is a subject banned in many communities today. However, Nabokov is not your average Joe. *Lolita* is perhaps the Vantablack of all paint, the darkest of all comedies. The darkness of a profound vein of human desire encapsulated in a toxic atmosphere, utterly depraved. But, it is simply goofy. While we may sit in our discomfort we cannot deny that we are entertained. We might even laugh. Is this allowed?

Vladimir Nabokov was a man delighted by language and word games, and this fact shines bright while reading *Lolita*. His writing has depth, strata against strata and texture against texture. It's a smorgasbord of clues and references and anagrams. Nabokov invents words, dissects them, nymphorizes them. *Lolita* is a frolicking story in the gauzy stride of an unadulterated, unapologetic, and unrestrained writer. It is pure, subtle, and raw. He taunts us to follow. He dares us to be merciful. He scandalizes us. He pokes us with a stick. But his pen is consistently severe, yet delicate.

Lolita was a phenomenal and yet laborious book to read. The story is a retrospective from prison. Seemingly. No decision stands, and we are immediately drawn to pass judgment on our narrator: a French man under the pseudonym "Humbert Humbert"; who experienced early love, but was unable to get some; who had never experienced slob on his cob; who could not reach third base; whose love was physically unfulfilled; who is irrevocably sexually obsessed with little girls whom he refers to as "nymphets". Humbert works as a French teacher and editor, continually passing through mental institutions. Before the start of the second World War, Humbert travels to America where he can finish out his book. In search of a new residence, he meets the widow Charlotte Haze, but he also meets the widow's daughter, Dolores "Lolita" Haze. Cue eyes widened, mouth opened, tongue lolling. Maybe I'll just say Humbert views in Dolores the quintessential nymphet.

Further, Humbert Humbert probes for discreet ways to fulfill his sexual urges. Things get ickier. Eventually, Charlotte confesses her love to Humbert and they are married. This was a tactical choice on Humbert's part. Charlotte dies and Humbert goes on humming. Pedophilia ensues.

Nabokov forces us to endure every second of Humbert Humbert's frottaging. We peer over Humbert Humbert's shoulder. We observe him at every chanced glimpse of Dolores. We see him salivate over children at play. We are with him from his first bust to his last. We hear this highly cultured, highly intelligent, highly functioning pedophile as he declares his love for Lolita. But this is not love.

Humbert Humbert's nymphet obsession is of an erotic ideal, not a being. He actually finds little girls unpleasant, except to the extent that they personify nymphs. At that point, his repulsiveness is exposed. Yet as soon as the girl in question matures, he turns his nose up in sheer disdain. Obviously the connection between the two parties is slim—excluding the level of lasciviousness—because one of the parties is a middle aged man and the other is a twelve year old child. Humbert's obsession with Dolores condemns them both to a life of undeniable loneliness and morbid co-dependency. A toxic bond consisting of an intimacy that can only ever be rape. A relationship which can only ever be baleful. But he loves Dolores because he tells us so. Hey, English teachers, it's this one. Here's the unreliable narrator.

But Nabokov is never blunt. It is always metaphors, innuendos, and euphemisms. *Lolita* is a dirty book because as readers, we are the forced to do the sex offender shuffle, to assemble the sex offender jigsaw puzzle ourselves. Quite literally a mind-fuck.

I experienced much difficulty while reading this book. It wasn't until I got to the afterword where I was provided with much more perspective and much needed clarification. *Lolita* is the story of a maniac. While Humbert Humbert's accounts are thorough and refined, highbrow and fabricated, ornate and scornful, he is still, and ought to be remembered, a maniac. In my eyes, Nabokov's self-awareness prevents *Lolita* from being a pedophile's almanac and instead preserves it as a cautionary tale.

Americans and our attraction to youth may be fooled by this story, we may offer our misdirected sympathy, and ultimately we may unintentionally empathize with a literal pedophile. But at its core, *Lolita* is a story which showcases painstaking and pain-causing selfishness. The selfishness of an urge that demands to be satisfied, to be fulfilled without regard to the ramifications that this satisfaction may have on the world. *Lolita* is a comedic examination at an anomalous psychology that is frankly captivating. Nevertheless, *Lolita* is foul.