“Exploring the Relationship between Humbert Humbert, Popular Media and the Reader in Nabokov’s Lolita”

a Mary Baldwin College Capstone 2012 presentation,

Adapted from the longer,

“Layers of Manipulation in Nabokov’s Lolita”,

An English Department thesis project

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Presented May 10, 2012
Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* is quite a puzzle. Released in America in 1958, *Lolita* is ostensibly about a middle aged European man who kidnaps and coerces a young girl into engaging in sexual intercourse. Yet for the text’s readers the experience is rarely so simple. Nabokov created Humbert Humbert to appear trustworthy; he is white, middle-class, educated and well spoken. Humbert himself does everything he can to persuade us that he isn’t so bad. He hides the girl he calls Lolita, her given name is Dolores, and what he does to her. He in turns praises and insults his readers, employing a trick now popular with pick-up artists. Humbert is deceptive and surprisingly convincing, which raises questions about Nabokov’s intent in penning this ambiguous novel. After all he is the creator of the misleadingly simple plot, rude Dolores, and Humbert himself. Yet if we look closely, there are many clues within the novel to Nabokov’s true intentions. Consider simply that Humbert is not wholly successful. For every critic like Leslie Fiedler, who dismissed *Lolita* as a novel about “the seduction of a middle-aged man by a twelve-year-old girl” (335), there is a reader like Lance Olsen who insists that *Lolita* “is an impassioned attack against human insensitivity, against our all-too-frequent inability to grant another human being freedom and individuality” (35).

Nabokov depicts America as a landscape of signs along the highway, magazine ads and Hollywood inspired childhood. Many readers overlook the role of media within the novel as details that enrich the text but are meaningless. While Humbert’s fancy prose may suggest otherwise, *Lolita* is a very economical text—Nabokov choose every word carefully. Keith Booker, a neo-Marxist critic, claims that this landscape shapes the characters Humbert encounters (83) but that Humbert
resists this shaping and instead takes advantage of the media’s effect on others (84). Ads, and particularly Humbert’s vocal disdain for media in many forms, ultimately become a way that we can see through Humbert’s deceptive narration.

Media manipulation begins with Dolores’s mother, Charlotte. Humbert portrays her negatively, primarily for her reliance on ads and popular culture but also because she prefigures, to a desperate Humbert, his Lolita’s inevitable fate: a grown woman. Everything about her, from her shrill voice to her reliance on homemaking manuals and advertisements, annoys him. Dana Brand points out that not only does Humbert notice early on Charlotte’s dependence on the media around her, but he uses the language of the media to control Charlotte so that he may possess Dolores (15).

Humbert’s exasperation with media’s hold on Charlotte doesn’t stop him from using it against her. When Charlotte announces that they are traveling to England, without Dolores, Humbert doesn’t just say no; he uses her obsession with popular culture to soften the blow of his flat refusal and to maintain his position of manipulative power. “And I doubt not that you and I would make a pretty ad for the Traveling Agency when portrayed looking—you, frankly starry-eyed, I, controlling my envious admiration—at the Palace Sentries, or Scarlet Guards” (Nabokov 90-91). This quote shows us Humbert’s aggravation, but also his compulsive need for control. He struggles to find the correct term for the palace guards, and eventually gives up, his frustration evident when he finally says, “whatever they are called” (Nabokov 91). When Humbert renames the palace guards, calling them “Beaver Eaters” he gains some power over them. Humbert renames things and people instinctively. He subjects Dolores to this renaming, after all her name isn’t really Lolita. Here his renaming is
somewhat sloppy, suggesting that Humbert is aggravated enough to lose his own composure.

Humbert’s intelligence—along with a certain measure of charm—allow him to manipulate the characters around him successfully. From his vantage point, he recognizes Dolores’ weakness for popular culture early on and uses it to manipulate her. Booker notes that when Humbert and Dolores first meet, “he attempts to impress her with his ‘movieland manhood’” (86). Humbert assumes that because of the media education of a modern child, Dolores learned her part from Hollywood and will respond to his advances (86). Humbert suavely uses media’s influence over the other characters to manipulate them further.

Dolores cuts pictures out of magazines and posts them on her bedroom wall. These ads pretend at harmlessness, but in reality they—like the other media Dolores is exposed to—affect her. They teach her not only to consume products, but also to see the world in a consumerist way and to identify what is handsome, desirable, and lovable. The male models in the ads embody a hidden irony; these Humbertian look-a-likes remind the careful reader of the difference between the harmless and handsome photographs and the malicious reality of Humbert (Booker 71). Humbert’s attention to these advertisements reveal Humbert’s participation in media’s dialogue. He attempts to use advertisements as he uses language, to sell himself to his readers. This participation reveals that Humbert is susceptible to ads and media, though he claims otherwise.

Humbert admits that the “eerie vulgarity” that Dolores learned from ads (Nabokov 44) attracts him. However, not all of the things Dolores learns please
Humbert. Dolores’ constant consumerism annoys him. He recalls that she would “induce me to drop a quarter into the radio, or she would read all the signs and inquire with a whine why she could not go riding up some advertised trail or swimming in that local pool of warm mineral water” (Nabokov 147-148). Her reliance on ads bothers Humbert in part because it reminds him of her normality. It reminds him that underneath his false classifications, Dolores is not a nymphet, as Humbert claims. She is a normal girl subject to manipulation in her environment just like any other. Humbert and the media compete for control over Dolores, yet the media remains more successful. Both influences shape her, yet Dolores never questions advertisements’ pull, never rebels against it as she does Humbert.

Unsurprisingly, Humbert cultivates a distaste for popular culture. Humbert worked at an ad agency for a short time and the language he uses to describe this experience cements advertising’s role in the novel as a veil over reality (Booker 84). Humbert twists the world before him, using his powerful rhetoric to deny advertisements their power and impregnate them with his own satiric meaning (17). But as mentioned previously, Humbert isn’t as successful as he would have us believe. He does respond to media and advertisements, and is affected by them.

When Humbert notices the “trochaic lilt” of the advertisement, he suggests similarities between literature and advertising, unconsciously connecting his narrative to the very ads he despises (Booker 85). Indeed, advertisements employ a characteristic language. These ads use diction designed to influence readers. When Humbert describes ads within the novel, his descriptions are littered with words such as “congenial,” “gracious,” and “complimentary” (Nabokov 147). Humbert too utilizes
a distinctive language—what he calls “a fancy prose style” (Nabokov 9)—a language equally designed to influence his readers.

Despite the similarities in their chosen languages, Humbert mocks the vernacular advertisements use. He often compares the idyllic imagery of ads with his imagined, much bleaker reality. Humbert claims that a certain hotel boasts “congenial company, between-meal snacks,” and “outdoor barbecues”, though Humbert sees instead a promise of “odious visions of stinking high school boys in sweatshirts and an ember-red cheek pressing against hers, while poor Dr. Humbert, embracing nothing but two masculine knees, would cold-humor his piles on the damp turf” (Nabokov 148). Humbert’s musings shed a sinister light on advertisements that pretend at innocence. These musings find an uncanny double in the sinister aspects of Humbert’s own story. However, we need not imagine the menacing aspects of Lolita, for they are all too real. When we assess these distinctive language patterns together we can easily apply Humbert’s disdain to his own language.

Certainly Humbert did not intend for such inspection. This dual reading of Humbert’s derision reveals Nabokov’s authorial hand. With this scrutiny we can see what these two languages share: exaggeration, misdirection and dehumanization. When we use the media’s language to interpret Humbert’s narrative we discover the clever, yet ultimately translucent defense of a guilty man.

Much of Lolita’s appeal lies in the balance between beauty and repulsion. Both sides of this fine line rely on manipulation. Humbert influences his readers with beautiful language in an attempt to divert their moral concern; in effect he hints that his love for Lolita, the situation, perhaps even his actions, contain beauty as well.
Ultimately Humbert’s aesthetic portrayal of rape inspires repulsion in the readers Humbert attempts to win over. Media manipulation within the novel acts as both a tool for Humbert to further influence those closest to him and also as a tool for the reader to better understand Humbert and his compelling rhetoric.

When we read carefully, we can use Humbert’s disdain for advertisements as a lens through which to read his narrative and become privy to yet another level of complexity—and irony—within the text. Ultimately, Humbert and the ads he despises share many qualities. They both hide within language; they both manipulate and warp the lives of the very people they need for sustenance, whether commercial or emotional. Finally, both reveal the other’s true nature. Humbert overtly criticizes advertising for its manipulative language and imagery while advertising subtly mocks Humbert, reflecting his own faults back at him. Of the clues Nabokov conceals within Lolita to his true allegiance, this duality, subtle and rewarding, declares his ultimate support for abused Dolores. Thank you very much.