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Playing With Every Sense of the Word : Lolita Through the Lens of Jacques Derrida

Noelle Marie Florio

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Abstract

This essay ties both the repetition and doubling found in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* with the art of retelling to find a means of a center origin in Jacques Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." This essay argues how unreliable narration works to substitute and redefine a center origin of/for the novel, and in doing so, pulls the reader further from any reliable foundation from which to draw conclusions. Humbert Humbert, the protagonist, employs what readers recognize as Derrida's theory of deconstruction not only to disorient readers of *Lolita*, but to provide a sort of innocence that passive readers are influenced to believe. It is argued that using Derrida's theory of deconstruction is almost necessary to decipher the ins and outs of the novel and to understand the inner workings of Humbert's pedophilic nature and abusive tendencies. Otherwise, all readers will become passive to his art of play and verbal manipulations.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Playing With Every Sense of the Word: *Lolita* Through the Lens of Jacques Derrida

by

Noelle Marie Florio

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

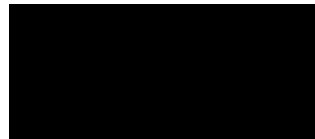
Master of English

January 2024

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

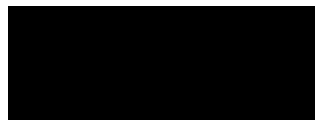
Department of English

Thesis Committee:



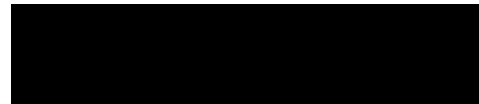
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PLAYING WITH EVERY SENSE OF THE WORD: *LOLITA* THROUGH THE LENS OF
JACQUES DERRIDA

A THESIS

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Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2024

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Introduction

Lolita, written by Vladimir Nabokov (1955) is one of the most critically analyzed novels of the Postmodern period in America. It may be regarded as the most successful exhibition of unreliable narration seen in American Literature (originally published in Paris) thus far. While this is true, many literary theorists and readers have failed to fully understand the technicalities that allow Humbert Humbert to manipulate the reader as he so seamlessly does. I argue that employing Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction and its many substitutions for a center truth is one remedy to this issue. The French philosopher supplies readers of *Lolita* a lens in which Humbert's perception and interpretation of the novel is thoroughly questioned. His essay, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," which is one of the two foundational texts in this thesis, shifted academia in that he asks his reader to think about the structurality of structure. This phrase is used to specify how each structure, or interpretation of an event, is made up of the interpretation itself as well as the illusion of a center truth or origin to the interpretation (Derrida 279). Derrida probes the idea of structure to decipher how it is constituted and/or defined. He forces the reader to think about how the retelling, or "redoubling" of a story or event is structuralized to stay as close as possible to its previous interpretation (278). Going forward, for readers' ease, rather than using "interpretations of interpretations," I will use interpretation⁽²⁾.

Applying Derrida's lens to the narrative of *Lolita*, one learns about the many interpretations and reinterpretations made by the narrator, Humbert Humbert, which pull the reader further and further away from the base level of Nabokov's narrative. The reader becomes entangled with Humbert's narration rather than Nabokov's storytelling. In turn, this exposes two contesting narratives as the reader must decipher who is speaking through the text. Additionally,

I use Derrida's theory of deconstruction to analyze how pop culture appropriates the skewed narrative that Humbert paints for the novel's protagonist, Dolores. This is regarded as a term I will call "The Lolita Effect," which points out and questions the contemporary appropriations and reinterpretations that have been created for Dolores not only by Humbert but also by the novel's readers. This results in the loss of her character that Nabokov created and is substituted for Humbert's overtly sexualized version of her that he has reinterpreted himself.

Because Humbert is the only source of communication between author and reader, the central truth to the structure of *Lolita* becomes ambiguous to these interpretations created by Humbert. While the reader understands that Nabokov is the author, Humbert's deceptive and manipulative qualities lead the reader to believe his words. This is the framework upon which Humbert deceives his reader so well.

Theoretical Background and Framework

Derrida's theory of deconstruction helps account for the way in which Humbert is constantly reconstructing the narrative of *Lolita* to his utmost benefit. Derrida compares the "event" to a certain type of structure full of interpretations of retellings interpretations⁽²⁾.¹ These interpretations lead to a "fixed origin" or center truth to the event's structure (Derrida 278). This center, he says, "was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure... but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure" (Derrida 278). A retelling that does not mimic the center origin or original interpretation, is when word play, or reinterpretation, occurs. He uses myth as an example of a structure with a lack of a center origin (286). Because most myths are passed down by oral tradition, he states that, "There is no unity or absolute source of the myth. The focus or the source of the myth are always shadows and virtualities which are elusive, unactualizable, and

nonexistent” (Derrida 286). Each interpretation of the myth will inevitably stray further away from the myth’s original source. Each interpreter of the myth is essentially playing with the narrative as they fill in the blanks of what was left out from the previous retelling. What one is left with is a series of reinterpretations made by countless individuals.

In *Lolita*, Humbert’s retelling of his experiences with Dolores (also known as Lolita, the titular character), which form the narrative, are what may be referred to as the structure of the narrative. Because his retellings frequently overlap and contradict one another, it can be noted that Humbert uses this technique of “playing” with the structure of the narrative. As seen in the subject of the myth, play is instability and inorganization in its most basic form. His unreliable narration is how he uses play, or a lack of center truth, to disorient the reader as well as influence their interpretations of the story and Dolores’ character. Humbert’s narration is viewed as a retelling of the center truth of the novel, with the closest center origin being Nabokov’s own interpretation.

Because Humbert is the dominant communicator between author and reader, he takes advantage of this position to distort the center origin. This is evident when he says, “A few words more about Mrs. Humbert while the going is good (a bad accident is to happen quite soon)” (Nabokov 79). While Humbert knows that the accident will happen soon because he is retelling the past, he knew that his wife Charlotte was going to die because he organized her demise. In doing so, his retelling of the event influences the reader’s interpretation of his retelling. Humbert uses his retelling of the narrative to hide his responsibility for Charlotte’s death. While his statement is true, he takes advantage of the timeline in which the narrative is told to the reader. This allows him to hide details such as he does here. Retelling is the result of Humbert’s interpretation of the original event. Here, that event is Charlotte’s death. In doing so,

the reader creates an interpretation of Humbert's retelling. This cycle will repeat each time the reader retells the novel.

Because Humbert's retellings do not always line up with one another, this leads to the rupture, or inevitable disruption of substitutions and interpretations of the center origin (Derrida 91). The rupture occurs as a result of repetition, which the reader can find when Humbert reinterprets, creates new interpretations⁽²⁾, and distorts the narrative. The idea of the rupture is key to Humbert's style of narration for it is a tactic to manipulate the reader. This is prevalent when Humbert distorts the murder scene, which he claims to be an accidental death, involving Charlotte, Dolores' mother. He says that the father of "Frederick Beale, Jr., driver of the Packard... was not in a dead faint, but was comfortable and methodically recovering from a mild heart attack or its possibility" (Nabokov 98). To describe the father having comfort or being methodical is an odd word choice for someone who is supposed to be having a heart attack. Perhaps this is a purposeful slip-up on Humbert's part to signal to the well-versed reader that the father's actions do not match up with the severity of the situation. This works to distort the translation of the center origin of the novel. Here, the reader questions narrative structure such as word choice here rather than focusing on Charlotte's death, a monumental climax to the plot. It can be argued that "the center [has] no natural site, that it [is] not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign substitutions [come] into play" (Derrida 280). Humbert uses his position as narrator to transform Nabokov's center origin into this nonlocus that is in a constant state of reinterpretation. When Humbert reinterprets the scene of Charlotte's death, he says that the man driving the Packard, a Frederick Beale Jr, "had finally [ran the car] to earth" as it lay in the neighbor's shrubbery (Nabokov 97-8). First, it is odd that Humbert knows the full name of the man who hit Charlotte before speaking to anyone at the

crime scene. Next, his choice to describe the car as “finally” crashing insinuates that Humbert was waiting for this event to take place.

Humbert does not explain how he knows this information, but rather further indicts himself as he points out that two cars were parked illegally in a cross lane a couple of blocks away (Nabokov 98). Was this strategically planned by Humbert and is he purposely leaving out key details to the accident? Because Humbert does not explain to the reader how the accident happened, one must assume that Beale lost control of his car due to these illegally parked cars. The reader must critique every word choice from Humbert to draw conclusions on what he has omitted from the text. He says, “The widower, a man of exceptional self-control, neither wept nor raved” which again alerts the reader that Humbert has no qualms about Charlotte’s death (Nabokov 98). Further, the choice to refer to himself in the third person works to distinguish his actions from identity. He is sure to mention he was not visibly ecstatic but through this it is shown how Humbert is not the least bit upset that his “lover” is dead.

Each word Humbert uses to reinterpret what is taking place in this scene ruptures the center origin of the narrative. He is so vague in his descriptions of how Charlotte dies that the reader is forced to come up with their own interpretations of what takes place. In turn, this results in the reader contributing to the rupture as their interpreter (Humbert) has chosen to stray from the center truth of what took place before Charlotte’s death. Humbert’s choice to leave out key details of the accident further contributes to his playing with the structure of the narrative. Both the act of play and the rupture are Humbert’s way of pushing the reader further away from Nabokov’s own interpretation of the novel until they are left with no sight of a center origin to the novel.

The Novel Births the Lolita Effect

Scholars well versed in Derrida's theory of decentered structure will notice how Humbert's narration strongly aligns with his assertions about interpretations⁽²⁾. Possibly the most famous evidence of this correlation is how Humbert portrays and defines Dolores as Lolita. This completely redefines her identity and what little sense of agency she has in the novel. Humbert never gives the reader an opportunity to understand her, for he calls her "Lolita" rather than "Dolores" from the very first page. Dolores is always seen and retold through Humbert's male gaze. He is constantly in a position to write and rewrite her identity at his whim. He says, "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" (Nabokov 1). Derrida's theory of deconstruction is evidenced here since Humbert is substituting Dolores' name with his own interpretations of her character. In doing so, he is creating, "a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center" (Derrida 279). The same cycle of retelling happens here as it did when Humbert retold of Charlotte's death. While a name defines *who* a person is to be defined as, it acts as an absent center of their identity. It only acts as a catalyst in which a person is retold and interpreted as. Humbert reinterprets Dolores each time he creates a persona for her. In turn, this works to rupture the absent center of each previous identity that the reader creates from the name he has given her. He does this five times just in this statement. These moments of redefinition allow Humbert's audience to interpret five different versions of Dolores.

Derrida's lens permits the reader to see how there is no center truth or origin to Humbert's interpretation of Dolores. Instead, the rupture of her identities works to separate Dolores from Lolita, the most prominent name Humbert creates to convey her sexual nature. The

reader understands Dolores through only Humbert's skewed and perverse perspective of her. In doing so, he slices her persona repeatedly to the point that the reader does not know who she is. In Humbert's arms, Dolores is known as Lolita. Not only has he assumed ownership over her identity through the creation of this persona, but Humbert is also physically restraining her in his arms. The reader sees how Humbert holds the power to create Lolita and recreate her as he sees fit. In this way, Lolita was born in a man's arms, and like the novel, will inevitably die in a man's arms. This inversely parallels Humbert's feelings of how his life begins and ends with Lolita—the first and last words of the novel are “Lolita.” (309). The Lolita Effect works to strip a woman, or girl in this case, of her identity to be perceived only as an object of sex, lust, and power. The woman is figuratively dying within the arms of a man for he does not know her outside of this persona. He only knows her through her body and the satisfaction that it will give him.

As Humbert projects his own fantasies onto Dolores, who assigned her alter ego, Lolita, he has kickstarted an entire subgenre that exploits the sexuality of women. One can call this The Lolita Effect. Music, film, and popular aesthetics have worked to produce the ideal nymphet: “a sexually attractive or sexually mature young girl” (Nymphet). To Humbert, the nymphet is aware that she radiates a certain sexual energy but shrouds it behind the idea that they are virginal or pure. This is seen when Dolores is sitting on Humbert's lap and he notes that, “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 49). He assumes that Dolores has an ulterior motive for her visiting Humbert and is using his writing as a way of physically getting closer to him. Humbert's retelling of this event influences the interpretation that the reader is going to have of Dolores. He succeeds in doing this to the passive reader, but Humbert

even notes that “[He] cannot tell [his] learned reader (whose eyebrows, [he] suspect[s], have by now traveled all the way to the back of his bald head” (48). The active reader is aware of this tactic to sexualize Dolores and influence her appearance with a certain sexual prowess. He supplies his reader with the facts outright. It is only a matter of noticing his tactics to deceive. Subsequently, Popular culture is at fault for taking to Humbert’s retelling of Dolores, creating their own interpretations of *Lolita* which only continues to rupture and decenter Dolores’ true persona. Famous 21st Century musicians such as Lana Del Rey have especially bought into and perpetuated The Lolita Effect.

The singer released two songs in 2012, one titled “Lolita,” the other titled “Off To The Races” that directly quotes the novel: “Light of my life, fire of my loins” (Del Rey “Off To The Races”). Her song “Lolita” entertains the idea of the nymphet with lyrics appealing to the adolescent: “Would you be my baby tonight? Could be kissing my fruit punch lips in the bright sunshine . . . No more skipping rope, skipping heart beats with the boys downtown” (Off To The Races). Childish pastimes of skipping rope and drinking fruit punch are intertwined with an unknown character referred to as “you” and the boys downtown.

The listener here becomes Humbert in a way, for the singer is directing her exploitation at them. In turn, Del Rey assumes the position of Nabokov as her authorship is the center origin to the song. The signifier “I” is not only referred to as Lolita but is also interpreted as a girl who lives to chase after boys in her young adolescence. It is concerning that the Lolita character is romanticized here because it does not portray Dolores, but rather the nymphet that Humbert claims her to be. Similar to readers of *Lolita*, listeners of this song reinterpret Dolores each time the song is sung. The listener even steps into the position of the signified “I,” which could arguably make them a skewed version of Dolores as well.

This impersonation of Lolita, who is really Dolores, enacts the substitution of center for center, or interpretation⁽²⁾ that Derrida uses to prove that there is no true center of an interpretation. Del Rey is

- substituting herself, or whoever she speaks of in this song, as a type of Lolita, or nymphet
- reinterpreting the interpretation of Dolores made by Humbert
- interpreting two characters, Dolores and Humbert, who are both written and thus interpreted by Nabokov

There are a multitude of substitutions for center, or interpretations, at play here. Humbert's retelling of Dolores as Lolita is the only interpretation that continues to live on in popular culture through the sexualization of her traumatic experiences. Del Rey is not writing the song about the Dolores who was groomed and raped by a pedophile, but rather the girl that Humbert wants the reader to believe "was asking for it."

The reader views Humbert wrongly interpreting Dolores in this way when they reach the Enchanted Hunters hotel (Nabokov 120). He notes her movements upon choosing an outfit from the closet as he says she resembled, "a bemused bird-hunter holding his breath over the incredible bird he spreads out by the tips of its flaming wings" (Nabokov). This is a foreshadowing of when headmistress Pratt refers to Humbert as "Mr. Humbird" (Nabokov 177). He also refers to himself as a bird when he is chasing Dolores who runs away from home, saying, "My talons still tingling, I flew on" (Nabokov 206). To him, Dolores is a Humbert hunter. This alludes to the idea that Dolores is the true predator in this dichotomy. Humbert says that she, "crept into [his] waiting arms, radiant, relaxed, caressing [him] with her tender, mysterious, impure, indifferent, twilight eyes--for all the world, like the cheapest of cheap

cuties” (Nabokov 120). This statement insinuates that Dolores is the active pursuer while Humbert is the passive pursuant. He claims Dolores is at fault because *she* moves toward *Humbert* despite the detail that his arms were waiting for her.

Instead of this skewed interpretation, one could understand that Dolores is climbing into the arms of the man she regards as her “father.” Humbert’s description of Dolores’ impure eyes are another reference to The Lolita Effect in that her mysteriousness is how she hides her awareness of her own impurity. He says that Dolores’ eyes are meant to be taken in by all the world, much like prostitutes are used by “all the world” for pleasure. Not only is Humbert comparing a child to a prostitute, but he refers to her as the cheapest of all cheap prostitutes. Humbert influences the reader to believe Dolores is asking for his affection when he states that that, “is what nymphets imitate--while we moan and die” (Nabokov 120). Humbert’s claim works to victimize his fellow enchanted hunters, or pedophiles, in that they are entranced by the supposed sexual prowess of a minor. It is Humbert who compares Dolores to a prostitute, not Dolores. Finally, the act of moaning proves that the enchanted hunters give in to committing the crime of pedophilia and die as a means of becoming the sexual assaulter. Humbert warps his interpretations to influence the reader regarding Dolores’ self-awareness of her own sexuality.

Humbert’s claim that Dolores is aware of her sexuality and uses it to her advantage is heavily reflected in Lana Del Rey’s song lyrics. One can argue that these lyrics do more harm than good in encouraging the sexualization and exploitation of young girls. Each time she wrongly identifies Dolores as Lolita, she uses Humbert’s interpretation of the young girl. Consequently, each time the listener sings the lyrics, they also wrongly interpret Dolores. While Del Rey may be bringing awareness to the sexuality of adolescent girls, she simultaneously feeds into Humbert’s claim that Dolores was aware of her sexuality and intended to use it to her

advantage. The listener is interpreting Humbert's interpretation of Dolores through Lana Del Rey's interpretation. Derrida's idea of a linked chain of substitution for center is present here as Del Rey reinterprets Humbert's interpretation of Dolores (90). Because there is a multitude of repetitive interpretations taking place, it can be argued that a rupture occurs. Derrida says that the rupture occurs when the structurality of structure, or the interpretations that are meant to lead one to the center origin, begin to be repeated (91). This disruption is, "repetition in every sense of the word" (Derrida 91).

Each time that Dolores is regarded as Lolita, Humbert's interpretation of her takes superiority above all others. Because Del Rey is influenced by Humbert and also reinterprets Dolores as Lolita, she encourages his opinions of Dolores, even if that was not her intention. Humbert's interpretation of Dolores has undergone a 68-year-long rupture as Popular Culture in the 21st Century still has an inaccurate portrayal of who Dolores really is. Songs such as Del Rey's and countless other genres prove how Humbert's reinterpretations of Dolores live on long after the story has been told. This continuing ripple effect is evidence of how crucial it is to understand how Derrida's theory of decentered structure reveals Humbert's narrative manipulations.

When Humbert enrolls Dolores into the Beardsley School for girls, headmistress Pratt proves that the curriculum at the school contributes to the conditioning of The Lolita Effect. In Part 2 of the novel, Humbert moves himself and Dolores into a rental home owned by Gaston Godin, an old colleague who used Humbert's textbook in one of his lectures (Nabokov 175). Godin comments that the school appears to be one that teaches girls, "not to spell very well, but to smell very well" (Nabokov 177). To the school, a woman's most important quality is her appearance and demeanor rather than her intelligence. Specifically, the school, "stress[es] the

four D's: Dramatics, Dance, Debating and Dating" (Nabokov 177). The substitution of each "D" word displays how the girls are reinterpreted in each "subject." Their sexuality is exploited through the assumption that the girls are more interested in their dating lives rather than academics. Further, this influences the girls to believe that if they are more interested in their dating lives, men will be more interested in them. While explaining the program to Humbert, Pratt re-identifies Dolores three times as she calls her Dolly, Dorothy, and Dorothy Hummerson (Nabokov 177-8). Pratt symbolizes how society works to mold young women to believe that their intelligence is a secondary factor whereas, "the most practical spot for an icebox in the kitchen may be... more important" (Nabokov 178). Humbert holds no objections to enrolling Dolores into this type of school because he redefines her identity just as much as Pratt does. The school molds these girls the same way The Lolita Effect encourages them to appease their male counterparts rather than themselves. Pratt says, "Your delightful Dolly will presently enter an age group where dates, dating, date dress, date book, date etiquette, mean as much to her as, say, business, business connections, business success mean to [Humbert]" (Nabokov 177). Not the repetition of the letter "D" and "B" when describing her views on both men and women's different priorities. Further, her retelling of her own beliefs instills this notion that girls only look for a means to appeal to a man. Gaining external validation from a man is the primary goal encouraged by the school and the leading factor in how The Lolita Effect strips a woman of her identity.

Literary Play

Perhaps the most efficient way in which Humbert manipulates his reader to believe his interpretations of the narrative is how he uses patterns, codes, and literary devices so effortlessly. Right away, his name Humbert Humbert is a comical foreshadowing of how he is going to create

deception on top of deception to influence his reader. The doubling of his name is significant for multiple reasons. The first is its Derridean echo in that it is a literary doubling of the same word. It points to Derrida's idea that redoubling that takes place during the reinterpretation of an interpretation which inevitably leads to the rupture (89). He says, "that the center [has] no natural site, that it [is] not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign substitutions [come] into play" (Derrida 280). The act of retelling propels this function of substitutions for a false center origin. Second, it is symbolic of two guides to the narrative, Nabokov and Humbert. The reader must discern when and where Nabokov is speaking within the text in comparison to Humbert. Essentially, the reader interprets two stories on top of one another (more if one considers the preface and legal documents as well as the many identities he substitutes for Dolores' real name). This is a signal to the literary doubling that happens so often throughout the novel. When Humbert is taking the reins of the story, the reader tends to fall for his deception rather than question his motives.

It is through his poetic diction that Humbert can so easily deceive his reader. This poses the question as to whether or not the narrator is just as important, if not more important, than the author of a novel. To reference Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author*, "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes). The author holds no weight here if the narrator is completely distorting its translation to suit his own benefit. The reader is unable to receive a firsthand account of what Nabokov was trying to say. This supports Barthes' claim that, "text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning...but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (149). Each reader will interpret Humbert's interpretation differently. This leads to the blending or clashing of interpretations depending on whether two readers interpret the narrative in a similar way.

Because the novel is not narrated by Nabokov, but a third person unreliable narrator, there is an even greater multi-dimensional space to interpret. The reader must discern when Nabokov is coming through the text as an author, and when Humbert is reinterpreting based on his own interpretation as the narrator. Should the narrator be held in such a high regard as his author? It can be argued that in the case of *Lolita*, the narrator holds more power than the author because he is the only source of communication between Nabokov and the reader. Consequently, Nabokov cedes control of his own work to Humbert as he continuously interprets and reinterprets both the characters and events within the novel through his own bias. Does this change how one interprets other novels? The author has become powerless in his own creation, leaving infinite room for every reader to mistake Nabokov's intent of the novel and Humbert's perception of his pedophilic behavior.

It is Humbert's point of view that the narrative is told to the reader--not Nabokov's. It can be argued that the narrative is a mask or a construction of the author in this way. On the first page, Humbert says, "'Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male,' such were the two titles under which the writer of the present note received the strange pages it preambulates. 'Humbert Humbert,' their author" (Nabokov 3). Humbert states in the first sentence that he is the author of *Lolita*. He closes the gap between author and narrator as he assumes both roles, completely removing Nabokov from the equation. If Humbert takes the role of pseudo-author, it poses the question as to whether or not Nabokov's word holds weight in this conversation. This blending between narrator and author changes how the reader interprets the novel as well as how one interprets all novels. Humbert's blurring the lines between creator and interpreter reaffirms Derrida's rupture, for one cannot discern where the author begins or where the narrator ends their interpretations.

Red as a Symbol of Nymphet Sexuality

One of the easiest ways Humbert deceives his reader is through the blatant change in language that occurs so seamlessly throughout the novel. There are phrases and sometimes even paragraphs of text written in French that the English reader may not understand. In this way, Humbert is taking advantage of the lack of knowledge, or laziness, of his reader to translate his words from French to English. This is one of the prime ways Humbert admits he is a rapist while also getting away with it. Humbert says, “I wonder what my academic publishers would say if I were to quote in my textbook Ronsard’s ‘la vermeillette fente’ or Remy Belleau’s, ‘un petit mont feutr  de mousse d licate, trac  sur le milieu d’un fillet escarlatte’ and so forth” (Nabokov 47). The first phrase he mentions is from the poem “Sonnet F minin” by Pierre de Ronsard which translates to “the vermilion slit,” referring to the female vulva. The second phrase is from R my Belleau’s poem titled “Incapacity” which translates to “A little mound, muffled with delicate moss, / Traced on the middle of a scarlet net” (Belleau). Humbert second guesses what his publishers would think about his fantasies using the context of Ronsard and Belleau’s poetry. He keeps these two sections in French to display both an educated persona as well as disguise his sexual attraction to the nymphet behind its lyrical style. This parallel reveals how Humbert is both obsessed with Dolores sexually and feels a sense of intellectual superiority toward her as well. This superiority extends to the reader for his audience is directed toward English speakers and only the active reader will make it a point to translate these key passages throughout the novel.

Dolores is replaced within the context of these poems about adult women. This not only juxtaposes the nymphet from the grown woman but reveals Humbert’ guilt around sexually assaulting Dolores. It is not a matter of mental illness to be blamed for Humbert’s pedophilia

because his awareness of his actions is what gives him away. Further, both poems not only revolve around the female genitals, but they explicitly mention the color red. Almost any time the color red is brought up in the novel, it refers to or implies sexuality or is representative of Humbert's forbidden desires.

Humbert's forbidden desires are also exposed when he is seen paying young, nymphetic prostitutes to satisfy his pedophilic needs. Monique, a prostitute that Humbert has multiple "assignments" with before he meets Dolores, wears red lipstick to their meetings (Nabokov 22). He is only enticed by her because she echoes features and mannerisms of the nymphet (Nabokov 21-2). He also mentions the color gray multiple times as a way of alluding to the double meaning of Dolores' last name, Haze. He notes that it was a gray afternoon and Monique was dressed in pearl-gray (Nabokov 21). This could be a foreshadowing of how Humbert believes Dolores is his possession and somehow, she was always meant for him. This becomes a juxtaposition between woman and nymphet takes. Humbert uses gray to prove how Monique's nymphetic features from her adolescence still poke through her adult body. In another instance, he compares Dolores' lips to "licked red candy" and notes that her "toenails showed remnants of cherry-red polish" (Nabokov 44, 51). Humbert notes that Dolores, "had painted her lips and was holding in her hollowed hands a beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple" (Nabokov 57-8). The symbolism of painting one's nails and wearing lipstick again echoes the habits of an adult female, but is situated upon the adolescent. The presence of the forbidden apple of Eden reaffirms this idea of the grown Eve juxtaposed to nymphet Dolores. Simultaneously, the parallel between Eve and Dolores allows the reader to step into Humbert's mind, for they can see how he is blaming Dolores for his sexual desires much like Eve was blamed for eating the apple in the Garden of Eden.

Often, neither Humbert nor Adam is blamed for their actions as the interpretation only looks to the female for fault. Looking at this through the Derridian lens, one can notice how Humbert is comparing his story to what is likely the first instance of an interpretation⁽²⁾. The forbidden fruit in this case is Dolores. And, oftentimes like Eve, Dolores is being wrongly interpreted and blamed for the fall of man, whether it is Humbert's imprisonment or the bane of Original Sin. Using juxtapositions and parallels, one can notice how Humbert is continuously intertwining and tearing apart the interpretations of Dolores. In this way, he is engaging in both the substitutions of center for center while rupturing them at the same time. He is unknowingly using Derrida's theory in the most extreme and chaotic manner.

Continuing the symbolism of the color red, Humbert works to juxtapose woman and nymphet when he mentions menstruation. Often, Humbert will allude to a woman's period as the murderer of the nymphet for when they experience menstruation, their childlike features disappear as do their sexual innocence. To try and suppress his desire for prepubescent girls, Humbert decides to marry a woman named Valeria during the years 1935-1939 (Nabokov 26). Humbert says, "what really attracted [him] to Valeria was the imitation she gave of a little girl" (Nabokov 25). Her smooth legs and her curly blonde hair resemble the innocence that comes with young girls and is the same innocence that Humbert steals when he assaults them (Nabokov 26). The presence of womanhood and puberty is exposed when, "The bleached curl revealed its melanic root; the down turned to prickles on a shaved skin" (Nabokov 26). He is disgusted by the attributes of the grown woman, often repulsed by it. The "Mystery of the Menarche," as he calls it, is not only the loss of the girl's nymphet or childlike features, but the birth of womanhood (Nabokov 47).

The same instance occurs when he realizes that Monique has, “grown less juvenile, more of a woman overnight” which leads to burdens and dull disappointment (Nabokov 23). Red is juxtaposed with both the lust over the nymphet and the death of her as well. This same McFate (as he calls it) becomes inevitable for Dolores as well when Humbert begins to notice, “the dirty sole of her white sock” and the “dead end of her face with its strange flush and freshly made up lips” which, “Some of the red had left stains on her front teeth” (Nabokov 204). Inevitably, Dolores becomes the very being Humbert despises: the adult female. Her dirty sock is symbolic of the loss of her virginity while the smudged red lipstick signals the death of her nymphet body. While Humbert once lusted after her cherry-stained lips and painted nails, he now despises this new type of red. This red was a choice made by Dolores; perhaps the first time the reader has seen her step into her own identity. Adversely, Humbert sees a version of Dolores that has not been tainted by him. This disgusts him because he realizes that she is more aligned to an adult woman’s body than the stature of the nymphet.

Humbert is aware of the symbolic death he imposes on these young girls as he reflects on whether he has stripped them of their purity. He says, “could it be that the hidden throb I stole from them did not affect *their* future? I had possessed her-- and she never knew it... Had I not somehow tampered with her fate by involving her image in my voluptas?”² (Nabokov 21). Humbert feels as if he has tainted or dirtied these women through his inherent sexualization of their bodies through a pedophilic lens. In between all of this, lust is the only constant for while he will still have sex with grown women, he only does so if they even remotely resemble a young girl.

After masturbating to the thoughts of the young Dolores, Humbert says, “The conjurer has poured milk, molasses, foaming champagne into a young lady’s new white purse; and lo, the

purse was intact” (Nabokov 62). Humbert recalls Sigmund Freud’s *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* here as the white purse is meant to symbolize Dolores’ genitals. To Freud, “The female genital is symbolically represented by all those objects which share its peculiarity of enclosing a space capable of being filled by something” (135). The molasses or champagne that does not taint the purse is a metaphor for Dolores still being pure despite Humbert’s masturbation to thoughts of her while in her presence. This is confirmed because the purse is still “intact” after Humbert has finished masturbating. Further, the white color of the purse represents the virginal aspects of Dolores’ sexual organs. While she has not been physically harmed as this is still early in the novel and he has not raped her yet, Humbert has exploited her body for his own pleasure. By wondering about Dolores’ purity after this event, he reinterprets her identity by placing her on a spectrum of two opposites: chaste to impure. He decides whether she is still innocent or not while simultaneously defining that, to him, purity means retaining Dolores’ virginity. Humbert is also doubling his use of the Old English word “lo” which is, “an interjection of vague meaning, corresponding approximately to the modern O! or Oh!” (Lo). Humbert is playing with the duality of the word as this is also one of his many pseudonyms for Dolores. Because Humbert questions whether he tampered with Dolores’ body in some way, it again proves that there is a feeling of guilt. This guilt signals to the reader that Humbert is aware of the corruption behind his actions.

Humbert’s Scapegoat: Claiming Illness

Humbert attests to mental illness to hide his sexual desire for certain children, or nymphets. It can be argued that he does this in hopes of being found guilty for the wrong reasons, even though he admits multiple times to his actions throughout the narrative. Perhaps, claiming a psychopathic illness helps maintain a certain level of morals that being a pedophile

does not. The National Library of Medicine conducted a clinical study that measures the moral compass of psychopaths (Cima et al.). It was concluded that, “psychopaths *understand* the distinction between right and wrong, but do not care about such knowledge, or the consequences that ensue from their morally inappropriate behavior” (Cima et al.). If Humbert were truly a mentally ill individual, he would not have gone through the trouble of writing his interpretation of events to be read during his trial. In this same vein, he must care about the consequences of his pedophilic actions which is why he is trying to manipulate the jury and his reader into believing he is truly a sick man.³

In the foreword, John Ray Jr. says that Humbert is, “a tempest in a test tube; that at least 12% of American adult males-- a conservative estimate according to Dr. Blanche Schwarzmann (verbal communication)-- enjoy yearly, in one way or another, the special experience “H.H.” describes with such despair” (Nabokov 5). This claim from Ray influences the reader from the very first page to assume that what Humbert does to Dolores is somewhat normal. He contrasts Humbert from the 12% of pedophiles through his specification that they enjoy their “experiences” whereas Humbert reveals them with feelings of despair.

Nabokov employs patterns for his reader to unravel here, starting with the alliteration of “j” and “r” in John Ray Jr.’s name. It echoes the same repetition of Humbert Humbert and alerts the reader that Nabokov is speaking through the text here. Secondly, the inclusion of Dr. Blanche Schwarzmann does not give the reader any factual substance to hold onto, but rather exposes Nabokov’s humor of naming the unknown doctor what translates as “White Blackman.” Blanche translates to “white” in French and schwarz translates to “black” in German, which Alfred Appel Jr. implies is Nabokov’s way of saying that Freudians, “see no colors other than black and white” (324). Not only is this an ode to the constant doubling taking place in this novel, but it helps the

reader understand how Humbert views children as either nymphet or ordinary. There is no gray area in terms of a child's nymphet nature, and this results in his willingness to sexually assault them or not. Nabokov includes this small detail to warn the reader of Humbert's stark beliefs in life, but specifically in terms of a child's nymphet-ness.

Nabokov points to the idea that it is useless to take Humbert's words as fact. His "facts" are only filled with these barely noticeable jabs at not only society, but the naivety of his reader. Humbert takes a Freudian approach in stating that while, "[his] body knew what it craved for, [his] mind rejected [his] body's every plea" (Nabokov 18). He takes much influence from Freud as he refers to himself as King Sigmund the Second (125). Humbert contradicts the claim that he is psychologically unwell for he proves that he is mentally sound in this statement. Here, he implies that his body is to blame for his pedophilic actions rather than his mental stability. If this is his truth, then it completely contradicts the claims that his lawyer makes in the foreword. Humbert does this again when he says, "It occurred to me that I had a fine brain in beautiful working order and that I might as well use it" (90). If John Ray Jr. were to hear this statement, Humbert's entire case would fall apart. In this scene, Humbert does not portray the "demented diarist" that Ray claims him to be in his opening statement (5). Rather, he is in the midst of telling Charlotte that the man of the home must make the ultimate decisions in their relationship (90). Through this, the reader can understand how manipulative Humbert is in the way that he claims he is a psychopath on one page and is morally abject on another. The inconsistency in his claims only work to prove how methodical he is. He gives his reader all of the evidence to prove he is a rapist and murderer, but it is up to them to investigate and draw these conclusions themselves.

The most prominent way Humbert supplies evidence of murder and pedophilia is through his use of wordplay. The reader sees this all throughout the novel but specifically when he says, “I am not a criminal sexual psychopath, taking indecent liberties with a child. The rapist was Charlie Holmes; I am the therapist-- a matter of nice spacing in the way of distinction” (Nabokov 150). Appel notes that Humbert is playing with the word “therapist,” admitting that he is the rapist (388). The “nice spacing” can regard the gap between “the rapist” being Charlie Holmes (150). If one takes out this gap, the statement will change to, “Therapist was Charlie Holmes.” If the therapist was Holmes, the inverse would result in Humbert being the rapist. The reader could use this same format approach of spacing for the first part of this sentence as well. The distinction “not” refers to Humbert’s claim that he is not a *criminal sexual psychopath*. The distinction does not take away from the point of Humbert stating he takes indecent liberties with a child (150). The comma creates a pause, or gap, within the sentence that is meant to alert the reader of this break in distinction. Both parts of this sentence align with the “nice spacing” he alludes to in the first passage. The removal of the adverb “not” has revealed to the reader what Humbert is hiding through his use of play. He tells the reader his tricks outright and wants them to engage in this analysis of language to decipher the truth.

He amuses himself with the use of this technique again when he quotes a book about young girls: “The normal girl is usually extremely anxious to please her father” (Nabokov 150). He takes the quote out of context through his redefinition of “please” in that he implies a sexual form of pleasure from it. He continues to say, “She feels in him the forerunner of the desired elusive male (‘elusive’ is good, by Polonius!)” (150). The definition of forerunner is, “One sent to prepare the way and herald a great man’s approach” (“Forerunner”). Analyzing this quote

through the sexual lens, Humbert implies that a girl must first have sexual intercourse with her father before moving on to her desired male counterpart.

Humbert influences his reader to make these inferences which only further contributes to the presence of Derrida's theory of decentered structure. Because he layers meaning within statements such as this one, the reader inevitably must interpret and reinterpret what Humbert is trying to tell his reader. This often leads to multiple ruptures of the text as every single reader will claim a different interpretation from just this one statement. Now, multiply this by every time Humbert does this within the novel. There is a possibility for hundreds or interpretations⁽²⁾ to be made by the reader because of Humbert's deceptive layering of the narrative. In both examples, Humbert addresses his reader at the end of each sentence. This is his way of planting clues in the hopes that an active and informed reader notices. He wants to converse only with this type of audience who fully understands that every technical choice in this novel is a clue.

For a large portion of the novel, Humbert uses this same technique to employ a play on words when he refers to the Enchanted Hunters Inn. This is the first motel Humbert takes Dolores to on their journey across the country as well as where he drugs her with sleeping pills. The first mention of the motel is noted when Humbert says, "I recalled the hotel or inn with the seductive name of The Enchanted Hunters which Charlotte had happened to mention shortly before my liberation" (Nabokov 108). Humbert has perverted the reason he even knows of the motel for Charlotte told him about it in hopes that they would go together. Rather, he took Charlotte's next of kin, or her double. He implies that to be an Enchanted Hunter is to engage in pedophilia for he says, "Was he not a very Enchanted Hunter as he deliberated with himself over his boxful of magic ammunition?" (109). Humbert is influencing his reader to believe that he

was actually “deliberating,” or making, “decisions after careful thought or consideration,” on whether he should follow through with his original plan to drug the child (Deliberate).

Humbert is attempting to show how he was not fully sold on this idea to drug Dolores; that it was a tough decision for him to make. It was not a tough decision when obtaining the sleeping pills, though. He plays with the idea of enchanting Dolores with a “magic potion” when he says, “the adorable accessible nymphet now started to tell me in between suppressed palate-humping yawns...oh, how fast the magic potion worked!” (Nabokov 122). As a means to keep with the theme of being an enchanted hunter, this magic potion is a code for the pills he uses to put Dolores to sleep and sexually assault her. This implication is brought up again when Humbert and Dolores are on their way to the Inn and pass a theater whose, “queue of people . . . [consist of] mainly children and old men” (116). Humbert’s specification of old men is an odd detail to include that alerts the reader of a similarity between the pairs and Humbert and Dolores. Dolores asks to go see the same film that the children and old men are on line to see with which, “‘We might,’ chanted Humbert” (116). This parallel can lead the reader to question what it means to be an enchanted hunter. Perhaps it is the idea that these old men lure children to the movie theater in a similar fashion as Humbert, who the reader knows is a pedophile.

Humbert hints at the idea of him being an enchanted hunter through the symmetrical alliteration between the phrase “Enchanted Hunters” and “chanted Humbert” that again supports the notion of his playing with words. He is showing the similarities between himself and the men who wait in line at the theater. Further, he is doubling his own experience with Dolores and insinuating the same for the old men and children on the line. Doubling becomes even more prevalent once Humbert and Dolores enter the hotel room when he notes that, “There was a double bed, a mirror, a double bed in the mirror... a blue-dark window, a reflected bed there, the

same in the closet mirror” (Nabokov 119). The bed is the center of every reflection within the room, making it the focal point of attention. Derrida says, “‘sign’ has always been understood and determined, in its meaning, as sign-of, a signifier referring to a signified, a signifier different from its signified” (92). The mirror acts as the signifier, or re-interpretation, of what is taking place in the hotel room. This becomes an image for how Humbert’s narrative is a backwards reflection of what is happening to Dolores. It is reinterpretations like Humbert’s that fuel Derrida’s need to remove the distinction between signifier and signified for it is only a means to create another substitution for the center truth (92). Humbert is only creating more difficulty to reach the center origin of the novel. He thrives on this distinction because it allows him to construct his own narrative. Nabokov has created a character who has taken authority over the story. In doing this, another substitution for center is taking place as Nabokov creates a narrator who retells and redefines the narrative. The narration acts as a substitution for center but only pushes the reader further away from the truth of Humbert’s acts of rape and abuse.

This leads the reader to wonder whether Nabokov, as the author, becomes the signified in this dichotomy. Derrida might say that Nabokov’s intention of the novel is just another substitution for the center truth, to prove that there is no origin to a story. Just as it is important, this question is simultaneously useless. Regardless of Nabokov’s intention, each reader will interpret Humbert’s retelling in their own way. Similar to the way mirrors create endless reflections of one another, each reader’s interpretation of the novel reveals a different angle to the story. This is why it is so crucial that the reader completely understands Humbert’s deceptive narrative techniques to discern fact from falsity. Derrida continues to say that one way of erasing the difference between the signifier and signified is, “reducing or deriving the signifier, that is to say, ultimately in *submitting* the sign to thought” [emphasis original] (92). In this way, the reader

could reduce Humbert's narration for it is only an interpretation of thought. It is not the center origin of the structure of *Lolita* and should not be taken as fact. To Derrida, he is just another interpreter of Nabokov's narrative, making it as reliable or unreliable as the reader's interpretation of the novel. Just because Humbert is the narrator does not make him any more authoritative in interpreting the story.

Humbert could be including the detail of mirrors in this part of the narrative to signal how he is creating a reflection of what truly happened. The mirrors in the motel room act as cameras for voyeurism to take place. Humbert's description of the reflective hotel room not only makes the reader feel as if they are a voyeur, but that the room itself has been personified to engage in this concealed observation. Derrida's theory of decentered structure is present as the mirrors literally create a reflection of a warped image.

Humbert's inclusion of the mirrors alerts the reader that there is a separation between them and what is happening. Humbert even alludes to the idea that everyone in the hotel engages in this voyeuristic performance with one another. Humbert complains about the thinness of the hotel walls when he notes of hearing "the clatter of the elevator's gate--some twenty yards northeast of my head but clearly perceived as if it were inside my left temple" and "someone in southern direction was extravagantly sick, almost coughing out his life with his liquor, and his toilet descended like a veritable Niagara" (Nabokov 129-30). Here, the reader must ask why Humbert would include detailed descriptions of strangers who never show their face in this novel. While he devotes great detail to the guests' excursions to the bathroom and their conversations in the parking lot, he seems to omit the most important piece of evidence relating to his trial: Humbert having sex with Dolores (129-32). He says that he shall not, "bore [his] learned readers with a detailed account of Lolita's presumption" (133). He gives his reader a

compliment (learned) to distract them from the fact that he is omitting vital evidence. Further, he insinuates that his act of rape would bore the reader more than his explanation of the next-door neighbor flushing their toilet. He also explains that “Anybody can imagine those elements of animality” (134). Humbert says this because he knows that his reader is going to imagine two adults having sex rather than a man and child. He is using his reader’s imagination to make him appear innocent, proving that he knows his audience precisely. There is a parallel stream of consciousness present in this excerpt. One can note both Humbert’s motives and how they affect the reader’s own thoughts and imagination here. Through his reader’s imagination, he removes the blame from himself and pushes it onto the passivity of his reader and even strangers such as the motel guests.

The Theme of Victim Blaming

Of all the people Humbert and Dolores come across on their journey, not one of them questions the signs of rape and inappropriate behavior he exhibits and perpetrates toward Dolores. Through this, it can be argued that Nabokov is commenting on the bigger picture of pedophilia and the sexualization of young girls and how prevalent it is in the United States. Both the casual reader and the passersby are at fault for their passivity to the evidence of Humbert’s history of pedophilia. This is especially toyed with when Humbert is arrested for a traffic violation rather than murder or rape of a minor (Nabokov 306-7). Nabokov points out how Humbert has been able to cross the borders of almost every state in the U.S without once being questioned about who Dolores is and what he is doing with her. It is only when the criminal runs away that people turn around and look. Little did they know, he was standing right beside them the entire time.

It is imperative to refer to the thin walls of The Enchanted Hunters hotel again. If Humbert is able to so clearly hear his neighboring “enchanted hunters,” it is possible they also hear him. If this is the case, then one can wonder how those on the opposite of Humbert’s motel room walls felt when they heard him with Dolores. One of the neighbors that heard him, “lov[ing] too loudly” let out a cough to fill the pause (Nabokov 164). Further, a woman even comments on the scratches on Humbert’s arm; “Whose cat scratched poor you?” which were most likely made by Dolores’ resistance to his sexual advances (164). He is aware that these little bits of information can incriminate him so he, “tried to keep as far away from people as possible” while Dolores, “would do her utmost to draw as many potential witnesses into her orbit as she could” (Nabokov 164). It is possible that Nabokov is commenting on the collective obliviousness of the American people. While they see the scratches or the pairing of “widowed” man and child, they do not question the “figuratively speaking, wagging [of Dolores’] tiny tail” when Humbert and Dolores spoke to strangers (164). They do not consider the nervousness of Dolores’ body language as a silent cry for help.

Nabokov reaffirms this sort of obliviousness when Humbert notes that Dolores is reading a newspaper article about tips if one gets abducted (Nabokov 165). The “Let’s Explore Your Mind” column reads “Would sex crimes be reduced if children obeyed a few don’ts? Don’t play around public toilets. Don’t take candy or rides from strangers. If picked up, mark down the license of the car... If... you don’t have a pencil but are old enough to read and write...scratch the number somehow on the roadside” (165). The first thing to note here is how the child is being pinned as the reason for so many abductions. The textual article asks children to obey and avoid danger rather than asking adults to be more aware of the children’s surroundings. Further, the article asks children whether they know how to read and write and to write their abductor’s

license plate down if they do. This article that requires their reader to know how to read is asking their readers to write down the license plate. The similar pattern of Derrida's interpretation⁽²⁾ is prevalent in the tip's redundancy for only readers would be able to understand what the article asks them to do. What do children who do not know how to read or write do? They do not have the ability to access this information to reduce the statistics of child abduction. The entire article becomes nonsensical when analyzed in this way.

If, in some possible way, the abducted child escapes from their kidnapper's car to write the license plate on the roadside, would any adult truly find that note? From what the reader has seen of the citizens that Humbert and Dolores cross paths with, none of them have once questioned neither Humbert nor Dolores' behavior. There is an inherent tone to turn our heads the other way as to not get involved in matters such as pedophilia. The journalist publishes the column as a means to "raise awareness" about this issue but provides no actual guidance to prevent child abduction. It is going to take much more than telling a child not to get in cars with strangers to do so.

In the same way this article is blaming *the child* for being abducted, Humbert continues to blame Dolores' rape on *her* promiscuity and nymphet qualities. Both the assumed reader of the newspaper and the reader of this novel are passive to the grooming that takes place right in front of their eyes. The affirmations for children to stay away from strangers does not take the pedophiles off the street. It only points the blame at both children and adolescents who do not know better. Here, Nabokov has allowed the reader to analyze a fictional newspaper; one that only exists within the realm of *Lolita*. The reader is interpreting the interpretation of a fictional writer's newspaper article. Reality is being reflected through fiction. In response to Dolores' mention of the newspaper article, Humbert says, "With your little claws, Lolita" (Nabokov 166).

Humbert attests to the idea that Dolores should scratch the car's license plate on the side of the road as a means of escaping him. This is a confirmation to the reader that Humbert has abducted Dolores and is not just taking her on vacation to deal with the death of her mother. It also sheds light on how Humbert blames her for not being able to outsmart her rapist, (which she eventually does with age).

The University of Leicester conducted a study as to whether or not police officers blame the victim or perpetrator in rape cases. It was concluded that, "the greater the police officers' stereotypical beliefs about rape, the more responsibility was attributed toward the victim" (Sleath and Bull 658-9). To attest to this, 38.96% of the police officers in the study agreed with the statement that, "When a woman is a sexual tease, eventually she is going to get into trouble" (654). Humbert influences his reader to use this same logic pertaining to Dolores. Humbert seduces the reader with his poetic diction, leading them to believe he is the victim entrapped by Dolores' promiscuity.

Further, 20.3% of the police officers also agreed that "If a woman is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control" (Sleath and Bull 654). It is not specified here how the woman became drunk, leaving interpretations open to lacing or drugging her. If one compares this statement to the situation of Dolores being drugged by Humbert, it will result in victim blaming. Using the same mindset as the police officers in this study, one could conclude that Dolores simply should not have let herself get to this level of delirium so that Humbert would not take advantage of her. As morally wrong as this sounds, this is the logic that is used in rape and sexual assault cases. The truth of Dolores' rape will never be taken seriously if the reader sides with this position of victim blaming. Dolores was not "asking for it" or too "drunk," (in this case "drugged") to justify the rape that Humbert committed. This

study only further convicts both him and the passive readers who turn their heads when crime is committed.

The Theme of Child as Commodity

By now, the reader understands that every detail Nabokov includes in *Lolita* is deployed for a purpose. While those purposes can change throughout the novel, at this moment he is using his lyricism to direct his reader toward the symbolism of children as commodity. Humbert reveals that he brought Dolores to a great deal of caves throughout the United States. When Humbert takes note of the price of admission to these caves, one can notice how the adult is always more expensive than the child. This is noted when Humbert says, “adults one dollar, pubescents sixty cents” to see the world’s largest stalagmite in a cave (Nabokov 155). It happens again when Humbert refers to the longest cave in the world and how children are free of charge to view it (Nabokov 157). At the “hundredth cavern” they visited; Humbert says that adults are one dollar while children are fifty cents (Nabokov 158). His tone suggests that he is getting a deal for how cheap it is to take Dolores to these caves. It is ironic to see how society is placing a cheaper value on the child whereas Humbert views Dolores as his most prized possession. To him, she is worth far more than the price these cave exhibits rate her.

The difference in price between adult and child suggests that there is more for an adult to extract from the experience than the child. It argues that the child is not fully developed or intelligent enough to grasp the educational portion of these experiences. This confirms how unreasonable it is to expect a child to understand the rules in the “Let’s Explore Your Mind” article about sex crimes. The adult is held accountable for their intelligence at the cave exhibits but not when child abduction is a factor. If a child is not aware or intelligent enough to grasp the information from the cave exhibit, then how are they expected to know when an adult may be

trying to abduct them? This detail reveals the double standard that entails everything it means to victim blame. While the media holds the child accountable for being kidnapped, the decreased price of admission proves how they are not developed enough to understand what an adult already knows. While the child is shorted in both price and value they are at the highest risk of danger for adults victim-blame them when being abducted.

At this point in the novel, the reader should be well versed in understanding how Humbert has been stacking his interpretations atop one another in a process of narrative accretion to produce his narrative for the jury. He is in the middle of convincing the reader that his trip with Dolores is more of a vacation than an escape plan. It is when Humbert takes Dolores to see the largest piece of Stalagmite in the world (at one of these caves) that the reader can view a physical representation of how Humbert is recycling his interpretations the Derridean way (Nabokov 155)⁴. Similar to how the calcium water drips in the same spot to create these formations, Humbert is building on previous interpretations over and over again to create his story. One does not exist without the other. As stalagmite is dependent on stalactite, Humbert's interpretations are dependent on one another to manipulate the narrative to his favor. These cave formations that Humbert and Dolores visit are physical representations of how Humbert uses Derrida's theory of decentered structure to build on his unreliability. As there is no center origin to the theory of decentered structure, there is no center origin to the cave drippings. The only foundation these formations have are the results of the previous water dripping.

The Doubling of Humbert and Quilty

Humbert discovers that Clare Quilty has been the strange man following him and Dolores across the country as well as Dolores' second abductor in the novel. When he learns that he has run away with Dolores, it becomes evident how much Humbert truly despises himself through

the parallels found in the two men. This is perhaps the most prominent form of doubling found in *Lolita* where the reader sees the interpreter being interpreted by a man who is a mirror of himself. Quilty is both the man who follows Humbert and Dolores throughout the second half of the novel as well as the playwright of “The Enchanted Hunters”, in which Dolores is the leading role. This is also the same name of the motel Humbert rapes Dolores in, where Dolores is again, the leading role. Humbert undoubtedly uses word play here as he layers meaning behind this phrase. As a hunter is known for displaying dominance over their prey, Humbert enchants Dolores with sleeping pills and sexually dominates her. Simultaneously, Quilty is also a kind of hunter in the way he tracks down Humbert and Dolores. Humbert learns that Quilty was a family friend who visited and groomed Dolores the same way Humbert did (Nabokov 272). Dolores mentions how Quilty, “had tugged and pulled her...by her bare arm onto his lap in front of everybody, and kissed her face, she was ten” (Nabokov 272). Only when Humbert sees a mirroring of his actions from an external source, such as Quilty, is when he thinks about the crimes he committed and the trauma he imposed on Dolores. When thinking about how Dolores’ husband Dick holds her, he claims that “[He has] hurt too much too many bodies with [his] twisted poor hands to be proud of them” (Nabokov 274). It is only through Quilty’s actions that Humbert understands his own guilt surrounding the crimes he committed with Dolores and Charlotte. Sadly, it is only when Dolores is treated poorly by another pedophile that he has these realizations.

As Quilty is gaining in proximity to Humbert and Dolores, he loses track of time and becomes delusional in memory within the narrative. This leads the reader to question whether Humbert has had these delusions throughout the entirety of the novel. He says, “Being a murderer with a sensational but incomplete and unorthodox memory” (Nabokov 217). Humbert’s

incomplete memory did not develop because of Quilty's presence. It must have been this incomplete from the start of the narrative. He even becomes lazy in interpretation as he explains that he was, "too tired to-day to analyze" parts of a letter Dolores received from a friend of hers named Mona (Nabokov 223). The reader must question what else Humbert was too tired to speak about (which affects how the reader interprets his interpretation⁽²⁾).

Conclusion

Humbert excuses his actions of rape because of the love he has for Dolores; a love that he believes Quilty does not have for her. This aligns with Derrida's statement that there are, "two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretations as an exile" (Derrida 292). Nabokov, as the author, can be viewed as the interpreter who tries to affirm the center origin of his own interpretation of the novel. Nabokov's center truth is an interpretation of Dolores that escapes the reputation of a nymphet. Adversely, the second interpretation, "which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism" (Derrida 292). While Humbert works to deceive and play with the reader through his interpretation of Nabokov's novel, there is an entirely separate layer of deception taking place between Humbert and Quilty. Quilty deceives Humbert the same way Humbert has deceived the reader throughout the entirety of the novel. This narrative technique is doubled as Humbert is placed in the same position as the reader. Quilty's main concern is to deceive Humbert as he kidnaps Dolores from the man who kidnapped Dolores. Not only does this novel follow the two sets of interpretations that Derrida discusses, but it doubles the second interpretation which is seen through the presence of Quilty deceiving Humbert. Humbert is not concerned with the center origin of Nabokov's interpretation and

Quilty is not concerned with Humbert's interpretation. Between the two, neither are concerned with interpreting the center truth to Dolores' character. The presence of Quilty passes beyond man in the sense that not only is he Humbert's doppelganger but he kidnaps the same child that Humbert does. He is mirroring his actions in this way, taking Derrida's idea of reinterpretation to an entirely new level. This only proves how necessary Derrida's theory of decentered structure is to accurately analyze just how much doubling is taking place within the novel.

As *Lolita* has been analyzed alongside Derrida's theory of decentered structure, it can be concluded that the theory creates the proper lens through which one understands the novel and its numerous manipulations and interpretations. An entire layer of the narrative is revealed when pairing these two works together. The technique of doubling is constantly found throughout the novel with Humbert as the center locus. Whether it is the dynamic between Nabokov and Humbert or Humbert and Quilty, it is impossible to find one moment where doubling or redoubling is taking place within the narrative. This analysis has allowed the reader to view the novel from a decentered perspective which has only offered more layers and questions for literary theorists to dissect. While this essay has grappled very little with the concept of pairing Nabokov and Derrida's respective works together, perhaps something will be found in your interpretation of my interpretation that propels literary theorists to answer yet another question within Nabokov's most famous novel, *Lolita*.

Notes

¹ This superscript⁽²⁾ will substitute each time the phrase “interpretation of an interpretation” is referenced.

² Variant of “voluptu” which is Latin for “pleasure” or “delight.”

³ Humbert layers the phrase “sick man.” While trying to prove that he is mentally ill, he plays with the word to display the repulsiveness of preying on prepubescent girls.

⁴ The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) defines the existence of two types of cave drippings: stalagmite and stalactite (Ocean Exploration). The NOAA says that “stalactite is an icicle-shaped formation that hangs from the ceiling of a cave and is produced by precipitation of minerals from water dripping through the cave ceiling” (Ocean Exploration). *Stalagmite* are these same icicle-shaped formations, but they grow upward from the floor of a cave (Ocean Exploration). Stalagmite is a result of the water dripping from the ceiling, or the stalactite (Ocean Exploration).

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