“Fond Fool” or “Pentapod Monster”: How is Sympathy Raised for the Unreliable Narrator of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*?

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1. Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel *Lolita* is famously controversial, featuring a sexual relationship between Humbert Humbert, a man in his late 30s, and Dolores Haze, whom Humbert calls "Lolita", a girl aged 12 when the two first meet. Readers seem to be divided into two when it comes to Humbert, who is also the unreliable narrator of the novel: they either love him or hate him. The inner cover blurb of the 1992 "Everyman's Library" edition of *Lolita* calls the novel a "love story" which I find strongly disagreeable, since the story of Humbert and Dolores is not a story of romantic love but of abuse and manipulation directed towards the young girl. However, this confusion and the labeling of the novel as a love story is the product of the unreliable first-person narration. Humbert is actively trying to convince the reader to believe and understand his view of the events, which is that he was seduced and taken advantage of by Dolores when it is, in fact, the other way around. While Humbert is ultimately an unlikeable and unreliable narrator and character, Nabokov uses distinct tactics —some of them specifically making use of his unreliability— to make readers feel sympathetic towards Humbert.

The novel is written as a confession to jurors by Humbert in jail but eventually ends up as more of a confession to himself, as he realizes what he has done to Dolores and starts to feel remorse for his actions. Humbert and Dolores first cross paths when he rents a room in the house where Dolores lives with her widowed mother Charlotte. Humbert instantly gets infatuated with Dolores, as she reminds him of his childhood sweetheart Annabel, who died when he was a boy. Charlotte falls in love with Humbert, and he ultimately decides to marry her in order to stay close to Dolores. When Charlotte passes away in a strange car accident, Humbert takes Dolores with him on a tour of the US, beginning their relationship. After some years, Dolores manages to escape from Humbert with the help of Clare Quilty, a playwright who is also interested in pubescent girls, but she ends up running off from him as well. The novel ends with Humbert murdering Quilty in a jealous rage, after which he goes to visit the now 17-year-old married and pregnant Dolores. Humbert gets caught for the murder of Quilty, and shortly after finishing his written confession, he dies in prison of a heart attack, while Dolores dies giving birth to her child.

I will first be examining some reasons why Humbert should be seen as unreliable. This is important for two reasons, the first of which is that I argue that Humbert's unreliability is a key factor in how Nabokov manages to make Humbert into a sympathetic character. The

second reason is that not everyone is in agreement when it comes to how reliable we should see Humbert as. For this, I will be using the definition of unreliable narration provided by Wayne Booth, as well as some further research conducted by Ansgar Nünning and Greta Olson.

I will also be discussing sympathy, which I have specifically chosen instead of the more popular empathy, and why I made this choice. Nabokov uses many techniques to estrange the reader from Humbert, thus making it harder for the reader to empathize with him and to feel his pain, whereas it is easier to sympathize with him and feel pity for his pain. Moreover, empathy has been described by Suzanne Keen as being a spontaneous feeling where the empathizer does not evaluate the empathy recipient's situation, whereas with sympathy, the sympathizer has to make a judgment about the recipient's situation and whether it is unfair or undeserved.

In the last section, I will be discussing how exactly Nabokov accomplishes his portrayal of Humbert as sympathetic. I argue that the deaths of two important figures in Humbert's childhood could be seen as an explanation for his mental illnesses and thus make readers feel sympathetic towards him. Moreover, Humbert has a heart condition which also could help in gaining sympathy for him. I then move on to explain a theory called "distributed mind reading" by Lisa Zunshine (2006, 100–17). She proposes that Humbert distributes his thoughts into the minds of other characters, making it seem like they are neutral sources of information when, in fact, they are only devices for furthering Humbert's own agenda. I will also be discussing James Phelan's theory of "estranging and bonding unreliability" (2007, 222–38). According to this theory, it can be argued that Nabokov purposefully uses tactics to both estrange the reader from Humbert, making their affective distance greater, and bond the reader with Humbert, making the distance smaller.

2. Why Humbert is Unreliable

Humbert's reliability has been debated on multiple occasions and even though most readers consider him unreliable, some do not. For example, Anthony R. Moore argues in his paper titled "How unreliable is Humbert in *Lolita*?" (2001) that Humbert is "[c]ompletely [reliable] when we reread the meaning in [Nabokov's] styles" (80). While it may be possible to interpret Humbert as reliable, acknowledging the views of Wayne Booth, who coined the term "unreliable narrator", as well as further studies conducted on unreliable narration, Humbert can be deemed unreliable because of the multiple textual markers found in *Lolita*.

Unreliable narrators have been studied ever since the term has been coined, and there are many views as to what the exact definition of it might be. Since the conversation on unreliable narrators is so extensive, I will be going back to the basics, so to say, and make use of a paraphrased description of Booth's models for unreliable narration appearing in Greta Olson's 2003 article titled "Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators". These models originally appeared in Booth's works titled *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) and *The Rhetoric of Irony* (1974), and these are the most popular models for understanding unreliable narration (Olson 2003, 93). Olson sums up that "Booth defines as unreliable those narrators who articulate values and perceptions that differ from those of the implied author" (94). In short, unreliable narration falls under the category of irony because it creates an inside joke between the implied author and the reader, where the unreliable narrator is the butt of the joke. Irony is always a way of creating inclusion, as well as exclusion, since "those who are included, those who happen to have the necessary information to grasp the irony, cannot but derive at least a part of their pleasure from a sense that others are excluded" (Booth 1961, 304). According to Olson, "Booth's emphasis on the pleasures of exclusion suggests that the reader and implied author belong to an in-group that shares values, judgments, and meanings from which the unreliable narrator is ousted" (Olson 2003, 94).

In her article, Olson has compiled the textual markers and indicators identified by Booth to find out whether a narrator should be considered unreliable. Those are: paratextual signals; direct warnings that the narrator should not be confused with the author; obvious grammatical, stylistic, or historical mistakes on the part of the narrator; conflicts between fictional facts; and discrepancies between the values asserted in the work and those of the author revealed in other contexts (Olson 2003, 95 citing Booth 1974, 47-86). In addition to this, Olson has also translated and compiled a much longer and more specific list of textual signals for identifying unreliability. These markers have originally been identified by Ansgar Nünning in his article commenting on Booth's model, titled "Unreliable Narration zur Einführung: Grundzüge einer kognitiv-narratologischen Theorie und Analyse unglaubwürdigen Erzählens". While the longer list of markers identified by Nünning is more specific and therefore more useful to my argument, it is also extremely long. Thus, it is better to only discuss those points that are relevant to my argument and *Lolita* specifically.

The first of these markers that I will be discussing is "an accumulation of direct addresses to the reader and conscious attempts to direct the reader's sympathy" (Olson 2003, 98), which is most central to this thesis, since as I argue, Humbert consciously tries to get the

reader to sympathize with him. While the notion of "directly attempting to direct the readers' sympathy" is vague, I will be identifying later how Humbert manages this. When it comes to addressing readers, Humbert continually does this by straightforwardly calling them "reader" in many instances: "Knowing me by now, the reader can easily imagine how dusty and hot I got, trying to catch a glimpse of nymphets … playing in Central Park …" (Nabokov [1955] 1992, 34). By searching the novel and excluding the foreword and afterword which were not written by Humbert, one can find more than sixty mentions of "reader". Humbert also addresses a certain kind of reader he imagines would be reading his work, most often a connoisseur of "nymphets"—girls aged nine to fourteen with a certain charm to them— like himself: "My brief acquaintance with her [a young, likely underaged sex-worker] started a train of thought that may seem pretty obvious to the reader who knows the ropes" (24). The abundance of addresses to the reader thus makes Humbert more unreliable because by doing this he actively tries to make the reader understand his point of view. By making a confession straight to the reader, he tries to shift his views onto them and make himself a friendly and relatable figure in the readers' eyes.

Instances of "contradictions between the narrator's account of events and her explanations and interpretations of the same" (Olson 2003, 98) can be found in *Lolita* as well. An example of this would be the way Humbert tries to reassure himself as well as the reader that he is not harming anyone by acting upon his pedophilia. When he first makes sexual contact with Dolores by masturbating against her in the living room of the Haze home, he tells the reader that no harm was done: "I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay; I want them to examine its every detail and see for themselves how careful, how chaste, the whole wine-sweet event is if viewed with what my lawyer has called, in a private talk we have had, 'impartial sympathy.'" (Nabokov [1955] 1992). Humbert tries to assure the reader that the moment on the sofa was romantic and innocent. However, readers who are not susceptible to Humbert's reassurances interpret this situation a little differently, wherein an adult man takes advantage of the innocence of a young girl by involving her in a sexual situation without her knowledge or consent. While Dolores might not have in that very moment realized what is going on, thus making the scene "innocent", it does not erase the possibility that later in her life she could understand what was done to her. Moreover, his statement of innocence does not even matter since he takes the sexual abuse even further later in the novel.

Humbert's paranoia also falls into the category of contradictions between events and the interpretation of them since he often misinterprets people doing normal things as them acting against him in some way. Everyone is his enemy, from random passersby to school principals and snoopy neighbors. For example, when the principal of Dolores' school is showing concern for her since she is not performing well in class and invites Humbert in for a talk, he reacts like this: "Pratt asked me to come over for a talk. Dolly's last report had been poor, I knew. But instead of contenting myself with some such plausible explanation of this summons, I imagined all sorts of horrors …" (204). While Humbert knows the reason for this meeting, he is still paranoid about getting caught for having a sexual relationship with Dolores and later thinks to himself: "disaster coming at last? Was I found out?" (208). Humbert is afraid of being caught throughout the novel, and he often thinks that someone has found him out now, which implies that he is of sound mind and knows what he is doing is wrong. At the same time, it also indicates that he misunderstands situations and thus shows unreliability by not being able to interpret and report them correctly.

When it comes to "an admitted lack of reliability, memory gaps, and comments on cognitive limitations" (Olson 2003, 98), the first two are extensive in the novel as well. Humbert often admits to lying, for example when he finds joy in tricking psychiatrists in a mental institution he is staying at (Nabokov [1955] 1992, 36), or when he makes up the lie that he and Charlotte were lovers before she married Mr. Haze (105) to imply that Dolores is actually his child (107). He also admits to not fully remembering all of the phases of his and Dolores' travels (162) and that he cannot remember when things have happened: "My calendar is getting confused" (116). Additionally, while mental illness in itself is not a "cognitive limitation" and is not always a sign of unreliability, in this case, Humbert's confession of having himself admitted to a mental institution on multiple occasions is not making him more reliable when combined with all of the other factors contributing to his unreliability.

Lastly, "syntactic signals denoting the narrator's high level of emotional involvement, including exclamations, ellipses, repetitions, etc." (Olson 2003, 98) are also relevant to *Lolita* since Humbert is particularly fond of all of the above, as well as parentheses. When Humbert tells Dolores that he is sending her to an all-girls "high-class" school (Nabokov [1955] 1992, 181), he describes her angry reaction and comments on the words she uses against him: "Enmeshed in her wild words (swell chance… I'd be sap if I took your opinion seriously… Stinker… You can't boss me… I despise you… and so forth)" (181). In this excerpt, both ellipses and parentheses are present. When it comes to repetitions, a popular target of that is

Dolores' name, particularly the nickname Humbert has given to her: "She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms, she was always Lolita" (9).

By examining these textual markers, we can conclude that Humbert is an unreliable narrator. *Lolita* is full of textual markers indicating that he is not entirely reliable in telling his account of what happened. Something that might also be interesting to mention but that is not worth discussing in too much detail is that some scholars who have studied *Lolita* have found that the dates of the events towards the end of the novel do not fully make sense. This implies that Humbert is either purposefully lying, and the final meeting with Dolores and the murder of Clare Quilty never happened, or that the dates have accidentally been mixed up by either the author or the narrator (Moore 2001, 71-2). While it can be possible that Nabokov may have accidentally mixed up the dates, I think it is likelier that he has done this purposefully to further highlight Humbert's unreliability, but this is only my speculation on the subject.

3. What is Sympathy?

Both sympathy and empathy, the companion emotions, have been defined many times by psychologists, social scientists, as well as literary scholars. Empathy and sympathy are frequently used interchangeably, and thus it is important to examine both of these terms and state their differences. In addition to the interchangeability problem, both terms are described somewhat differently by different fields of study and different scholars within those fields. A popular description of empathy in the field of literary studies is that of Suzanne Keen. She describes empathy as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect [that] can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading" (2007, 4). Keen also describes the term sympathy as "[a] more complex, differentiated feeling for another" (4) and writes that empathy is thought to be a precursor to sympathy, also called empathic concern. According to her, sympathy is a moral feeling that is other-directed and altruistic.

Keen displays example sentences of both empathy and sympathy. For empathy she has sentences reading "I feel what you feel" and "I feel your pain", and for sympathy "I feel a supportive emotion about your feelings" and "I feel pity for your pain" (5). When examining these sentences alone as descriptions of empathy and sympathy, I would interpret empathy as a "deeper" emotion than sympathy, since to really "feel what someone's feeling" one would

need to have a deep emotional connection to them, whereas with "feeling pity for someone's pain" one wouldn't need that deep of an emotional connection. In actuality, Keen is suggesting that empathy is often a precursor to sympathy, meaning that one has to first feel empathy towards someone to feel sympathy. However, here I argue instead that one does not need to feel empathy first to feel sympathy and that empathy is a "deeper" emotion than sympathy (4).

The definition of sympathy I will be using for this work is one by Howard Sklar appearing in his 2013 book titled *Art of Sympathy in Fiction: Forms of Ethical and Emotional Persuasion*. His definition is based on developments from different disciplines such as sociology, social psychology, and philosophy. Sklar first explains that empathy is a "chameleon emotion" (24) in which we take on the emotional experiences of others as our own. With empathy, there should be a small emotional distance between the person who feels it and the person towards whom it is directed. The difference to sympathy is that sympathy involves a greater distance between the sympathizer and the "sympathizee" (Sklar 2013, 29 citing Clark 1997, 13), the person towards whom the sympathy is directed. Unlike Keen, Sklar argues that sympathy is not a product of empathy and that sympathy can be felt without first feeling empathy (53). Sklar identifies four components of sympathy that he considers essential:

> 1. Awareness of suffering as "something to be alleviated."
> 2. Frequently, the judgment that the suffering of another is undeserved or unfair.
> 3. Negative, unpleasant or uncomfortable feelings on behalf of the sufferer.
> 4. Desire to help.
>
> (Sklar 2013, 35)

The first two components are "the foundations for a definition of sympathy" (28) and the rest "will help in forming a more tenable view of what the emotion is, how it functions, and what the ethical consequences of it might be" (29). I will now explain these components in more detail.

The reason why I chose this specific definition of sympathy is especially the very clear-cut way it is presented. Sklar quotes a sociological study in which many subjects associated sympathy "with 'feeling sorry' for someone whose situation is somehow difficult, unfortunate, or unpleasant" (Sklar 2013, 26 citing Clark 1997, 29–30). He also explains that his definition excludes 'happy sympathy', which is sympathizing with the positive emotions of someone since it is unusual to describe feeling happy feelings for someone as feeling sympathy. According to him, "[w]hen we *describe* or *think of* experiences of sympathy … we refer to feelings for individuals who in some sense are suffering" (27 [emphasis original]). This is why one of the components of sympathy includes these negative and uncomfortable feelings. He

also rationalizes his choice by explaining that the characters studied in his book are all considered unlikeable in some way. This fits well with my thesis since Humbert can also be considered quite unlikeable.

Moreover, Sklar points out the moral nature of sympathy by saying that one essential component of sympathy is the "*judgment* that the suffering of another is undeserved or unfair" (35 [emphasis added]). This means that feeling sympathy towards someone is not purely an emotion, as it always involves the cognitive deliberation of someone's situation. This cognitive component is also present in the first component of sympathy, the "*awareness* of suffering 'as something to be alleviated'" (35 [emphasis added]), in which the word "awareness" directly refers to deliberate thinking. Thus, Sklar divides sympathy into the notions of sensation and deliberation, what we feel and what we think (29). If we consider a claim made by philosopher Martha Nussbaum in which she points out that empathy is often felt without evaluation of the person's situation (Nussbaum 2001, 301-2), we notice that this is a particular difference between the concepts of empathy and sympathy. This means that sympathy is inherently a moral emotion that always incorporates both emotions and cognition.

The aspect of desiring to help the sympathizee is also a part of the cognitive aspects of sympathy, and it is linked with the awareness that the person's suffering is something to be alleviated, as well as the judgment that the suffering of another is unfair. Although the desire to help is present when feeling sympathy, it does not have to be acted upon (Sklar 2013, 34). Of course, in the case of literature, it is impossible to act upon the desire to help since the characters are not physically attainable, or "real".

In this section, I have described the term "sympathy" and how it is different from the very similar term "empathy". The most important aspect of sympathy is that the sympathizer needs to make a judgment on the sympathizee's situation. Another important aspect of sympathy is the desire to help the person who is suffering. While in most cases sympathy is felt towards someone who is going through something that is undeserved or unfair, there can be exceptions to this. Sklar mentions that "some theorists suggest that there may be instances in which we feel sympathy for people or characters, even though we may consider their suffering somehow 'deserved'" (28). Humbert indeed deserves to be in jail for murder as well as the abuse he directed towards Dolores, but readers still manage to feel sympathy towards him throughout the novel. Why is that?

4. How Sympathy is Raised for Humbert

In this section, I will be discussing some techniques used by Nabokov to manipulate the reader into feeling sympathy towards Humbert, such as Lisa Zunshine's "distributed mind reading" (2006, 100–117) and James Phelan's "estranging and bonding unreliability" (2007, 222–38). Before discussing the theories, I would like to point out some further reasons why readers may feel sympathy towards Humbert. He seems to be surrounded by death and abandonment, as all the women in his life either leave him or die sooner or later. Both of his marriages ended with the women leaving him in one way or another, and both his mother and his childhood love Annabel passed away when he was very young. The sexually unfulfilled nature of the relationship between Humbert and Annabel is not very subtly insinuated to be the reason for Humbert's interest in "nymphets".

Humbert married two times, both times for the wrong reasons. He married his first wife Valeria to achieve a sense of normalcy of home-cooked meals and regular sex to suppress his pedophilic feelings, and he married Charlotte to get and stay close to Dolores. While the motivations for his marriages were sketchy, the reasons they ended could gain him some sympathy from readers: his first marriage ended with Valeria cheating on him and leaving Humbert for another man, and his second by Charlotte getting hit by a car and dying, making him a widower. Still, at least one of these events was Humbert's fault —depending on whether one believes the strange story about Charlotte's accident— since he did not treat Valeria very well at all and admitted on multiple occasions on using physical violence against her, but these are still major and tragic life events. No one should be cheated on or be left for someone else, and it is, of course, horrendous having a loved one die. Even if Humbert was for the most part indifferent about both events, readers can still feel sympathy for someone going through these horrible things.

The deaths of both Humbert's mother and his childhood sweetheart Annabel happened when Humbert was a child, making the loss of these important people in his life sympathy-inducing for readers. Without analyzing Humbert's mental condition too much, these deaths have definitely played a part in the development of Humbert's mental issues, which could to some readers be an explanation, a concrete reason as to why he is having pedophilic and murderous tendencies. In van Lissa et al. (2016, 57) it was found that while a character was doing something wrong, they could still get both a positive and a negative reaction from the reader. Many of these positive reactions included psychological evaluation or displaying

another reason for the character's behavior. In Humbert's case, the most prominent reason is the death of Annabel. Humbert feels the need to fulfill his sexual relationship with Annabel, but since he is unable to do so, he finds substitutes in other young girls. A further illness that could raise sympathy for Humbert is a physical one: the much later mentioned congenital heart condition, which also causes his death in prison. This could also be seen as a reason for Humbert's reckless behavior, since if he is already dying, why not do everything he wants to do, including killing the person who took his 'Lolita' away from him? Since the notion of sympathy requires the evaluation that someone's suffering is bad or undeserved, I argue that at least the deaths of Humbert's mother and childhood sweetheart make the readers feel sympathetic towards him. I am not saying that understanding the reasons for Humbert's behavior should somehow excuse it because everyone is ultimately responsible for their own actions. Additionally, Humbert did seek help for depression and anxiety but kept his pedophilia a secret from the doctors in the mental institution he stayed at (Nabokov [1955] 1992, 36).

4.1 Distributed mind reading

One major tactic used by Nabokov to get the readers to take Humbert's side has been proposed by Lisa Zunshine in her book *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2006). She calls this tactic "distributed mind reading", in which "Nabokov 'distributes' Humbert's version of events through the multiple minds within the narrative" (103). These multiple minds include virtually every character in the novel, including Dolores, her friends and family, the people they meet while they are touring the US, such as policemen and hotel clerks, as well as the implied reader. Because Humbert is the narrator of his own story, he has full control of the way in which it is told. As Zunshine (2006, 104) points out, this means that every time he meets someone and describes what they are thinking or feeling, he is only telling what *he* thinks they *might* be thinking and feeling. He inserts thoughts into other characters' heads and displays them as their own to tell his version of what happened and to make himself look better. The tricky part of this is that the reader might not even realize what is happening and takes the information presented to them from a seemingly neutral source without deliberating on it too much. The minor characters who's minds Humbert is reading are also introduced and removed very quickly, meaning that the reader does not have time to assess their trustworthiness or even to realize that their trustworthiness should be assessed.

Zunshine describes two types of distributed mind reading used by Nabokov (100–18). The first type is making Humbert seem like a sweet, clumsy, romantic scholar who is in love with his 'Lolita' and wants to be with her (103–9). She moves on to give examples of how Humbert prompts the readers to see themselves as the source of their positive representation of him. This is accomplished by addressing the reader directly, such as when Humbert tries to send a telegram to the hotel where he plans on taking Dolores and give her sleeping pills to assault her. Zunshine gives this sentence as an example, in which Humbert writes, "How some of my readers will laugh at me when I tell them the trouble I had with the wording of my telegram!" (Nabokov [1955] 1992, 115). According to Zunshine, the reader may misinterpret this sentence and understand it to be general clumsiness in trying to put one's messy thoughts onto paper to make it sound informative and respectable. She suggests that this sentence is in actuality meant to be directed towards "veteran pedophiles", who would be the only ones to wholeheartedly laugh at this situation (Zunshine 2006, 106).

Zunshine (106) also points out the cascade of adjectives Humbert uses to make himself look better. He describes himself as "horribly timid" (Nabokov [1955] 1992, 56), "tenderhearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect" (137), and "pathetic" (66). Zunshine explains that the use of these adjectives makes Humbert seem like "a babe in the woods, a romantic soul, not knowing the ways of the world and as such deserving our *compassion*" (Zunshine 2006, 106, emphasis own). As stated by Sklar, compassion is often synonymous with sympathy (Sklar 2013, 33). I would like to add my own observation to this and say that Humbert also describes himself in other types of "self-aware" adjectives, calling himself a "monster" (Nabokov [1955] 1992, 64, 302) and a "brute" (235), for example. This passage works well to highlight Humbert's apparent regret and self-awareness: "I loved you. I was a pentapod monster, but I loved you. I was despicable and brutal, and turpid, and everything, *mais je t'aimais, je t'aimais!* And there were times when I knew how you felt, and it was hell to know it, my little one. Lolita girl, brave Dolly Schiller" (302). I believe these strategies are both there to make Humbert look better, just in different ways. As Zunshine says, the use of the first-mentioned adjectives that make Humbert seem like a "fond fool" (243) do just that and make the reader feel sympathy towards Humbert for being a sweet, romantic, and misunderstood guy. However, Humbert describing himself as a disgusting monster makes the reader feel sympathetic towards him because he is now displaying regret and is self-aware of the evil that he has done to Dolores. Whether Humbert is displaying genuine regret or whether

he is doing it just to get the readers' sympathy is up for interpretation, but it does not change the fact that it is a way of receiving sympathy.

The other type of distributed mind reading identified by Zunshine is to portray Dolores as a sexually promiscuous, irresistible seducer of men, thus making Humbert *her* victim instead of the other way around (Zunshine 2006, 109–10). This he accomplishes by reporting everyone's thoughts as if he knew what they were really thinking. Humbert reads the minds of Dolores, her friends and mother, and people they meet on their travels to portray Dolores as the "little wench" (Nabokov [1955] 1992, 57) he wants everyone to see her as. Zunshine gives a great example of this, quoting Humbert apparently reading Dolores' thoughts when she visits his room at the beginning of the novel:

> All at once I knew I could kiss her throat or the wick of her mouth with perfect impunity. I knew she would let me do so, and even close her eyes as Hollywood teaches. A double vanilla with hot fudge – hardly more unusual than that. I cannot tell my learned reader … how the knowledge came to me; perhaps my ape-ear had unconsciously caught some slight change in the rhythm of her respiration – for now she was not really looking at my scribble, but waiting with curiosity and composure – oh, my limpid nymphet! – for the glamorous lodger to do what he was dying to do.
>
> (Nabokov [1955] 1992, 51)

Even though Humbert claims that he *knew* he could kiss her, in actuality he *thought* he could kiss her, but as Zunshine writes, "[t]he wimpy 'I thought' would strongly imply Humbert as the source of our representation of Lolita's mind, whereas 'I knew' works toward obliterating this source, especially this early in the novel when we do not yet have a good reason to doubt every one of Humbert's claims to knowledge" (Zunshine 2006, 110).

In addition to describing Dolores as being promiscuous with him, Humbert presents her like that with all the men she encounters, and wherever they go, there seems to be a man or two there who find her attractive. For instance, at the gas station, there is "a pimply brute of a boy … who eyed my fragile child in her thin cotton frock with carnal deliberation" (Nabokov [1955] 1992, 122), or somewhere on their travels "[a] lanky, six-foot, pale boy with an active Adam's apple, ogling Lo and her orange-brown bare midriff" (166). Moreover, Humbert makes use of a whole paragraph to complain about this problem of Dolores' "radiance":

> Oh, I had to keep a very sharp eye on Lo, little limp Lo! Owing perhaps to constant amorous exercise, she radiated, despite her very childish appearance, some special languorous glow which threw garage fellows, hotel pages, vacationists, goons in luxurious cars, maroon morons near blued pools, into fits of concupiscence which might have tickled my pride, had it not incensed my jealousy. For little Lo was aware of that glow of hers, and I would often catch her *coulant un regard* in the direction of some amiable male, some grease monkey, with a sinewy golden-brown forearm and watch-braceleted wrist, and hardly had I turned my back to go and

> buy this very Lo a lollipop, than I would hear her and the fair mechanic burst into a perfect love song of wisecracks.
>
> (168).

Humbert is describing these admirers of Dolores to cement his helplessness against that radiance of hers, to prove that he is her victim. The fact that Dolores is apparently aware of her radiance means that her making good use of it makes her a whore in Humbert's opinion. This could also be a tactic to normalize Humbert's pedophilia by making a point of everyone being attracted to Dolores. This would mean that Humbert's attraction to Dolores is completely normal, and like everyone else, he is also the victim of a nymphet.

This tactic of "distributed mind reading" used by Nabokov is often quite subtle and hard for the reader to discern. If we add to this the factor that some readers might consider Humbert to be a reliable narrator, the effects on raising sympathy are very effective. Especially readers used to third-person narration and omniscient narrators might not take notice of Humbert's creative liberties and take everything he says as truth. Meanwhile, Nabokov tricks his readers into believing Humbert's story and to feel sympathetic towards him. Many readers fall into this trap and believe Dolores to be the antagonist of this story while taking for granted an adult man's account of how a preteen has "seduced" him.

4.2 Estranging and bonding unreliability

James Phelan argues in his article titled "Estranging Unreliability, Bonding Unreliability, and the Ethics of *Lolita*" (2007, 222–38) that Nabokov uses techniques both to pull the reader in, as well as to push them away from Humbert the unreliable narrator. He identifies two groups of readers of *Lolita*, those who are taken in by Humbert's "artful narration" (223) and those who are not and thus resist all his rhetorical appeals. Phelan describes estranging unreliability as a technique that makes the authorial audience understand that accepting the narrator's perspective would mean moving far away from the implied author's. In bonding unreliability, the authorial audience recognizes that the narrator is unreliable but sees that the unreliability includes some communication that the implied author endorses. I will be discussing some ways in which bonding unreliability is used to raise sympathy for Humbert.

Overall, six subtypes of bonding unreliability are described in Phelan's article, but not all of them are relevant to *Lolita*. Phelan calls one of the subtypes "*playful comparison between implied author and narrator*", in which the implied author playfully employs unreliable

narration to point out similarities or differences between themselves and the narrator (228). Phelan provides an example from the very beginning of *Lolita* in which Humbert writes: "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style" (Nabokov [1955] 1992, 9). Here Nabokov is jokingly bringing up both a similarity and a difference between himself and Humbert: they are both writers, whereas only one of them is a murderer. According to Phelan (2007, 234), Nabokov uses this strategy of playful comparison to urge the authorial audience to regard Humbert as a reliable narrator by highlighting the artistic writing style that Nabokov has and thus also allows Humbert to have. The first couple of preceding paragraphs with linguistically and lyrically artful writing perform as a base for the "fancy prose style" statement and thus make it believable.

Phelan says that "from the end of Part One on, Humbert's own engagement with the task of narrating his experiences with Dolores leads him to see more clearly the irreparable harm he has done to her. As a result, he eventually cannot sustain his purpose of exonerating himself, so he stops rationalizing his behavior and starts taking responsibility for ruining her life" (236). Nabokov increasingly uses bonding unreliability towards the end of the novel and brings Humbert closer to the authorial norm, which is one of the six subtypes of bonding unreliability called "*partial progress towards the norm*" (Phelan 2007, 231). Phelan is suggesting that readers start feeling sympathetic towards Humbert because he is showing remorse towards the end of the novel. While some readers feel sympathy towards Humbert, some readers are confused about the complex coding of both estranging and bonding unreliability in Part One and want to "push even this partial progress back in the direction of estrangement" (236), taking Humbert's self-deprecation as a ploy to win the readers' sympathy. It is also this complex coding that still keeps the reader at an arm's length from Humbert and prevents them from feeling empathy towards him.

Humbert's redemption is likely, but in accordance with Phelan's argument, what I noticed when I was reading the novel was that I did not feel compelled to believe Humbert because there has been too much estranging unreliability, and I did not trust him enough to take his redemption as truth. However, I am not going to generalize my experiences as universal, and I agree with Phelan that the end of the novel does bring in more bonding unreliability, which compels the reader to feel more sympathy towards Humbert. Sincere or not, readers do end up feeling sympathetic towards Humbert by the end of the novel, and bonding unreliability and his admission of guilt and remorse play a part in the awakening of sympathetic feelings. All in all, it does not even matter for the sake of my argument to which of the two groups the

reader belongs to, to the ones that believe or those who do not, since either way, "*partial progress towards the norm*" is a way to get the reader to sympathize with Humbert, for some readers it has worked and for some, it has failed.

5. Conclusion

I think it is safe to say that Humbert Humbert is a controversial and thought-provoking character, and that is all because of the clever writing of Vladimir Nabokov. The world we live in is not black and white, and even though Humbert is objectively a bad person, there is that certain something about him that resonates with readers despite his flaws. When I first thought of tackling this novel, I could not believe that the readers of *Lolita* could be so divided when it comes to Humbert as my views of the character were too focused on his flaws and horrible actions. While I still maintain my ground that Humbert is unreliable, takes advantage of Dolores, and tries to make her look like she is to blame for his abuse, I have to admit he has a certain charm to him. Studying this novel and the research that has been conducted on it has broadened my horizons to understand those who are sympathetic towards Humbert and even find him likable.

With the help of textual markers to identify unreliable narrators, first written by Nünning and later compiled and translated by Olson, we have found that Humbert can be seen as a classic unreliable narrator. These textual markers most importantly included his many addresses to the reader, admissions of forgetting events, contradictions between the accounts and interpretations of events, and syntactic signals indicating the narrator's high level of involvement. By making it clear that Humbert is unreliable, the door was opened for the discussion of how his unreliability ties into the sympathy-raising. I also explained why I chose to examine how sympathy is raised for Humbert instead of the more popularly discussed empathy. The reason for choosing sympathy is the fact that it requires a greater emotional distance between the person feeling it and the person receiving it, whereas, with empathy, that distance should be small. I argue that the distance between Humbert and the reader stays great because of the estranging unreliability used by Nabokov, thus making it difficult for the reader to feel empathy towards Humbert.

In the last analysis section, I discussed the ways in which Humbert raises sympathy in the readers of *Lolita*. Readers can identify a clear reason for Humbert's pedophilia and mental illness, which is the death of Annabel and their unfulfilled sexual relationship. Realizing this makes readers feel sympathetic towards Humbert since this is a concrete reason why he has

sexual feelings for young girls. Moreover, all the women in Humbert's life leave him, which can also make the readers feel sympathetic towards him. I also discussed two strategies that make use of Humbert's unreliability: distributed mind reading and estranging and bonding unreliability. Distributed mind reading makes use of the first-person narration of the novel by distributing Humbert's thoughts into the minds of other characters, thus furthering his own agenda. Zunshine divides this notion into two: the first in which Humbert makes himself look good, and the second in which he makes Dolores look bad. In estranging and bonding unreliability Nabokov uses tactics to both bring the reader closer to Humbert and push the reader away from him. I argue that bonding unreliability and especially *partial progress towards the norm* raises sympathy for Humbert, when at the same time estranging unreliability keeps him at an arm's length and difficult to empathize with.

Studying the intertwining of unreliable narration and sympathy raising is important, especially when it comes to a dangerous character like Humbert because of how easy it is for some readers to forget what it means to feel sympathy towards him. It seems that in some cases, feeling sympathy because of Humbert's childhood and relationship problems leads to feeling too much sympathy where it expands to believing Humbert's view of the events of the novel. This, in turn, leads to completely misunderstanding the relationship between him and Dolores, victimizing Humbert instead of her.

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