

EXTENDED ESSAY

English B
Category 3 (Literature)

Unreliable Narration in *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov

To what extent does Vladimir Nabokov use unreliable narration in *Lolita* to manipulate the reader's perception of *Humbert Humbert* and blur moral judgments?

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INTRODUCTION

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) is a highly controversial work of modern fiction because of the very tension it explores between aesthetic beauty and moral revulsion. The novel depicts the profound obsessive desire of Humbert Humbert, a middle-aged man, for a prepubescent child named Dolores Haze. Although the highly taboo subject matter alone has sparked outrage, heated debates, and many different cases of censorship attempts, the true controversiality of *Lolita* projects beyond its themes and storyline (Häljestam). Nabokov himself has come out against the claims of *Lolita* having any erotically provoking or pornographic intent on numerous occasions and helped emphasize the linguistically misleading and morally self-delusive disposition of the work (Nabokov 353-361). Thus, it is the disturbing influence of *Lolita* that is not only achieved through the content but also through tempting the readers into the unreliable narration by the storytelling with an uneasy level of ease.

Unreliable narrator refers to a narrative voice whose diction is highly conditioned by subjectivity, intentional manipulation, bias, and omissions; which consequently lead readers to adopt a critical and analytical attitude towards its rhetoric. (Booth 158). Instead of projecting reality with full transparency, unreliable narrators mediate meaning and often blur the distinction between perception and truth. (Booth 158) Therefore, unreliability in literature expands beyond simple dishonesty, also encompassing moral distortion, emotional manipulation, ethical persuasion, and rhetorical control.

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In *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert's unreliability spans beyond explicit factual inconsistencies. It is rather constructed through his command of language and misuse of narrative authority. Humbert's refined diction is stylistically elevated and internally coherent, paradoxically making him a highly trusted and persuasive narrator. However, his unreliability is rooted in his manipulative abilities on interpretation: he aestheticizes and romanticizes moral transgressions, reframes grooming and exploitation as desire, and selectively discloses and conceals information in ways that would reduce or distract from moral responsibility. Humbert has complete narrative authority over cherry-picking scenes either to emphasize through softening euphemisms and lyricality or to strategically leave out with ambiguity, ultimately tuning the reader's understanding of events and perception of him.

Nabokov uses unreliable narration to make the readers repeatedly question their very own moral and emotional stances. The ethical uneasiness created in the guise of aesthetic admiration by the contrasting beauty of the eloquent language used to narrate the horrific acts, creates the feeling of ethical discomfort throughout the process of reading. It is with this same predicament that Nabokov discusses the power of diction in manipulating the perception and judgment of the readers, which makes *Lolita* not only a novel of obsession but a literary masterpiece modelling the misleading powers of narration.

This essay explores the research question: **To what extent does Vladimir Nabokov use unreliable narration in *Lolita* to manipulate the reader's perception of Humbert Humbert and blur moral judgment?** It will be argued that Nabokov deliberately creates Humbert as an unreliable narrator who lures readers in for momentary complicity through his eloquence, self-

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justifying logic, and rhetorical authority before uncovering the moral implications and consequences of aestheticizing grooming. This essay will examine how linguistic style and narrative voice manipulate the reader's perception through a rhetorical approach to unreliable narration. Nabokov's design of Humbert's unreliability will be dissected into Humbert's poetic tone as a strategy for aestheticization, his emotional self-vindication attempts at presenting exploitation and obsession as suffering, his complicit portrayal of Lolita, and his narrative omissions that make readers dependent on his implications. These manifestations and signs of unreliable narration will be addressed to provide the basis for a deeper analysis of their effects on readers, in terms of their perceptions of Humbert and their ability to make sound moral judgments.

HUMBERT AS AN UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

As the lens through which the novel unfolds, Humbert's diction is the main pillar of contextual understanding. His control over the reader's perception gives him the power to manipulate morality drastically, and the direction of his narration is solely based on his objectives and his own perspective, therefore, making him a cunning, unreliable narrator. Nabokov constructs this unreliability linguistically through Humbert's artistic diction, self-justifying rationalizations, and role-reversing logic.

Humbert begins his storytelling by prefacing the place and identity that "Lolita" has in his eyes. *"Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the top of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta."* (Nabokov 7) The poetic prose style of Humbert Humbert establishes his forthcoming artistic style and greets

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the reader as if the story he is about to tell is one of aesthetic bliss and love. The alliteration in the words “*light*”, “*life*”, and “*loins*” diverts attention away from the actual content and the disturbing implications of his obsession, while the musicality of the passage produces a lyrical tone that frames the narrative as an epic romance instead of a disturbing confession in the eyes of the reader. Humbert also provides oral imagery to further sensualize his diction and entertain the idea that he and his behavior must be of a passionate, poetic nature. As a result, readers find themselves as passive participants in his intimate, almost erotic performance and instantaneously become complicit in Humbert's perspective. Vladimir Nabokov equips Humbert's narration with linguistic manipulation, a far more discreet manner of unreliability, rather than one that stems from straightforward factual inconsistencies. As a result, the reader perceives Humbert not only as a reliable source and storyteller but also as a morally trustworthy and even an ethically righteous person in the story he is narrating. All while the poetic language initially lures the readers into a passive adherence to his side, the resulting rhetorical trust serves as the very foundation upon which further moral justifications of Humbert and his actions are built.

Having already gained the trust of the reader through aesthetic narration, Humbert begins to exploit this trust through emotional manipulation. He recounts the story of his childhood lover, Annabel, repeatedly emphasizing that they were both children at the time and that he was “*her equal*,” deliberately collapsing temporal and moral distinctions to provide a foundation for emotional and moral justification for his later desires (Nabokov 16-17). He insinuates that there was no power imbalance between him and Annabel, another prepubescent lover of his, disarming any moral skepticism as his retrospective narration reshapes memory into an innocent and fair childhood love story. After clearing himself of any past ethical controversy, he then turns the

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reader's attention onto himself by projecting his love and desire as things that have been haunting him ever since: "*I was a strong lad and survived; but the poison was in the wound, and the wound remained ever open*" (Nabokov 17). Humbert positions himself as the primary victim as the injury metaphor guides the readers into pity instead of judgment. He is completely passive in this framing, as his obsessions are unavoidable pains inflicted upon him. As a result, readers abstain from morally judging Humbert as he has removed any agency he might have over his previous and upcoming actions through claiming that he was in a permanent pitiful captivity under his love and desires. This strategic diction reinforces Vladimir Nabokov's construction of Humbert as an unreliable narrator whose self-pity aids ethical distortion.

Moreover, Humbert's unreliability builds upon his recounting of Annabel, as he tries to form a similar, balanced relationship dynamic in his descriptions of his sexual acts with Lolita. He attempts to frame another one of his predatory relationships with another child, Lolita, in a similar light as he had previously to undermine his moral wrongdoings. He portrays Lolita as a sexually suggestive, morally corrupted, and equally complicit participant in their relationship. He absolves himself of moral responsibility as he reverses roles to cast Lolita as the initiating and promiscuous partner: "*it was she who seduced me*", "*what she was suggesting.*" (Nabokov 150) The assertion of Lolita's sexuality implications is made without any concrete descriptions, evidence, or explanation. Humbert withholds and omits details to back up his incriminating portrayal of his partner to not admit to any immoral act he took part in. His controversial claims stand unchallenged through vague phrasing and lack of articulation. Humbert's cherry-picked disclosure guides the reader to focus explicitly on Lolita's intent rather than swaying away to Humbert's culpability. Her character interpretation is under the complete control of Humbert's narration, thereby allowing

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him to recast exploitation as mutual transgression. The power equality laid out in the Annabel story is used as a premise to shift signals to present blame of Lolita, facilitating a deliberate role reversal between Humbert and Lolita in terms of victimization. Furthermore, Humbert intensifies this role reversal by underlining that he "*was not even her first lover.*" (Nabokov 153) using sexual history and past experiences as a moral shield to imply that virginity is the prerequisite of harm. In Humbert's logic, virginity symbolizes moral innocence, and in its absence, his relationship with Lolita does not tarnish or harm her in any way. Following this faulty line of logic, the inherent power imbalance and undeniably exploitative relationship between the adult narrator and a child victim is deliberately erased to lift ethical responsibility off Humbert's shoulders. It is through this deliberate role reversal and strategic omission that Nabokov constructs Humbert's unreliability as an ethical distortion in which his narrative control shifts blame and moral responsibility away from him, dismantling the reader's ability to judge his moral culpability.

THE EFFECTS OF HUMBERT'S NARRATION

Having established how Humbert Humbert's unreliability is constructed through aestheticizing language, self-justifying rhetoric, and emotional rationalization, it has now become necessary to discuss the ethical consequences of his narration. Nabokov goes further to create reader complicity with Humbert's perspective to ultimately alter how he is to be perceived by the reader in ways that soften, delay, and debase moral judgment of his actions and character.

First and foremost, Humbert's unreliability manipulates the reader's perception of him primarily through direct address and call to action, which positions the reader as an implied

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participant in his self-defense rather than a detached observer. Humbert repeatedly interrupts the narrative frame to abruptly engage readers, flattering their intellect and guiding them to appeal to their sense of fairness.

"I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay; I want them to examine its every detail and see for themselves how careful, how chaste, the whole wine-sweet event is if viewed with what my lawyer has called... impartial sympathy."

(Nabokov 62-63)

By explicitly addressing the readers as "*learned*", he has invited them to tap into his mindset and previous diction and analyze his actions and align their idea of him with his self-portrayal as "*chaste*", "*careful*", and even "*wine-sweet*". Humbert positions the readers as an audience to his self-defense performance, casting them as rational and fair judges and eliminating their role as moral arbiters. Humbert ensures that moral evaluation is postponed, allowing alliance and trust to precede ethical resistance through recasting judgment as bias and sympathy as intellectual virtuousness. Through this call for "*impartial sympathy*", he subtly insinuates that his condemnation would result from intellectual failure and unethicity on the readers' part. Similarly, in his assertion, "*I hope I am addressing myself to unbiased readers*" (Nabokov 325), the illusion of fairness is further reinforced. Moral judgment of his character is reframed as prejudice, and he demands emotional neutrality regarding his perception. Moreover, Humbert further adapts a slightly altered courtroom rhetoric to strengthen reader manipulation. The transformed trial narrative in which the reader assumes the role of the jury is repeatedly reinforced through his performative addresses of "*Ladies and gentlemen of the jury*", "*winged gentlemen of*

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the jury", "*Jurors!*" (Nabokov 98-191). He wants the readers to perceive him as a legal defendant deserving of impartiality, sympathy, understanding, and patience. This unreliable rhetorical framing suppresses any immediate moral resistance the readers may show and enforces compliance in the way he imposes himself. Appearing repeatedly throughout the novel, these direct appeals exemplify unreliable narration controlling the perception of Humbert Humbert, softening the scrutiny he may receive and facilitating alignment with his perspective.

After the readers have been positioned as passive, and sympathetic observers in his rhetoric, Humbert proceeds to manipulate how he, himself, is perceived as a person by his audience. Through the unreliable narration of Humbert, he recasts his identity from that of a criminal to that of a romantic lover, a poet. His self-attribution as a poet lays out the central mechanism through which he cunningly manipulates the reader's perception of his character in the storyline. This allows him to construct a moral binary in which he opposes the coexistence of violence with his presented poetic sensibility. He states, "*Poets never kill.*" (Nabokov 98) to categorically overrule the mere possibility of brutality within his self-fashioned poetic identity. The image of Humbert Humbert that he wishes to create in the minds of the readers is fundamentally alien to criminality and violence. He lays the ground for further instances in which he can use his narrative authority to manipulate the reader's perception of himself without the need to provide evidence. This leads the readers to view him as a fundamentally non-violent or culpable person, even in instances in which evidence implies otherwise. Consequently, ethical scrutiny appears excessive and premature, and readers become more accustomed to perceiving obsessive grooming as emotional complexity. Humbert can do this by expanding even further on his curated

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and asserted identity, aestheticizing the internal landscape of his intent to distract from the harm his actions cause.

"The gentle and dreamy regions through which I crept were the patrimonies of poets – not crime's prowling ground." (Nabokov 149)

By describing his inner world as "*gentle and dreamy*", Humbert intentionally misdirects the reader's attention away from the consequences of his actions and toward the romanticized portrait he paints of his internal emotional world. He makes metaphoric references to portray the introspective and sensitive persona he creates in the minds of the readers. He does this to ultimately get his readers to perceive him as an emotionally refined poet and artist instead of a morally repulsive predator, a criminal. This strategic unreliability is particularly effective here because, instead of denying the reality, he totally diminishes the need for concrete evidence. In return, the way the readers perceive Humbert becomes dependent on his self-portrayal, presenting a cultivated identity of a poet and a romantic lover, which may overshadow the moral implications of his acts. Readers equate his self-fashioning of emotional depth and eloquence with innocence, which positions Humbert as a fundamentally non-violent person and a morally trustworthy, reliable narrator. Therefore, this poetic self-framing of Humbert Humbert is a manner in which Nabokov manipulates the reader's perception of him as both a character and a narrator, encouraging sympathy at the expense of moral clarity.

Humbert's direct appeals and address to the reader and his poetic self-portrayal both collectively demonstrate complementary stages of unreliable narration, through which Vladimir

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Nabokov can manipulate the reader's perception of Humbert both as a person and as a narrator. Though Humbert is perceived as emotionally complex, cultured, and reflective, this perception does not immediately eliminate moral judgment, but it significantly delays and destabilizes it. Taken together, these qualities attributed to Humbert set the tone for deeper ethical confusion of the reader, as his justifications shift from aestheticized self-portrayals to explicit references to legal and social constructs as well as authority later in the narrative.

This blurring of moral judgment becomes most explicit when Humbert sways from aesthetic suggestion and begins to justify his actions through legal and historical reference. Having already guided the reader to approach his narration with sympathy and attribute intellectual value, he refers to Roman law to rationalize his behavior:

"The stipulation of the Roman law, according to which a girl can marry at twelve, was adopted by the Church, and is still preserved, rather tacitly, in some of the United States. And fifteen is lawful everywhere. There is nothing wrong, say both hemispheres, when a brute of forty, blessed by the local priest and bloated with drink, sheds his sweat-drenched finery and thrusts himself up to the hilt into his youthful bride." (Nabokov 152-153)

By invoking the Roman law and mentioning its adoption by the Church explicitly, along with emphasizing its continued normalization across "*both hemispheres*", Humbert attempts to collapse the distinction between legality and morality. The deliberate insistence that "there is nothing wrong" acts as a facilitator in his rationale of predatory relationships. The appeal to legal

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authority disconnects responsibility from Humbert as an individual and places it onto the ongoing societal norms of tradition and heritage. He further uses the approval of legal institutions as authoritative proof that his moral conviction would be faulty and unjust. The appropriate ethical judgment is presented as unnecessary in the approval of global and legal authorities, and in this way, Humbert's exploitative conduct towards Lolita is reframed as universally accepted as morally righteous. This reframing guides the reader into questioning the intellectual fairness of his condemnation and whether there is anything to find immoral or harmful. As a result, moral violations are presented and perceived as matters of historical and societal constructs, as well as their respective culpability being lifted from Humbert Humbert's back. An attempt to challenge the fundamental power imbalance of the exploitative predation of Lolita is substituted by a complete obliteration of the reader with legal and social conventions to make them focus not on the real experience, but on an imposed, blunt logic. Although ethical judgment is not erased completely, the reader is unsettled, hesitating, and encouraged to weigh the context and postpone moral clarity under the blurring influence of his narration. This is how Nabokov uses unreliable narration to not only manipulate emotion, but also logic itself. The appeal to legality after gaining trust and sympathy allows Humbert to incline the reader further to surrender to his deliberate moral evasions. The result is an intentional blurring of moral judgment that allows Humbert to use authoritative communities and institutions to dictate the ethical responsibility he holds for his actions and the ultimate righteousness of his conduct.

All while Humbert's unreliable narration is largely effective in manipulating perception and softening moral judgment, Nabokov also allows momentary slips in which this narrative control cracks and Humbert's awareness of guilt becomes apparent. He admits after recounting

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the story of Dolores Haze as clarified in the statement, "*always preferred the mental hygiene of noninterference,*" and his strategy "*habit and method to ignore Lolita's state of mind, while comforting my own base self.*" (Nabokov 327) This confession shows his acknowledgement of his earlier false portrayal directly and debunks his façade of an emotionally helpless and unaware lover. His assertion reveals a very conscious decision to suppress his empathy instead of an inability to recognize or be responsible for harm. The most revealing scene takes place when he exposes, "*But I admit that a man of my power of imagination cannot plead personal ignorance of universal emotions.*" (Nabokov 327) His explicit confession of self-vindication weakens the very core of his portrayal of himself as a victim up until this point in the narrative. Humbert confirms that he understands and picks up on emotional suffering, all throughout purposefully prioritizing his wants and gains. These moments appear as cracks in Humbert's narration, toward the very end of the novel, and his deliberate attempts at moral evasion become clear to the reader. Through the usage of minor authorial interventions, Nabokov reveals the intentionality of Humbert's manipulation of the readers' perception and their ability to make moral judgments.

CONCLUSION

All in all, throughout *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov employs the technique of unreliable narration to an intentional extent, manipulating the way readers perceive Humbert Humbert and blurring their moral judgments. The narrative style of Humbert, its lyricality, along with his selective disclosure and attempts at emotional justifications, initially establish him as a cultured, trustworthy, and sympathetic narrator. His unreliable narration is not coincidental; it is purposefully designed to replace instinctive condemnation with intellectual revulsions through romanticization of violence, reframing of exploitations as desire, and obstructions of moral

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resistance. Nevertheless, as the story progresses, Nabokov gradually exposes the dangers and consequences of such misdirecting and manipulative narration. The use of legal constitutions, past and social precedent and aestheticizations of Humbert further link the moral boundaries and delay impulsive denunciation. Ultimately, these attempts at rationalization and justification remain overridden by the moments in which he reveals and acknowledges that he is and always has been aware of Lolita's suffering. This demonstrates how Humbert's unreliability is rooted in deliberate moral evasion instead of mere ignorance or incompetence. By letting him speak and demonstrate this, Nabokov reestablishes moral reasons and limits to lead the readers to challenge their previous submission to Humbert's narrative without overtly obvious authorial interference and presence. The unreliable narration used by Nabokov serves as a tool of manipulation and as a warning, not pardoning or condoning Humbert as a character and as a narrator. Instead, *Lolita* shows the disturbing nature of storytelling as a whole and how moral consciousness can be eroded so easily in the hands of an unreliable narrator.

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