

2011

Interpreting with "All Possible Caution, on Mental Tiptoe": Nabakov's Post-Romantic Renewal of Perception in *Lolita*

Curtis Donald Le Van

University of South Florida, clevan@mail.usf.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

Scholar Commons Citation

Le Van, Curtis Donald, "Interpreting with "All Possible Caution, on Mental Tiptoe": Nabakov's Post-Romantic Renewal of Perception in *Lolita*" (2011). *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*.
<http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/3201>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

Interpreting with “All Possible Caution, on Mental Tiptoe”:
Nabokov’s Post-Romantic Renewal of Perception in Reading *Lolita*

by

Curtis Donald Le Van

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Art
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Phillip Sipiora, Ph.D.
Joseph Moxley, Ph.D.
Ylce Irizarry, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:
November 3, 2011

Keywords:
estrangement, defamiliarization, hermeneutics, modernism, phenomenology

Copyright © 2011, Curtis Donald Le Van

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: The Romantics	10
Chapter 2: Defamiliarizing the Act of Reading	15
Chapter 3: Defamiliarization of the Act of Reading in <i>Lolita</i>	21
Conclusion	30
Works Cited	33

Abstract

Although presenting the concept of love in a form not accepted by societal conventions does indeed estrange the conception of love in Nabokov's *Lolita*, it does nothing to explain how readers accept Humbert's passion, without immediately and consistently disregarding it as lewd and inappropriate. I will argue that Nabokov estranges the romantic conceptions not by defamiliarizing the occasion of love (by making the romance a manifestation of pedophilia), but rather by defamiliarizing and complicating the acts of both reading and interpreting. First, I will make associations between the Romantics and Nabokov, regarding their shared desire to renew the habitual acts of both perceiving and interpreting human life, which they accomplish through methods of isolating the emotions effected by acts—not the acts themselves. After which, I will examine the theories of phenomenology and externalist philosophy to cement the concepts of anticipation and hermeneutics, starting in general and then narrowing to the act of reading. In following, I will demonstrate how Nabokov agitates this anticipation for readers, making the very act of reading *Lolita* a new experience, in which Romantic themes do not appear cliché and outdated. On the whole, I will maintain that it is this disruption in interpretation that absolves Humbert's ills, allowing *Lolita* to maintain its status as one of the greatest love stories of the twentieth century.

Introduction

The Romantic poet John Keats, perhaps more than any other poet of his day, describes a desire and passion for a love that persists throughout time. Rather than a more classical sense of immortality, which requires an after-life constituted by heroism, poetry, and reputation beyond death, Keats, along with other Romantics, seeks to fuse astronomical and physical time to perpetuate a love and passion that never dulls in sensation for those who engender it. For example, in his sonnet “Bright Star,” Keats begins with a plea to have the characteristics of an unwavering celestial sphere: “Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art—” (1). Here he expresses the desire for the immortal station of a star; however he does not want to live forever for the sake of wealth, fame, or heroism, but he wishes to experience a love that never dissolves in intensity. Through his hyperbolic language, he demonstrates the yearning for both physical and sensual pleasures, which last indefinitely in an unswerving and inexorable manner:

No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever--or else swoon to death. (9-14)

Undeniably, a lover cannot experience, eternally, the gentle rise and fall of a beloved's chest. The impracticality of it remains obvious, needing no explanation. Additionally, Keats does not explore the problem of love becoming routine in this poem; while it may be pleasing for lovers to lounge together for a certain period of time, it will unquestionably become tiresome and mind-numbing. Furthermore, it may become habitual, losing all significance and requiring the lovers to find other means for stimulation.

Keats, however, particularly addresses this issue in another poem, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in which he admires two lovers celebrated on an unchanging artifact. Here, Keats addresses the young man portrayed, pointing out that the girl depicted "cannot fade, though thou has not thy bliss, / For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!" (19-20). Whereas the pair has successfully fused bodily and astronomical time together, Keats does not mourn the young man's inability to claim his lover, but rather he praises both the passion of a never-ending pursuit and the lady's immutability. Rather than focus on the actual acts performed by lovers (chest movements), Keats shifts to expand upon the notion of an ecstasy that never fades. Although the urn does not permit the lovers to experience, intimately, each other's breath as the lovers do in "Bright Star," the characters presented never falter in the potency of their emotions.

Although this longing for a love to exist forever in an indefatigable manner, described in poetry, may have been revolutionary during the time of the British Romantics, artists have since explored such tropes, never questioning their validity or logistics. While many romances and romantic comedies strive to achieve a happy ending, full of emotion, the text ends, and every time readers and viewers return to the

text, the passion has significantly faded. The only people who unendingly experience these sensations are the characters in the film or book—frozen like the lovers on Keats’s urn. After an audience suffers repeated exposures to a text, the dulling of the ardor happens not only with the content of each work individually but also with the conventions used throughout the various works that explore the experiences of love and passion. In other words, the once revolutionary techniques of Keats and his contemporaries have lost their distinctiveness, becoming lackluster and conventional. With this thought in mind, modern writers have found difficulty with presenting their works in a way that the romance described does not immediately appear to audiences as monotonous and predictable. One modern American author in particular, Vladimir Nabokov, provides readers with a story of love that appears vibrant and new, but the question remains as to whether or not his work *Lolita* seems so vivacious because of the nature of the romance (pedophilia)—and, ultimately, we must question how *do* readers reconcile this romance with societal notions of sexual deviancy.

Nabokov in like manner to Keats’s poetry describes a situation in which the protagonist Humbert Humbert desires time to stand still; he has a hope for an intense sensual pleasure that transcends or at the very least ignores the passing of time. Upon introducing his definition of a Lolita in terms of age, Humbert admits that he “substitute[s] time terms for spatial ones” (16). While this admittance may seem to explain that age has little or nothing to do with the constitution of the nymphet, he later announces that “the idea of time plays such a magic part” (17). While this may seem contradictory at first, Humbert uses these references of time to show that time is nothing and everything simultaneously; a nymphet’s status is not defined by her age, yet the

timing of a nymphet's meeting of an admiring man proves difficult and ephemeral. In other words, a Lolita is, in part, constituted by her age, insofar as it determines when she may meet an engaging older man who perceives her nymphet-like attributes, but nonetheless, her station is not equal a certain age or time of life—Therefore, time proves crucial for a passionate romance to occur. This only magnifies Humbert's craving to share intimacy with a Lolita whereas Humbert has objectified the nymphets, who no longer are subjected to time as such an object.

We can note this objectification when he expands on his definition, whereas “an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy . . . [can] discern” a nymphet from an ordinary girl (17). Interestingly, Humbert's primary qualifications for a nymphet rely completely on their being perceived by conventional understandings of artists, not unlike the melancholic Keats observing an urn. In demonstrating this objectification, Humbert concludes his definition with a seeming utilization of the conventional romantic trope of a blazon: “the slightly feline outline of a cheekbone, the slenderness of a downy limb, and other indices . . .” (17). Furthermore, Humbert clarifies that nymphets do not reside in “the spatial world of synchronous phenomena . . . [but] on that intangible island of entranced time” (17). Much like the lovers on the Grecian urn, Lolitas have escaped a *synchronous* existence and live apart from the pedestrian lives of their peers.

Moreover, given Humbert's understanding of time, Nabokov begins *Lolita* with a description of a passion that appears reminiscent of the Romantics:

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.

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)

At the very start, Nabokov reveals passion as his most dominant Romantic theme within the text. The cover¹ of *Lolita* shares *Vanity Fair*'s description of the book, which declares it "[t]he only convincing love story of our century"; moreover, the back-cover reports to the reader that John Updike believes "Nabokov writes prose the only way it should be written, that is, ecstatically." Nabokov employs, at times, intense lyricism and metaphor to describe a love that increases in intensity, all the while keeping a constant tinge of social taboo in the back of the readers' minds. Such a response implies that modern readers have accepted the romanticism of this text. Hinging on this concept, Claudia Moscovici suggests that Nabokov "was compelled to transform ecstatic passion into pathology...to make Romantic themes palatable to an audience used to cynicism and textual play of modernist literature" (78). Although presenting the concept of love in a form not accepted by societal conventions does indeed estrange the conception of love, it does nothing to explain how readers accept Humbert's passion, without immediately and consistently disregarding it as lewd and inappropriate.

Modernists, and no doubt contemporary readers of American literature, arrive at a text with a certain level of cynicism, particularly toward literature that illustrates a romance. In an effort to provoke this cynicism, Nabokov begins his novel with such a vivid description of ecstatic love, yet he offers no context or explanation of its derivation. This immediately divides readers into two ways of perceiving the text: literally or

¹ Both references to the cover of *Lolita* are to the 1997 Vintage paper-back printing.

ironically. In her piece “Melville’s Fist: The Execution of *Billy Budd*” Barbara Johnson defines both the literal and ironic reader. For Johnson, a literal reader believes that the events described in a piece of literature should be taken at face value, and that the characters reveal their true inner natures. In other words, literal readers consider the characters represented in a text as motivated signs, which is to say that these characters have a knowable moral character (the within, the signified) because of their outer appearance or description (the signifier) (2260-61). Restated, a literal reader will take Humbert’s first chapter as a sincere expression of love. On the contrary, ironic readers assume that a sign (a character’s moral constitution) is arbitrary and unmotivated; therefore, such readers reverse the value of the signifiers, and most modern readers fall into this category (2262); therefore, ironic readers most likely assume that Humbert’s declaration is insincere and diabolically formulated. By looking at *Lolita* in this way, literal readers consider Humbert genuine in his love and passion, and they wish to understand his situation by reading further. On the other hand, ironic readers assume Humbert lies throughout the entire novel, and they take nothing that he says at face value and seek to continue reading in order to find other instances of his cunning. Regardless of how readers may first approach *Lolita*, they will have difficulty in maintaining their cynical or literal lens; the techniques employed by Nabokov makes this too difficult to maintain and certain oscillation will occur.

Johnson offers a third type of reader, the situational judge to help explain this. For Johnson, a situational reading can be summed in one word: *history*. History suggests that the law (applicable to *Lolita* since Humbert is about to enter trial) is a historical phenomenon, not a game of language that attempts to establish universal and timeless

truths, which is what literal and ironic readers attempt (2271). In terms of *Lolita*, Nabokov asks his audience, through Humbert's manuscripts, to become situational judges since he positions his readers as members of a jury. Humbert announces this in the first chapter: "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs envied" (9).

As Johnson continues, she states that the act of judging remains best in ambiguity because "to describe perfectly, to refer adequately, would be to 'hit' the referent and thus annihilate it; ...to know completely would be to obliterate the very object known" (2266). With this posited, the only way for language to maintain its innocence is to deny its referential abilities, by remaining indirect. If the audience were to have a clear understanding of Humbert's romance with Lolita, it would literally kill Humbert through the court system and its proceedings. If Nabokov were to make this romance candid, and thereby lewd, it would possibly annihilate his career or reputation as an artist. Therefore, applying these concepts to *Lolita*, Nabokov makes Humbert ambiguous not only through Humbert's situations, but also through this protagonist's literary style—"You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style" (9). With this thought, Humbert, by remaining ambiguous, possesses the ability to survive. In summary, by remaining indirect, Nabokov forces readers to withhold making judgments, taking situation into consideration. This not only happens for the character of Humbert, but on the use of Romantic tropes and themes in the text as well; by estranging the act of reading through constantly having the reader re-evaluate the text, Nabokov's romantic tendencies appear pulsating and innovative.

Readers must not look too deeply into Humbert's attempt for apologia, given the importance of uncertainty. In the opening of the novel, Humbert offers many rationalizations for his behavior, yet they prove inadequate to pardon his crimes. He provides a litany of examples describing men loving young girls: East Indian provinces, Dante and Beatrice, Petrarch and Laureen (Nabokov 19). He even disregards the "so-called legal terminology [that] accepts as rational terms 'lewd and lascivious cohabitation'" (150), which appears as a plea to have his readers to become situational judges rather than seekers of universal truths. Furthermore, he provides a social example that suggests situation determines morality and depravity: "Among Sicilians sexual relations between a father and his daughter are accepted as a matter of course" (150). Undeniably, the existentialist call to the relativism in reality does not satisfy readers; therefore Nabokov applies a different approach. On the whole, a deferment to relativism is not ambiguity; it is an answer.

With this idea in mind, Nabokov renews a modern audience's senses to Romanticism by disrupting the readers' hermeneutic cycles, which, in turn, nullifies anticipation, requiring the reader to actively interpret themes of love, passion, and romance (along side with deferred criminal judgments) without codifying them as dismissive Romantic tropes. This addresses the ironic reader; rather than immediately recognizing Romantic themes and dismissing them as disingenuous, the ironic reader is forced, through Nabokov's techniques, to engage with the text and determine the passions it attempts to recreate. I will argue that he does this not by defamiliarizing the occasion of love (by making the romance a manifestation of pedophilia), but rather by defamiliarizing and complicating the acts of both reading and interpreting. First, I will

make associations between the Romantics and Nabokov, regarding their shared desire to renew the habitual acts of both perceiving and interpreting human life, which they accomplish through methods of isolating the emotions effected by acts—not the acts themselves. After which, I will examine the theories of phenomenology and externalist philosophy to cement the concepts of anticipation and hermeneutics, starting in general and then narrowing to the act of reading. In following, I will demonstrate how Nabokov agitates this anticipation for readers, making the actual act of reading *Lolita* a new experience, in which Romantic themes do not appear cliché and outdated. On the whole, I will maintain that it is this disruption in interpretation that absolves Humbert's ills, allowing *Lolita* to maintain its status as one of the greatest love stories of the twentieth century.

Chapter One: The Romantics

For many of the British Romantics, the main objective of their craft was to free the imagination, to explore thoughts and emotions often over-looked in prosaic living. Many Romantic poets credited the imagination with providing artists, primarily poets, the means to venture through all the human sentiments in order to have a better understanding of society. Percy Bysshe Shelley argues in his *A Defense of Poetry*, that poets do not reside solely in the present, in which most perceive solely how things are and seek to conserve its order. Instead, he argues that poets have the unique ability, through their imaginations, to see a greater order of human life, and therefore poets serve as “the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society and the inventors of the arts of life and the teachers” (792). For Shelley, poets do not concern their works with the intense investigation of the present states of things, but rather they examine the ways things “ought to be ordered,” thereby “behold[ing] the future in the present” (792). The occasion of Shelley’s defense was to defend and expand the understanding of a visionary, mandating that all creative minds should bear the title of poet. Shelley sought to break his contemporaries’ understandings of “utility and progress” (789). Therefore, seeking to encourage others to break convention, Shelley expands on breaking habitual means of perception. Shelley asserts that poetry invigorates and encourages the mind by forcing readers to place an innumerable amount of seemingly incongruent thoughts together, thereby “lift[ing] the veil from the hidden beauty of the world...mak[ing] familiar objects

be as if they were not familiar” (796). Through making the mind “the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations,” poetry “turns all things to loveliness...and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror,” not unlike how Nabokov makes *Lolita* palatable (796, 799-80). Without doubt, readers may experience discomfort or confusion in the fusion that takes place when reading poetry, since it expands the mind and joins *exultation* and *horror*, much like the narrative of *Lolita*. Nonetheless, Shelley maintains that the “great instrument of moral good is the imagination” (796). Shelley, on the whole then, seeks to create a “world of chaos,” in which “the film of familiarity” has vanished, allowing readers to experience passions and thoughts not “blunted by reiteration” (800).

Additionally, Joanna Baillie addresses in her “Introductory Discourse” the roles of poets and dramatists, concerning how they isolate and explore the passions of human nature, which “might not be acceptable to the publick” (369). Written as a defense for her plays, which were accused of exploring human emotions in excess, much like *Lolita*, Baillie begins her piece by describing how humans enjoy perceiving and analyzing one another; however she explains that most perceptions are superficial, only reflecting everyday and habitual behaviors. In her plays, she hopes to remove the veils of convention and focus primarily on how different passions affect the human mind. In expanding on the observations of everyday life, she asks that “[i]f man is an object of so much attention to man, engaged in ordinary occurrences of life, how much more does he excite his curiosity and interest when placed in extraordinary situation of difficulty and stress?” (358).

By placing her characters in difficult situations, she has the ability to isolate and make known the more foreign aspects of the human psyche, which she commonly refers to as the *concealed passions*. She notes that even the wildest and most vulgar passions serve morality, noting that “the dark and malevolent passions” make a person “more just, more merciful” (360). Like Shelley, the expanding of sympathies through the imaginative works of poetry serve as the foundation for moral behavior, despite the content itself seeming depraved.

In direct contest to “the reasonable argumentative [that is legal] and philosophical writings,” which do little to sway an audience, Baillie posits that the metaphors and imagery of poetry help readers understand the ambiguities of life, and allow for a greater expressions of sympathy, making it clear that “[a]n argument supported with vivid and interesting illustration will long be remembered when many equally important and clear are forgotten” (362). She continues by claiming that the majority of a reader’s stimulation and interest with literature derives from being able to see characters as they “are in the closet” (362). Therefore, it remains imperative that writers do not conceal any of the hidden passions. Although modern readers may find this concept to be unoriginal, many of Baillie’s contemporaries disdained her works for their lack of convention. She announces that, in contrast, her plays are “of simpler construction, less embellished with poetical decorations, less constrained by the lofty seriousness which has so generally been considered as necessary for the support of tragick dignity” (369). With this film of conventions abandoned, Baillie can then reveal the passions that “only give their fullness vent in the lonely desert, or in the darkness of midnight” (366). In summary, Baillie had to be unconventional in her approach, both in form and content, in order to reveal the

emotions that each person has experienced but never had the opportunity or inspiration to explore.

Similar to Nabokov, William Wordsworth notes in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that readers have “a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies” (243). At first pedophilia, such as the one described in *Lolita*, seems to fill this craving, but Wordsworth continues that with the rapidity of the printing press, the large numbers of gothic novels it produced only create a “degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation” (243). Rather than relying on indecency to open the senses, Wordsworth seeks another method, and he asserts that the “purpose [of the *Lyrical Ballads*] will be found principally to be: namely to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement” (242). This excitement, on the whole then, does not reside in outrageous situations, but rather upon a closer examination of what provokes stimulation, and this, for Wordsworth, need not require extremities.

Nabokov relates a similar reaction to Wordsworth in his essay “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” in which he claims that the books of his day, in like manner to the rise of the gothic novel in Wordsworth’s, “[are] either topical trash or what some call Literature of Ideas [reminiscent of Baillie’s critique], which very often is topical trash coming in huge blocks of plaster” (315). Nabokov distinguishes his works from these ubiquitous *blocks* by describing the ideal work of fiction, which “exists insofar as it affords...aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with the other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (314). Nabokov then shifts the focus from *topical trash* (the morality regarding

pedophilia), to the actual feelings and emotions sparked. Wordsworth would agree completely, stating that “the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling” (243). Whereas both writers note the importance of emotion over topic, pedophilia does not and cannot serve as the primary means for accentuating emotion. In the case of *Lolita*, Nabokov not only employs intense lyrical language, romantic tropes, and ridiculous commands to the editor to demonstrate this severe passion, but he frustrates our hermeneutic cycles as we examine these techniques.

Chapter 2: Defamiliarizing the Act of Reading

Nabokov avoids having his novel categorized as truisitic Romanticism, topical trash, or crude pornography through formulating frustration in the reader's anticipation, which prohibits such cataloging. In order to fully understand this technique, I will examine the works of several philosophers and theorists regarding hermeneutics and anticipation as they relate to reading texts. First Martin Heidegger, through his writings in *Being and Time*, explains the three-fold structure of interpretation. Heidegger announces that all interpretation must begin with *Vorhabe*, or fore-having (the background of the interpreter). "In every case...interpretation is grounded in something we have in advance—in a fore-having. As the appropriation of understanding, the interpretation operates in...an involvement whole which is already understood" (Dreyfus 198). This background, or fore-structure already envelops the object up for interpretation, and leads the interpreter in his or her questioning, making a reader either literal or ironic. Secondly, the interpreter must have some sense in how to approach the problem, and/or use some sort of perspective to carry out the interpretation: "A point of view, which fixes that with regard to which what is understood to be interpreted. In every case interpretation is grounded in something we see in advance—in a fore-sight" (199). It follows then, with this fore-sight, that interpreters have expectations as to what they will find out: "The interpretation has already decided for a definite way of conceiving [the object being perceived]...either with finality or with reservations; it is

grounded in something we grasp in advance—in a fore-conception (199). Because of this, whenever a reader arrives at a text, pre-conceptions designed in the fore-structure will determine the text's identity, primarily through concluding its themes, structure, and even morality; in essence, a sort of anticipation occurs.

Phenomenology asserts that the subject determines truth through perceiving objects, creating a shift from classical philosophy, which attempts to codify the object-filled reality. Because of this, the hermeneutics of the subject come to the forefront of phenomenological discourse. In his lecture "Language," Martin Heidegger echoes his writings in *Being and Time*, by applying elements of his three-folded structure of interpretation as it pertains to the anticipation of the subject (reader) regarding objects (poetry).

Interpreters, therefore, possess expectations as to what they will find out. In "Language," Heidegger claims that language constitutes a world within the reader's mind; language molds perception and grants subjects to create things into being. His concept of dif-ference serves as a realm in which world and things constitute one another, but are not equal to one another: "Things bear world. World grants things" (993). In this dwelling, particularly regarding poetry, subjects may meditate on the object, waiting for the "command of the dif-ference" (996); however, Heidegger maintains that that the listener must "hear it [the command] even beforehand, and thus as it were to anticipate its command.... This anticipation...determines the manner in which mortals respond to the dif-ference" (997-98). Therefore, the subject's fore-structure aids in the interpretation of literature. Heidegger's understanding of a subject's fore-structure seems to prefigure the

poststructuralist notion of a subject's situated-ness in regards to how language molds the perceptions of objects.

With expanding on Heidegger's disclosure of the fore-structure of understanding, Hans-Georg Gadamer articulates the elements of a theory regarding hermeneutic experience in his *Truth and Method*, and he focuses on the hermeneutic circle and the problem of prejudices resulting from anticipation. Gadamer suggests "a person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text" (315). This translates into readers anticipating themes that are not actually there, themes that derive from expectations prompted by certain styles and themes, which Nabokov admits in his essay on *Lolita*: "Certain techniques in *Lolita* (Humbert's Journal, for example) misled some of my first readers into assuming that this was going to be a lewd book" (Foreward 313). This act of projecting, Gadamer notes, reflects the prejudices and fore-structure of the interpreter. Gadamer maintains that the interpreter can only achieve understanding in a text by constantly going back and forth between the part and the whole: "[T]he process of construal is itself already governed by an expectation of meaning that follows from the context of what has gone before... Thus the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole" (326-7). Part of the hermeneutic circle requires a reader to recognize the temporal distance of the text, leaving the part to examine the whole in order to recognize its significance, and then attempt to harmonize the details with the whole.

Nabokov, I will later argue, disrupts this process for two reasons: he disrupts this process to not only defamiliarize the act of reading but also to allow the reader to abstain

from judging Humbert. As Gadamer concludes in this section: “We now know what this requires, namely the fundamental suspension of our own prejudices. But all suspension of judgments and hence, a fortiori, of prejudices, has the total logical structure of a *question*. The essence of a *question* is to open up possibilities and keep them open” (332). For Gadamer, to reach complete understanding, one cannot rely on fore-structure and anticipation to fill in the gaps, but instead, one must forebear prejudices and judgment. By constantly disrupting the hermeneutic circles within the narrative of *Lolita*, Nabokov forces readers to question the placement of the parts and whole; therefore withholding prejudice until the parts reconcile with the whole.

Such a concept of construal follows Johnson’s description of what a situational judge must perform in order to interpret characters: taking a knowable *difference between* (the whole) and making it an ambiguous *difference within* (the parts) in order to make a just assessment of the *difference between* (the whole). She begins by explaining that judgment has the intent to reconcile an action with an understanding. The occasion of judgment commonly arises with a *difference between*, which she defines as two objects in opposition (2274). The action between the two objects, undeniably, remains knowable (perceptible) to outsiders; however the reason for the action originates from a *difference within* the actor and is, therefore, unknowable to outsiders. In the case of Humbert, he is first defined in opposition to both Lolita and Quilty; both of these relationships can be known because they contain perceptible actions. However, in order to fully assess, judges must then make the situation ambiguous in order for questioning and interpretation to take place in an effort to achieve an understanding for the action (2275). In regards to *Lolita*, this occurs through Humbert’s multiple attempts to explain his

mental processes to the jury. He most explicitly states this in chapter 13, when he addresses the following to his audience: “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 . . .” (Nabokov 57). He then proceeds to describe a scene with Lolita on his knee, as they listen to the “Carmen” song.

Humbert stands accused of a difference between, and he then attempts to showcase his difference within, so then the jury can make the final judgment regarding the legal and political difference *between*. In essence, the process appears as the following: 1) the differences *between* of Humbert vs. Lolita and Humbert vs. Quilty, 2) the difference *within* of Humbert’s moral ambiguity, and 3) the political differences *between* of murderer vs. victim and child molester vs. minor. Johnson insists that a political judgment cannot be fully executed by differences within, and therefore it attempts to displace them within the structure of differences between as they pertain to historical contexts, thus the legal labels of *murderer* and *child sex offender*.

Johnson ultimately argues that political judgments inherently subordinate differences *within* for the knowable differences *between*. In an effort to perform this construal of differences, the reader or situational judge must reside in a degree of uncertainty until a final judgment can be made; however, Johnson continues that no judgment can ever be final. She explains that a political judgments attempts to act cognitively; it attempts to understand the past and make certain declarations. However, judgment is also a performative act, since judgments attempt to prevent certain acts from happening in the future with their sentences. Johnson asserts that a situational judge cannot execute both functions of judgment simultaneously. If a judge attempts to remain

purely cognitive, others will certainly judge the action, making it performative. If the judge acts solely performative, legal labels will still appear (2276).

Johnson contends, on the whole, that language remains the most effective when it resides in uncertainty, since “language can only function in ambiguity and uncertainty” (2277). Nabokov demonstrates this chiefly in his foreward to *Lolita*, since Dr. Way acts cognitively, labeling Humbert as “horrible...abject...[and] a shining example of moral leprosy” (5). However, he also makes the judgment performative since he explains that others can judge Humbert’s story in order to harness a “greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world” (6). As stated in the opening section, readers of *Lolita* appear to have the task of either accepting this narrative as a great re-interpretation of Romantic sentiments (cognitive) or judging it as lewd and deprave (performative); however, Nabokov does not ask his readers to make such a distinction. As Johnson and Gadamer suggest, Nabokov remains in a constant state of questioning and ambiguity, not permitting his readers to make a final judgment. In the following section, I will examine the ways in which Nabokov dwells in uncertainty throughout the text.

Chapter 3: Defamiliarization of the Act of Reading in *Lolita*

I will now refer to specific instances in the text in which Nabokov interrupts the interpretative process, thus estranging the normal conventions of reading a narrative; on the whole, I will discuss two ways in which he executes this: first by promoting an oscillating between two schemes and then by operating affective disruptions, regarding the readers' anticipations derived from both typical conventions and stimuli crafted by Nabakov.

Nabokov causes the readers, at many times, to alternate between believing and doubting Humbert Humbert in his retellings, violating the reliable narrator assumption. Undeniably Humbert remains capricious, but he does at times offer reasons to believe that what he writes has some validity, and it is through this fluctuating that the readers must persistently and actively interpret his defense. Humbert offers his assumed jury exhibit number two: a pocket diary from the year 1947, in which he recounts his first summer with Delores. He begins this introduction of the journal as “though it were really before [him],” (40) but we soon discover that the original had been destroyed five years before this current retelling. This causes the audience to at first believe Humbert and then doubt him. He continues that “courtesy of a photographic memory” (40) he can rewrite the contents of this journal, which leads most readers to suspect his honesty; however, he attempts to regain trust through sharing that he remembers the contents of

this diary because he wrote the entire document twice; first in pencil, and then he “copied it out with obvious abbreviations in my smallest, most satanic hand” (40).

The reader, therefore, remains uncertain as to the legitimacy of this piece of evidence because of this rough transition from good faith to bad faith, which demonstrates agitation in anticipation; the reader cannot conclude through fore-structure and prejudging if Humbert is trustworthy, and readers thus refrain from making a final conclusion—but continue reading. Throughout the diary entries Humbert offers moments of honesty, during which he points out that perhaps his memory has failed him and he has inserted some of his present thoughts into the text. This typically occurs when he departs narrative and enters defense: “If and when you wish to sizzle me to death, remember that only a spell of insanity could ever give me the simple energy to be a brute (all this amended, perhaps)” (47). In this passage, Humbert admits that he, in all likelihood, did not write this interjection originally, and he added it while writing in prison.

Michael Woods, in his book, *Nabokov: The Magician's Doubts and the Risks of Fiction*, suggests that this is an instance of “odd oscillation between trust and distrust,” (104) which Nabokov employs so that “a text cannot do without interpretation, which may be secure or shaky, decent or disreputable, but will always be work, cannot simply be given” (106). This thought resembles Gadamer’s notion of the hermeneutic cycle, in which prejudice *gives* a reader interpretation rather than having the reader work for interpretation. Only through keeping the text open through questioning, as Gadamer advocates, which this oscillation of trust and distrust instills, can readers delay prejudice and arrive at a real meaning of text (*Lolita*’s Romantic themes). Woods offers a further

example in this game of trust and distrust in his exploration of Charlotte's letter to Humbert:

The letter these phrases come from occupies more than a page of print, and seems to be complete. It isn't: we have read only what Humbert remembers of it, although, in a wonderfully acrobatic twist on an already dizzying logic, what he remembers he remembers *verbatim*.... The text of the letter now seems uncertain, but...on inspection we begin to see shifts and interference in the style, Humbert's sardonic eloquence invading Charlotte's raving and rambling. (104)

Through incessantly suspecting the actual hand that wrote this letter, readers once again actively question the text, rather than becoming completely certain of how to interpret it. As Woods suggests, to doubt that Charlotte did not write the letter at all remains just as erroneous as to assume that Humbert did not insert any of his own language.

A reader should also recognize that this oscillation could also occur within a single sentence of Nabakov's writing. Humbert often employs parenthetical insertions that pull the reader out of the grammatical and/or rhetorical functions of a sentence, forcing them to consider not only the purpose of the insertion, but also his rhetorical choices regarding the inclusion of parentheses. In other words, readers oscillate back and forth between the sentence and its parenthetical insertion almost simultaneously, which disallows readers to derive one complete and final meaning or objective from the sentence. In the following paragraphs, I will examine his use of such a technique. I have chosen examples from the beginning of the text because I feel that this is when they are the most useful, since the reader remains in the beginning stages of trying to understand the protagonist.

Nabokov's most frequently used insertion includes appositive clauses within parentheses. Humbert employs one very early on in the text, in which he re-phrases the death of his mother. He details that his "very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning)" (10). The tone of the actual sentence appears to lead the reader into perceiving that he will go into great detail as to the exact cause of death; however, he simply rephrases it in two words: *picnic* and *lightning*. He goes on in the sentence to explain that she had died when he "was three, and, save for a pocket of warmth in the darkest past, nothing of her subsists within the hollows and dells of memory" (10). This is a very melancholy sentence, in which we learn a tragic fact about his childhood, perhaps explaining his behavior as an adult. Looking at the grammar of the sentence, he is, grammatically, explaining that he has little recollection of his mother. This should explain why his parenthetical explanation remains so brief; however, upon first reading the two cold words, readers may feel that he is insensitive about his mother's death. Here, Nabokov provides two very different ways of talking about a mother's death, yet readers encounter two very different rhetorical methods regarding the ways of interpreting the sentence.

Humbert, however, does not use these insertions to only describe his own history and situation, but also the situations of others—particularly when he describes the physical manifestations of nymphets. For example, after declaring that he was "perfectly capable of intercourse with Eve . . . it was Lilith he longed for" (20), he continues with asserting that "[t]he bud stage of breast development appears early (10.7 years) in the sequence of somatic changes accompanying pubescence" (20). This rephrasing of the stage of development proves intriguing for two reasons. First, once done with making

both a Judeo-Christian myth allusion (Lilith) and a poetic metaphor (bud-stage of breast), Humbert provides in his diabolical parentheses, a cold and unmotivated numerical expression. The rhetoric of the sentence remains refined and lyrical in its efforts to hedge any anticipated disdain of Humbert's desires. However, most readers would not accept a poetic expression of puberty to be any excuse for his behavior. Nonetheless, in a seeming disregard of technique (and his own objective of extending the sympathies of a jury), Humbert provides a scientific and numeral expression for this juncture in female maturity, which implies a use of sinister empiricism and observation, certainly an industry that would belittle his case. Even so, given on a sentence level, readers must consider which reading of the sentence remains dominant, being unable to consider both in chorus.

Additionally, Humbert plays a sort of language game regarding the *activeness* and *passivity* of these carefully defined nymphets: "In Massachusetts, U.S., on the other hand, a 'wayward child' is, technically, one 'between seven and seventeen years of age' (who, moreover, habitually associates with vicious or immoral persons)" (19). In this, we discover that the state government has defined a wayward child, leaving her no agency of her own. On a grammatical level, the use of *is* as a linking verb suggests passivity in determining her own identity. However, Humbert adds a certain degree of volition, since he grants the nymphet an active verb: *associate*. Therefore, this sentence posits two very different understandings of a young girl. At first, she has no will and no part in her identity, being too young to act: the state must provide her with a definition and a limited amount of accountability. In the parenthesis, we see a definition noted by action, or in other words association. Undoubtedly, the state recognizes that the girl between the ages

of seven and seventeen must act in a certain way to be deemed a *wayward child*; however, Humbert does not provide this in the sentence, but leaves it in his own words, which suggests that the government provides the parameters of the child, and men, like himself, provide the occasion for a nymphet to bring herself into actuality. Through this division, Nabokov forces the reader to wander between various understandings of the situation: passivity and activeness, language and performance.

Beyond the sentence level, Humbert's various forms of writing also defy conventional use, and as Vladimir E. Alexandrov suggests, in his book *Nabokov's Otherworld*, Nabokov even breaks the conventional barrier understood commonly to exist between authors and their narrators. First, through employing letters, diary entries, narratives, memos to printers and publishers, addresses to the court and jury, Humbert has a multiplicity of tones, styles, and even objectives: "Nabokov grants [Humbert] a range of cunning strategies, and numerous passages of great beauty, pathos, and humor (in addition to some bathetically purple prose)" (162). This multiplicity of styles inherently requires the reader to utilize multiple methods of interpretation. Furthermore, Wood also suggests that Nabokov requires his readers to oscillate between two different realms through his unorthodox style: "Nabokov can be understood as having intentionally shared part of his own genius...with a first-person narrator who...is deplorable. This results in a fictional world that presents unusual complexities from the point of view of differentiating between truth and falsehood, right and wrong, parody and what can be taken literally" (162). Once more, Nabokov breaks conventions to create a situation for readers in which he denies the use of assumptions for the purpose of interpreting.

Nabokov also alternates between two very different understandings of Humbert in his roles as care-giver and lecher, and in doing so he agitates the anticipations of the readers. Leona Toker notes in her article “Being Read by *Lolita*,” “we find ourselves expecting an erotic heightening because our attention is constantly being diverted from the realistic picture of an eleven-or-twelve-year-old school girl [Dolores] to an imaginary eidolon [*Lolita*]” (153), which derives from these two temperaments of Humbert. We see this wavering most poignantly in the second half of the novel, where Humbert begins his duties as a respectable stepfather. In an interesting succession of chapters, readers almost extend their sympathies to Humbert because he plays the role of a father rather convincingly. Humbert finds himself concerned with “the demoralizing idleness in which she lived” (173). In an endeavor remedy this, he examines Beardsley School which “[would] provide some formal education for” *Lolita*'s mind. Humbert, however, remains critical of the quality of the education: “This program rather appalled me, but I spoke to two intelligent ladies who had been connected with the school, and they affirmed that the girls did quite a bit of sound reading...” (178).

After Nabokov portrays Humbert as a decent and discerning father figure, Nabokov reintroduces the other side of Humbert: “Apart from the psychological comfort this general arrangement [the location of the new house near the school] should afford me by keeping Dolly's day adjacent to mine, I immediately foresaw the pleasure I would have in distinguishing from my study-bedroom, by means of a powerful binoculars, the statistically inevitable percent of nymphets among the other girl-children...” (178-179). With this succession, Nabokov disrupts the interpretive cycle by moving from one portrayal of Dolores to another, *Lolita*.

As Toker mentions, another result of this fluctuation is a heightened sexual tension between Humbert and Lolita—a sexual scene that the readers anticipate but never observe. This brings me to another method through which Nabokov creates frustrated anticipation. While the missing sex scene remains the most effective, Nabokov employs other ways of upsetting expectancy. I have already mentioned the introduction of exhibit number two, but Humbert’s first piece of evidence for the jury also retains significance to understanding Nabokov’s methods in *Lolita*. In the beginning chapters Humbert relates the stories of his youth, his parents, education, and most importantly his relationship with a girl named Annabel. Upon her untimely death Humbert insists that “the shock of Annabel’s death consolidated the frustration of that nightmare summer, made of it a permanent obstacle to any further romance through the cold years of my youth” (14). Prior to this statement he also reveals, “that in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel” (14). This leads the readers to anticipate a defense through psychoanalysis, which Humbert denies several times later in the text.

Nonetheless, readers will recall the time spent in describing Annabel and her death, and must attempt to make some relevance of it despite Humbert’s mockery of psychiatrists: “The psychiatrist who studies my case...is no doubt anxious to have me take my Lolita to the seaside and have me find there, at last, the ‘gratification’ of a lifetime urge, and release from the ‘subconscious’ obsession of an incomplete childhood romance with Miss Lee” (166-7); “(as the psychotherapist, as well as the rapist, will tell you) the limits and roles of such girlish games are fluid” (113); “The child therapist in me (a fake, as most of them are—but no matter) regurgitated new-Freudian hash” (124). As

these examples demonstrate, Humbert refutes the authenticity of this practice, belying the effect created in the chapters mentioning Annabel.

Another occasion, in which Humbert misleads the audience with planted stimuli for anticipation, resides in the scene where Humbert has Lolita on his lap, and a song plays in the background: “Carmen.” He refers to Lolita as “my little Carmen” (61), and at the end of the chapter he does his best to recite the ending of the song: “...arm in / Arm, we went, and our final row, / And the gun I killed you with, O my Carmen, / The gun I am holding now. (Drew his .32 automatic, I guess, and put a bullet through his moll’s eye)” (62). This, at first glance, may appear as a bit of foreshadowing; however, during the conclusion of his and Lolita’s final row, Humbert writes: “Then I pulled out my automatic—I mean this is the kind of fool thing a reader might suppose I did. It never even occurred to me to do it” (280). Here we find Humbert acknowledging the readers’ anticipations—particularly after a clue he set up earlier.

Conclusion

With returning to the Romantics, and more specifically to the task of the *Lyrical Ballads*, we find in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* another view on Wordsworth's goal for his poetry:

Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us...but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.
(478-9)

This *film of familiarity* presents itself in the writings of Victor Shklovsky, in his *Theory of Prose*, when he asserts "[i]f we examine the general laws of perception, we see that as it becomes habitual, it also become automatic" (4-5). This quote suggests that even reading can devolve into an automatic experience, as alluded to by Heidegger's fore-structure and Gadamer's prejudice. Shklovsky continues that "held accountable for nothing, life fades into nothingness. Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives and at our fear of war" (5). To remedy this alleged disease, Shklovsky requires that art provide some element of estrangement, or defamiliarization:

“By ‘estranging’ objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and ‘laborious’” (6).

Michael Clune notes the significance of defamiliarization to modern American literature in his piece “‘WHATEVER CHARMS IS ALIEN’: John Ashberry’s Everything,” by examining its manifestations within Ezra Pound’s mantra of “make it new” and de Manian deconstruction. Applied to modern literature, Clune observes that this process removes a reader’s focus from societal norms and instead concentrates this focus on the actual act of perception. According to Clune’s understanding, defamiliarization expresses “how are disentangles things from cultural conventions and symbolic systems, and restores their perceptual immediacy, a vivid sense of their materiality” (447).

Applied to *Lolita*, this loss of conventions means that readers do not rely on fore-structures or anticipations, derived from the social constructs of sexual deviancy and the callousness toward romantic sentiments, to obtain meaning from or manipulate perception of the text. Instead, readers must constantly re-evaluate the representations of romance within the novel, perceiving it in a new and vivid way, “making the known thing unfamiliar” (Clune 448). Readers, in turn, experience the intense passion of Humbert in a state of ambiguity; they cannot achieve a definite judgment, and thus, they are left with only the sensation of a passion unrestrained by convention.

On the whole then, Wordsworth achieved this estrangement with lyricism and heavy tropes in order to make the mundane stimulating. Readers of *Lolita* may be tempted to conclude that Nabokov attempts to *estrangle* the Romantic ideas of love, passion, and romance by displacing it from a normal and habitual relationship and

positing it into an incestuous pedophilia. This may prove valid; however, it does little to absolve Humbert of his sins insofar as we continue to consider *Lolita* “the only convincing love story of the 20th century,” rather than pornographic trash. In review, I argue that it is not Romantic tropes that receive this defamiliarization in *Lolita*, but rather it is the automatized method of reading that becomes estranged through Nabokov’s varying techniques at disrupting the process of interpretation, which to return to Shklovsky, includes the act of *complicating form*. Not only does this provide modern readers with a new way of reading Romantic ideas, it also delays complete understanding and judgment for Humbert Humbert. In the end, *Lolita* serves as a post-Romantic text, which illustrates a passion to modern readers who would otherwise remain insensitive and cynical toward Romantic ideals and conventions.

Works Cited

- Alexandrov, Vladimir E. *Nabokov's Otherworld*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1991. Print.
- Baillie, Joanna. "Introductory Discourse." *The Broadview Anthology of Romantic Drama*. Eds. Jeffrey N. Cox and Michael Gamer. Ontario: Broadview Press. 2003. 357-70. Print.
- Clune, Michael. "'Whatever Charms Is Alien': John Ashbery's Everything." *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* 50.3 (2008): 447-470. *MLA International Bibliography*. EBSCO. Web. 4 March 2011.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biography Literaria*. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Romantic Period*. Ed. M. H. Abrams. New York: W. W. Norton and Co. 2000. 468-489. Print.
- Dreyfus, Hubert. *Being in the World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*. Massachusetts: MIT Press. 1991. Print.
- Heidegger, Martin. "Language." *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism*. Eds. Vincent B. Leitch, Willam E. Cain, Laurie A. Finke, Barbara E. Johnson, John McGowan, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Jeffrey J. Williams. New York: W. W. Norton and Co. 2010. 982-98. Print.
- Johnson, Barbara. "From Melville's Fist: The Execution of *Billy Budd*." *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism*. Eds. Vincent B. Leitch, Willam E. Cain,

- Laurie A. Finke, Barbara E. Johnson, John McGowan, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Jeffrey J. Williams. New York: W. W. Norton and Co. 2010. 2255-277. Print.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method. The Phenomenology Reader*. Eds. Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney. New York: Routledge. 2008. 314-337. Print.
- Moscovici, Claudia. "Teaching *Lolita* as a Post-Romantic Text." *Approaches to Teaching Nabokov's Lolita*. Eds. Zoran Kuzmanovich and Galya Diment. New York: The Modern Language Association of America. 2008. 77-82. Print.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. New York: Vintage International. 1997. Print.
- . Foreword. "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*." *Lolita*. New York: Vintage International. 1997. 311-317. Print.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *A Defence of Poetry. The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Romantic Period*. Ed. M. H. Abrams. New York: W. W. Norton and Co. 2000. 789-802. Print.
- Toker, Leona. "Being Read by *Lolita*." *Approaches to Teaching Nabokov's Lolita*. Eds. Zoran Kuzmanovich and Galya Diment. New York: The Modern Language Association of America. 2008. 152-157. Print.
- Wood, Michael. *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1994. Print.
- Wordsworth, William. "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Romantic Period*. Ed. M. H. Abrams. New York: W. W. Norton and Co. 2000. 238-251. Print.