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Lolita & Abuse

Accessing the Wounded Inner Child's Voice

Vladimir Nabokov's infamous novel is an American classic. However, popular culture has re-conceptualized its story and erased elements of incest and childhood sexual abuse that is prevalent within its original text. This paper explores the impact of this conceptualization on how we normalize rape culture and erase the voice of survivors by drawing on reviews of Lolita as well as the personal autobiographical accounts of the author. The paper then turns to examining Lolita's popularity in mainstream society (including in popular music, aesthetics, and films) that depict promiscuity and lasciviousness of young women. The author argues that such a framing is produced by patriarchal society which reduces and silences the voices of sexual abuse survivors. This examination sheds light on the nature of sexual abuse as well as survivor-centered recovery.

Keywords: Lolita; Nabokov; Childhood sexual abuse; sexual grooming; rape culture; healing

Lolita (1955) is a novel written by Vladimir Nabokov which chronicles the romantic and sexual relationship between a middle-aged man (Humbert Humbert) and a 12-year-old girl (Dolores Haze). Critics and reviewers have called the novel a tragic love story, although this narrative dismisses the complexity of abuse and coercion that *Lolita* truly inhabits. I write this essay with concern about popular culture's current conceptualization of *Lolita* as it ignores the implicit story of childhood sexual abuse which the titular character endures.

Lolita does not exist within a vacuum; it exists in a world where too many young women are already victims of sexual assault, abuse, and harassment. Internationally, girls and women are being raped, battered, sold, and slain (Durham 2008). An annual estimated two million children—most of them young girls—are sexually abused every year (Durham 2008). Children who have been sexually abused are three times more likely to experience major depressive episodes and four times as likely to abuse drugs as adults (Himmelstein 2018). After the wake of the #MeToo movement, stories of sexual abuse deserve a second glance. Statistics are no longer just numbers, they are personal accounts that we have finally decided require accountability. Most importantly, I write this essay because of my own experiences of childhood sexual abuse, particularly as it relates to the nature of the titular character's abuse in *Lolita*.

Within this personal, social, and cultural context I have difficulty viewing Nabokov's *Lolita* as a beautiful, tragic love story as popular culture conceptualizes it. Using personal anecdotes as well as literature reviews of *Lolita* throughout this essay, I try to unpack why *Lolita* has been overwhelmingly lauded despite its normalization of abuse. It is my belief that when a society ignores and reinforces narratives that seek to dismiss sexual abuse and the dynamics which creates this abuse, it does a disservice to all those subjected to such abuse. It becomes important, then, to shine light on the abused child's voice and allow them to speak.

Lolita is narrated from the perspective of the step-father, Humbert Humbert. Humbert is manipulative and emotionally, physically, and sexually abusive. He is a child predator and (as the

plot contends) supposedly, a “man madly in love” with his 12-year old step-daughter, Dolores “Dolly” Haze. Much of Dolly’s emotions, thoughts, and judgements are unknown to us throughout the novel. This dichotomous relationship where one narrative is emphasized over the other reflects how difficult the recovery process can be for sexually abused women and young girls. Even as we grow up and are no longer living inside the state of trauma, a piece of us is always attached to those memories.

To investigate Dolly’s possible position, I will use a theory about the inner child from Dr. Arlene Drake’s book, “Carefrontation” to help explain the complexity in the healing process for childhood abuse. Without recognition of the wounded inner child who was abused, none of us who have been sexually abused can heal. That is why it is important to examine this wound and the source of its pain despite how uncomfortable and emotional the process may be. Oftentimes, discussions about childhood sexual abuse is not talked about in public discourse, nor in private (Drake 2017). Survivors are then left to believe that their experiences are isolated, abnormal, and shameful. It is my hope by writing this that other survivors can recognize the possibility of healing despite how difficult the journey may be. Having an abused child’s voice become silenced or otherwise unexplored is an injustice to that child’s recovery and healing process. So, let us explore that inner child’s voice.

We exist within a patriarchal society. The narrative of the man, or the father—and those that sexually abuse women and girls—are given more power over other narratives. Indeed, “father-daughter incest represents an exaggeration of patriarchal norms, not a departure from them” (Shelton 1999: 276). By sympathizing with father-incest narratives like Humbert’s readers, consciously or unconsciously, do so at the detriment of the abused child (Dolly) (Meek 2017). Dolly, the subject of the abuse, is silenced and denied agency or a voice. Within a patriarchal society, male pleasure also comes at the expense of female pain in incestuous narratives and relationships. There is a long passage in *Lolita* that Humbert describes achieving climax through frottage with Dolly as the unknowing participant. Frottage is the act of non-consensually rubbing against the body of another person for sexual pleasure and gratification. Reading this passage about frottage in *Lolita* made me feel completely sick to my stomach. The scene reflected the same trauma I had experienced with my father at seven-years-old. However, the experience was written through the ecstatic and pleasurable perspective of the adult male. As Humbert ejaculates it is unclear to us what Dolly feels during this time. When I had heard my dad moan as he came, I remember feeling fear, terror, and confusion pour out of me. Later, after taking the flight up the stairs into my bedroom, I felt my heart racing. Why did he allow me to sit on him while he was aroused? How do I forgive my father for doing such a thing to me? “Pleasure that comes at the expense of trauma to a girl child [...] derives from a culture that violates and punishes women, that denies, trivializes, and fragments the female personal—especially trauma—while hegemonically advancing the male personal—especially pleasure” (Meek 2017: 154). Having *Lolita*’s narrative focus strictly on the father’s pleasure comes at the expense of the female child who is traumatized during this process.

There are also two distinct and separate readings of *Lolita*. One is aesthetic and the other is moral. A popular reading of *Lolita* often praises its aesthetic but does so without addressing the context of incest and abuse. In the process of praising the aesthetic, the story of incest easily becomes erased (Shelton 1999). It is also within this aesthetic reading that Humbert is given permission to control and manipulate the narrative for both his relationship with Lolita as well as Dolly’s life (Shelton 1999). Often lost in the aesthetic reader’s analysis of *Lolita* are Dolly’s “weeping and stony silences” which convey her lack of consent in the novel (Meek 2017). Throughout *Lolita* we are often reminded of Dolly’s weeping “every night, every night” (Nabokov 1955: 176). When examining this weeping, we recognize that it signifies Dolly’s loneliness and grief from the violence which Humbert inflicts on her (Meek 2017). While Humbert exercises the control of the narrative as an adult man in a patriarchal context, Dolly’s voice cannot be silenced entirely.

Since *Lolita* is written within a social and cultural context in which women and young girls are disproportionately sexually harassed and abused, Dolly's experiences are not completely erased or unknown. I was able to recognize Dolly's pain since her pain is similar to mine. Ignoring such a voice may be the more comfortable route, but it comes at the expense of that child's pain. Reading about Humbert's "love" towards his Lolita should be sickening to all of us. Although it is eloquently written, *Lolita* still depicts childhood sexual abuse that many young girls experience in real life. It is difficult for me to separate the personal context in which I exist when analyzing *Lolita*, especially knowing that I am not the only one who has experienced child sexual abuse. These small snippets of Dolly's weeping and unhappiness are intricately linked to my own. Dolly's trauma parallels my own inner child's trauma. The people who were supposed to love me and care for me the most have also caused me the greatest harm. Indeed, Dolly states, "you [...] broke my life" (Nabokov 1955).

When male perspectives are overemphasized in popular culture, abuse narratives can be warped to mean something else entirely. Popular culture's usage of Lolita excludes narratives of incest and abuse despite the reality of such abuse existing within our culture. For example, Lana Del Rey's song "Lolita" explores the novel's aestheticism and focuses on romantic and sensual elements. Her lyrics include "I know what the boys want", "kissing my fruit punch lips, and "I want to have fun and be in love with you" (Del Rey 2012). This is in stark contrast to the unbalanced power relationship that is at the heart of the sexual abuse and incest committed by Humbert against Dolly in *Lolita*.

We must also examine the structural relationship between Humbert and Dolly, as this structural level helps to illuminate the power and control Humbert exercises over the preadolescent girl. These implicit power dynamics are often glossed over in the mainstream conceptualization of *Lolita*. Dolly is only twelve-years old when the two first have sexual intercourse and Humbert desperately tries to keep his "Lolita" under his control by threatening Dolly with foster care, institutionalization, physical and emotional abuse. He also bribes her with fashion and money to control her behaviour.

Children are in a vulnerable position in relation to the adults entrusted to care for them as they normally do not possess the financial independence to sever the relationship. Nor do they have the cultural, cognitive, social, or economic knowledge that adults possess. Dolly's position in the hierarchy of age means that she "lacks legal majority and the capacity to forcefully or intellectually resist Humbert's abuse" (Laing 2018:17). In this subservient hierarchical positioning, a child engaging in sexual relationships with adults cannot wield the same power that would be afforded to an adult-adult sexual relationship. Furthermore, a child cannot truly consent to a sexual relationship with an adult in this context. Why? The child has not fully developed in all their capacities to recognize the social, psychological, emotional, or cultural repercussions of such an act. In fact, Humbert mentions that Dolly's kisses are more like "an innocent game on her part" or an "imitation of some simulacrum of fake romance" (Nabokov 1955: 113). It is the responsibility of the adult and the more powerful individual to do what will cause the least harm. Humbert fails to do such a thing, and this results in Dolly's weeping and trauma throughout *Lolita*.

Children who have been abused often do not understand the complete context of their trauma until later into adulthood; the abuse is normalized in their mind because they simply do not know any better. I did not have the full capacity of understanding the context of what my abusers were enacting upon me at the age I was abused. However, as an adult, this context is reframed in my newfound knowledge of implicit power dynamics and structural relationships that sexual abuse occurs in. Popular culture's common conceptualizations of *Lolita* often excludes this structural analysis as female voices are often silenced within our culture and the allure of a "forbidden love" is romanticized to the point where sexual abuse is glossed over.

Durham (2008) notes that within popular culture, Lolita now signifies a favourite metaphor for a child vixen; a knowing coquette; an out-of-control young girl's libido; and a baby nymphomaniac.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines Lolita as “a precociously seductive girl.” All such definitions of this re-interpretation of Lolita are a myth. Eroticizing the abuse of young girls in the media furthers rape culture by regularly sexualizing girls and then assigning blame to them for their desirability (Savage 2015). This myth also creates a blame-the-victim mentality that appears prevalently in our culture (Savage 2015). Survivors who then hear and see these messages in the media internalize this damaging content which can disrupt their recovery process from sexual abuse.

Popular culture has also taken certain elements of Nabokov’s *Lolita* and commodified it. This commodification is a trend that comes at the expense of female sexuality, their sexual well-being, and their sexual health. Interestingly, Nabokov’s initial stance on the cover art for *Lolita* was oppositional to any kind of representation of a little girl (Laing 2018; Savage 2015). However, decades later, cover art for *Lolita* often depicts representations of young girls or their various body parts to market the book as an erotic novel (Savage 2015). Similarly, cinematic adaptations of the novel have also focused the aesthetic elements of the book such as female beauty and youth. The sexual and aesthetic emphasis on the young girl (i.e., Dolly) rather than the older gentleman (i.e., Humbert) leads to the erasure of abuse and incest in *Lolita* with the tacit complicity of the viewing public (Savage 2015). Indeed, the eroticized girl has become a naturalized element of female sexuality in popular culture (Savage 2015).

Such sexualization of young girls is detrimental to their social development, for their self-esteem; for developing healthy sexual relationships with others; for their understanding of desirability; and for their understanding of sexual consent. For much of the aftermath of the sexual abuse I experienced in my late teens, I assigned self-blame. There were also intense feelings of guilt and shame. Writing about these experiences in this essay brought up many painful memories that were often difficult, unhelpful, and unbearable to remember. Other survivor accounts of sexual abuse are similar to mine.

Our society is riddled with gender-based violence against women as well as shaming women for their sexuality. When these personal accounts of violence crop up in popular discourses, victim-blaming mentality seek to shut victims up. Examining the myth of the child seducer is imperative to rectify these internalized messages that survivors are consuming (Durham 2008). I did not possess the voice to tell my mother about what her brother did to me when I was first abused as a child. Similarly, Dolly could not voice her abuse in any meaningful way in *Lolita*. However, writing this essay is a way in which the often-silenced voices in our culture can speak. In this sense, I hope to bring about a process of validation, recovery, and healing for other survivors reading this. Although I cannot change what has happened to me in my past—nor could I have stopped Dolly’s abuse from happening—I can look to the present and the future for hope and betterment. Let *Lolita* be a more nuanced and complex story than the sexually precocious nymphet of Humbert’s “loving” adoration.

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