

Alternative Freudian Symbols of *Lolita*: A Study in the Lapse between the Literature and Film

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To preface, Vladimir Nabokov hated psychoanalysis; in his time as a professor, he was known to have a “passionate dislike for Freud and his proto-theories in psychology” (Mosi 1). Nonetheless, Nabokov’s novel *Lolita* (1955) details the plight of the middle-aged Humbert Humbert, infatuated with the twelve-year-old Dolores Haze (or Lolita), inadvertently using several psychoanalytic tactics in the crafting of Humbert’s perversion. The popularization of the novel led to two film adaptations, Stanley Kubrik’s 1962 film and Adriane Lyne’s 1997 remake. Many have critiqued the two adaptations for failing to account for Humbert’s perversion and over-romanticizing the relationship between Dolores and Humbert; I believe that this is largely due to the films’ departure from the psychoanalytic symbols used in the novel. In this paper, I will be exploring how the film versions of Nabokov’s *Lolita* romanticized the relationship between Humbert and Dolores, and how the departures they took from the novel misconstrue Nabokov’s original symbol of ‘Lolita.’ Using psychoanalytic theory, depictions of Lolita will be articulated as a symbol of psychological regression in the novel, as opposed to a flattened, aestheticized portrayal in the two film adaptations.

Before I begin my analysis, I will define and clarify some of the key psychoanalytic concepts being employed in this paper. First, the Freudian concept of the *ego*, which exists in conjunction with the *id* and *superego*. The *id*

represents primitive instinct, the *superego* is the moralizing influence, and the *ego* is the mediator between them. According to Freud, when one feels threatened by primitive drives of the *id*, they repress them into the unconscious to protect the *ego* and keep the mind functioning (Parker 117). Repression is not necessarily a bad thing; however, repression as a defense mechanism can be troublesome in excess and can lead to neurosis (Parker 112). The most prominent defense mechanism in Nabokov's *Lolita* is psychological regression – the act of reliving a former, repressed psychological state (Mosi 7).

Lolita's character in the 1955 novel is a symbol of Humbert's psychological regression to a time of innocence, sexual frustration, and unrequited love, as well as the reader's. In Fatima Mosi's essay "Sexual Abuse in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*: A Psychoanalytical approach to Humbert Humbert's Sexuality," Mosi outlines Humbert's repression of his first girlfriend's death, Annabel, as well as the sexual frustration and humiliation he felt during his first sexual experience with her. Mosi argues that Humbert is able to rationalize his pedophilic behavior by seeing Dolores as a reincarnation of his lost love thereby being able to repress the pain of Annabel's death and achieve sexual satisfaction by convincing himself that his love never died but has reincarnated as Lolita, the promiscuous 'nymphet.' This is evident in multiple instances of Humbert's narration where he is unable to separate his feelings of loss for Annabel with his lust for Lolita:

Long after her death I felt her thoughts floating through mine. Long before we met we had had the same dreams. We compared notes. We

found strange affinities. The same June of the same year (1919) a stray canary had fluttered into her house and mine, in two widely separated countries. Oh, Lolita, had you loved me thus! (Nabokov 12-13).

Mosi writes, “*Lolita* bases its structure on the interpretation of the unconscious mind behind the narration of Humbert” (8). Nabokov emphasizes Humbert’s rationalization of his ill-natured regression through his language; Nabokov’s narrative voice in *Lolita* feels greasy, unclean, and deliberately foggy in Humbert’s rose-tinted worldview. Passages that detail sexual encounters with Dolores are inexplicit, making the reader doubtful of Humbert’s version of events. For example, Humbert will often describe Dolores’ version to his sexual advances as a stale moment in their relationship, or manipulation on her part, “[n]ever did she vibrate under my touch, and a strident “what d’you think you are doing” was all I got for my pains” (Nabokov 166). Critical readers interpret *Lolita* as a symbol of innocence; as Humbert’s narration is doubtful, many will not view *Lolita* as a manipulator or sexual deviant. Her character in the novel can also stand for the Jungian archetype of The Innocent thus representing a loss of innocence and the feelings of safety that come from capturing innocence lost (Hwang 34).

However, the symbol of *Lolita* in the film(s) is no longer one of innocence, but one of desire and glamour. Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” can best articulate the films’ departure from the novel as the ‘objectification’ of *Lolita*. Mulvey uses Freudian psychoanalytic concepts such as narcissistic scopophilia to analyze how women are objectified on-screen. Narcissistic scopophilia is defined by Mulvey as a spectator’s “identification

with the image [subject] seen” in the film, deriving from Freudian scopophilia where sexual satisfaction comes in a “controlled sense, an objectified other” (202-203). Mulvey describes the differentiating portrayals of men and women on-screen as a binary of active/male and passive/female; men are three dimensional subjects and women are flat, two dimensional objects, whose only requirement is to connote “looked-at-ness” (203). Film camera movements depict women as glamorized and sexual until they fall in love with the male subject and become his property (Mulvey 205). As the spectator identifies with the male subject, they are able to receive erotic pleasure from the female object and ultimately possess her too. Mulvey calls this “the male gaze” (203). Lolita’s portrayal in two film adaptation is as such: a flat, glamorized, femme-fatale ‘nymphet;’ until she becomes Humbert’s property and prey. She exists only to be looked at; we see her only through Humbert’s gaze, and with the absence of his foggy narration, she loses all existing agency. While readers of the novel can identify Humbert’s warped perception of reality and make the assumption that his affair with Lolita is not as it seems, this sentiment gets lost in the film adaptations. In the films, Lolita’s character represents the Lover archetype (representing intimacy for the viewer), or the Jester (in her playful flirtation with Humbert) (Hwang 34). The objectification and transformation of Lolita as a symbol is achieved through the camera shots of the actress (Fig. 1 and 2).



Figure 1



Figure 2

Consider the introductory scenes of each film. In the Stanley Kubrik film (1962), Lolita's character is introduced lounging in the sun, enticing Humbert and ultimately convincing him to move into the Haze house with no more than a glance (fig. 1). In the Adriane Lyne film (1997), Lolita is reading in the garden, her white dress soaked by the lawn sprinklers; Lyne's Lolita in this shot emulates all the qualities of careless youth while simultaneously possessing the sexual maturity of a young woman (fig. 2). The film adaptations do not seek to capture the self-awareness and delusion of the narrator, but to aestheticize the character of Lolita, inadvertently depicting her as the instigator of the relationship. While this may be how Lolita is portrayed in the novel, we are aware that it is not accurate due to Humbert's troubling narration. In her on-screen transition to a sex symbol, Nabokov's literary imagination of Lolita as a symbol of innocence is lost.

It is difficult to visualize a film adaptation of *Lolita* that is able to relay Lolita's character as the symbol of innocence she represents in the original text as opposed to an objectified image. When her status as a symbol of innocence and psychological regression is lost, Lolita becomes a mere object made for the

male gaze's viewing pleasure. The main critique of both the 1962 and 1997 adaptations of *Lolita* was that the relationship between Dolores and Humbert was overly romanticized. With both the absence of Humbert's troubling narration and the transformation of Lolita into a sex symbol, *Lolita* becomes a love story. In understanding this, the critique becomes less about the directors' choices and a greater issue for filmmaking conventions at large. It begs the question: why are filmmakers unable to depict a young woman as anything but a sexual object, especially if that young woman was originally written as a twelve-year-old-girl? The distortion of Lolita as a Freudian symbol of psychological regression and Jungian archetype of The Innocent to a mere sex-symbol and Lover archetype is a harmful shift. Misconstruing the problematic nature of Humbert and Lolita's relationship to the point where audiences cannot identify its immorality contributes to a social psychology of misogyny that starts targeting girls at a young age. The film adaptations represent a rupture of innocence, for Lolita and women alike, forced to mature early on at the hands of the male gaze.

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