

Creating Spaces of Fear and Anxiety: Analysis of Factors Affecting Male Character's Conduct in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

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Even though diverse theoretical approaches have been employed to tease out the psychological nuances of the male character Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's (1955) erotic novel *Lolita*, the decisive role of psychological issues such as fear and anxiety in forming his character have hitherto remained unexplored. Drawing upon Freud's theories on spaces of anxiety, this essay aims to investigate the psychological factors that affect Humbert's conduct, and explore the personality changes that he undergoes. The findings of the study reveal that certain psychological core issues, namely fear of abandonment, fear of betrayal, and Oedipus complex lead to creation of different forms of anxiety such as reality, neurotic and moral anxiety in the subject's life. The study concludes that Humbert's fears and anxieties are rooted in the loss of his childhood love object, and it is to avoid the re-enactment of traumatic experiences of betrayal that Humbert appropriates *Lolita*'s life.

Key words: *Lolita*, Humbert, core issues, anxiety, fear.

Introduction

Ever since its publication in 1955, Vladimir Nabokov's erotic novel *Lolita* has been the subject of public and critical debates for its vexed topic and controversial characters (Flanagan, 2018; Ganesan, 2018; Patel, 2015). The novel's scandalous plot revolves around the middle-aged male protagonist Humbert Humbert's sexual obsession with a prepubescent girl nicknamed *Lolita*. Though the novel's "manifestly deplorable content" has prompted some critics to point to the protagonist's monstrosity in defiling *Lolita* and conclude that

Humbert is a paedophile (Connolly, 2009; Dorr, 1998; Severson & Goodman, 2018, p. 9), Humbert describes himself a ‘nympholept,’ i.e. a person who is seized by nymphs. The former epithet indicates the subject’s lustful desires “to sexually possess” a girl child, but the latter does not necessarily indicate a “wish to sexually possess” the nymphs (Bouilly, 2011, p. iv). In this manner, Humbert attempts to replace the negative term paedophile with the more positive nympholept to conceal the horrible truth about the reality of his psychological nature (Ibrahim, 2017).

Literary scholars have employed different theoretical approaches to tease out the psychological nuances of Humbert’s character and behaviour. Donahue (2011), Hamrit (2009), Ingham (2002), and Niazi and Honarjou (2012) have explored the novel from psychoanalytical perspectives, directly tracing the protagonist’s deviant behaviour to an Oedipus complex. On one level, Humbert’s sexual advancement towards Lolita is widely perceived as indicating that the girl child acts as his “maternal surrogate,” and on the other it is believed to prevent a reenactment of traumatic experiences of betrayal that he had gone through in the past (Ingham, 2002). Within the existing body of literature, notwithstanding its invaluable critical and theoretical insight, the decisive role of other psychological elements such as fear and anxiety in shaping the male character’s behaviour have hitherto remained unexplored. This essay seeks to fill in the gap by examining the male protagonist’s psychological development in light of the core issue of anxiety.

Sigmund Freud offers a subtle and sophisticated framework for examining anxiety. A Freudian reading of *Lolita* revisits a well-grounded correlation between anxiety and behaviour, the appreciation of the former being instrumental in understanding the latter. An unresolved anxiety, formed during childhood, is very likely to develop into “a fixation on an erogenous area” which in turn can cause serious “psychological disorders like neurosis and hysteria” in adulthood (Gould & Howson, 2018, p. 3). Freud identifies three types of anxiety, namely, neurotic, reality and moral anxiety. From his perspective, anxiety and other interrelated core issues such as fears of intimacy, abandonment, and betrayal are fundamental in defining the individual’s being (Asl, 2014; Tyson, 2006, p. 17). Furthermore, this approach would help us to unravel the ways in which selective perception, selective memory, denial and avoidance serve the male protagonist as coping mechanisms in dealing with the psychological issues.

Literature Review

The existing body of scholarship on the character of Humbert in Nabokov’s *Lolita* mainly investigates two stages of his life: his childhood and its profound impact on his adult life. Hamrit (2009) draws upon Freud’s theories on trauma to argue that Lolita is the reincarnation of Humbert’s past love object, Annabel Leigh. Humbert was thirteen when Annabel died and

her death has scarred him throughout his adulthood. Humbert proves to be mentally stuck in the past and thus his fetish for young girls. From a Freudian perspective, trauma “is inseparable from the notion of deferred action,” meaning that what happens afterwards gives meaning to what has happened before (Hamrit, 2009, p. 140). In the novel, Humbert witnesses two different but interconnected scenes: first, he loses his first love Annabel, and then he meets Lolita. Hamrit (2009) asserts that the two scenes are connected because when Humbert sees Lolita, “his vision is divided, split between past and present, superimposing in a repeated time the images of the present nymphet and those of the teenager of his past” (p. 142). Likewise, Thomieres (1999) explains Humbert’s sexual obsession in Lolita as an attempt to recapture his innocent childhood love. For Humbert, Lolita is a reincarnation of his unfulfilled childhood desire for Annabel (Asl, 2019; Thomieres, 1999, p. 170). In a similar study, Islam (2015) employs Freud’s notion of melancholia to conclude that Humbert’s psychological imbalance is rooted in “an everlasting feeling of loneliness” that he has suffered from since his mother’s death (p. 2). According to Islam, the primary cause of Humbert’s present melancholia lies in the loss of his maternal love object, which was further intensified by Annabel’s death. Hence, as Islam maintains, Humbert’s perversion is explained by the overwhelming grief triggered by his mother’s death, the traumatic experience of being left alone, and the loss of his childhood love object.

Regarding the notion of perversion, nonetheless, there is an ongoing debate about the nature of paedophilia, and whether it is a sexual orientation like homosexuality and bisexuality (Seto, 2012; Whiting, 1998, p. 836). In general, paedophilia has two forms: structured and occasional. In Freudian psychoanalysis, paedophilia is considered as an occasional act in which children serve as sexual substitutes for individuals who cannot have sexual relationship with adult partners (De Masi, 2007, p. 149). Humbert’s obsession with Lolita, according to De Masi (2007), is a genuinely romantic act of paedophilia as he derives pleasure from his overwhelming sexual desire for her. In other words, since his romantic paedophilia is “nurtured by the eroticised and idealised figure” of the girl child (De Masi, 2007, p. 150), it is in contrast to sadistic paedophilia in which a subject feels excited by inflicting pain to a child. Nonetheless, Marcus (2005) contradicts Humbert’s romantic inclinations, arguing that the protagonist’s refusal to acknowledge that he has inflicted pain on Lolita is self-deception, a “mental state in which the subject is motivated to believe in a specific proposition or state of facts” (p. 187). Throughout the novel, as Marcus concludes, Humbert refers to Lolita as his “object of desire, not as a subject with feelings, thoughts, and wishes of her own but as a work of art,” and by virtue of such aesthetic references to Lolita, Humbert seeks to assuage his guilt (Marcus, 2005, p. 189). In like manner, Kopelson (2008) considers Humbert’s aesthetic portrayal of Lolita as well as his candid acts of confession to murder as desperate attempts to gain “some sort of emotion or effect ... love, [and] pity” (Kopelson, 2008, p. 147). To sum up, the above-cited scholars (De Masi, 2007; Islam, 2015; Kopelson, 2008; Marcus, 2005) unanimously agree that Humbert’s self-deception and deft attempts to manipulate

others are caused by an underlying defence mechanism that was initiated by a state of melancholia which was in turn caused by the loss of love object. Yet none of the existing studies explores the psychological issue of anxiety and its impact on the subject's conduct and behaviour. Hence the significance of this study, which aims to examine the impact of Humbert's childhood anxieties on his behaviour in adulthood. Unless one appreciates the Freudian notion of anxiety as a psychological core issue, one would not be able to understand the ways in which it operates as a complex defence mechanism for Humbert to conceal his inner guilt. In what follows, the study seeks to explore the Freudian notion of anxiety in relation to psychological core issues.

Phenomenology of Anxiety: A Freudian Perspective

In constant attempts to fight off instinctual drives, the human mind develops defence mechanisms in dealing with repressed painful feelings. The mechanism is meant to protect the ego by driving away anxiety and feelings of guilt (Cramer, 2015). The ego is protected from internal and external sources of danger; i.e., from instinctual anxiety and superego anxiety, respectively. For instance, children's fear of disobeying their parents may result in the creation of objective anxiety, and an adult's internalised conscience is the source of prohibitions for superego anxiety (Cramer, 2015, p. 526). Defence mechanisms work to keep the repressed thoughts repressed, but when the defences fail, the subject may experience what is commonly known as anxiety. Freud identifies three types of anxiety: reality, neurotic and moral (Horwitz, 2013).

Reality anxiety refers to a painful emotional experience from perceiving danger from the external world (Hall, 1979). The danger posed by the external world is when the condition of the environment threatens to harm the individual. How a person perceives danger and "the arousal of anxiety may be innate in the sense that one inherits the tendency to become afraid in the presence of certain objects or environmental conditions, or it may be acquired during the person's lifetime" (Hall, 1979, p. 63). Fears are acquired during infancy and early childhood because individuals at this stage are helpless and are not able to cope with the external dangers. When the experience of anxiety is overwhelming and the individual is reduced to an infantile state of helplessness, the situation leads to a traumatic experience. In this regard, fears are derived from the early experience of helplessness. In order to avoid reality anxiety, the individual may learn how to react to the dangers of the external world by running away from the danger or doing something to nullify the situation. If the individual fails to get rid of the danger, the anxiety will build up to a point where the individual may collapse or faint.

Neurotic anxiety is the result of sexual repression. The symptom of anxiety is a displacement of the repressed wish that cannot be fulfilled. In certain conditions such as phobias, neurotics

would go to great lengths to avoid anxiety (Asl & Mehrvand, 2014; Mehrvand & Asl, 2013; Thompson & Leavy, 1994). Neurotic anxiety is completely different from real anxiety. Whereas the latter is “a signal elicited from an external threat or danger,” the former is a “derivative of the economics of sexual life” (p. 15). The danger of neurotic anxiety is internal and it is not consciously recognised. It is a response to threatening external danger. An example of external danger is castration, the loss of genitals. Castration is the punishment of being in love with the mother. Though it seems to be only a threat, the child believes the danger of the threat, and thus castration is considered as an external danger. Castration, however, is only applicable for young boys. The girls, in Freudian parlance, fear the loss of love. The female infant develops anxiety when it realises the absence of the mother (Thompson & Leavy, 1994).

In the phenomenology of neurotic anxiety, there are three main symptoms that should be looked into: general irritability, anxious expectations, and anxiety attacks. General irritability can be seen in a variety of states. Yet it is considered to be invariably present in neurotic anxiety, and this symptom points to an accumulation of sexual excitation (Starkstein, 2018). Anxious expectation is present in “normal anxiety and in hypochondria, mostly fearing vague semantic complaints” (Starkstein, 2018, p. 235). Anxious expectation is also moral anxiety, which can be described as an exaggerated scrupulousness and pedantry. As the main symptom of anxiety neurosis, it is “the semantic energy freely available to engage with an object of object of potential worry is the main mechanism of this anxiety” (Starkstein, 2018, p. 235). Lastly, anxiety attacks consist of psychological symptoms; e.g., when a person has the idea of imminent death or having an acute illness and going crazy.

Moral anxiety is created when a person experiences guilt or shame in the ego. These feelings are stirred by the perception of danger from the conscience. The conscience works as “the internalised agent of parental authority,” which threatens to “punish the person for doing something or thinking something which transgresses the perfectionistic aims of the ego-ideal that have been laid down in the personality by the parents” (Hall, 1979, p. 68). Moral anxiety is slightly similar to neurotic anxiety; a person is unable to escape from feeling guilty by running away from the situation. In addition to this, moral anxiety is also an outgrowth of an objective fear of the parents. Since the conscience works as the voice of parental authority it prohibits sensuality and disobedience. A person who is virtuous tends to experience more shame compared to an unvirtuous person. Considering the fact that a person who is less virtuous does not experience much shame, they are “less likely to feel conscience-stricken he thinks or does something that is alien to the moral code” (Hall, 1979, p. 69). The guilt can be overwhelming and sometimes the person experiencing this feeling may do something to invite punishment from an external source to ease the guilt and find relief.

Furthermore, anxiety can reveal a person's core issues existing in the psychological space. In Freudian theory, core issues are identified as fear of intimacy, fear of abandonment, fear of betrayal, low self-esteem, insecure or unstable sense of self and the Oedipal fixation (Asl, 2014; Pourya Asl, 2018a & 2018b & 2019). The first is defined as an overwhelming feeling of being emotionally close to someone whose absence can destroy a person. In order to avoid this ordeal, a person would keep a safe emotional distance from others. Fear of intimacy works as a defence mechanism. However, when this defence persists, the fear of intimacy becomes a core issue for the subject. Fear of abandonment is divided into two parts, physical abandonment and emotional abandonment. The former is described as a condition where a person believes their loved ones will leave them. Emotional abandonment, on the other hand, is the belief that nobody genuinely cares for the subject. In the fear or betrayal, a person may feel that they cannot trust their friends and loved ones not to lie to them or laugh behind their back. For those who are in a relationship, they fear that their partner may cheat on them and date other people. Low self-worth happens when an individual genuinely believe that they do not have self-worth and are undeserving of attention, love, and any of life's rewards. Insecure or unstable sense of self is a core issue that explains how a person may have the inability to establish a sense of identity. Due to the feeling of being insecure, a person may be vulnerable to the influence of other people. Usually, a person who is insecure occasionally changes the way they look or behave as they mingle with different people or groups. Last but not least, the oedipal fixation is a dysfunctional bond between a child and the parent of the opposite sex and if a person does not outgrow this problem during their adult life, it will not allow them to develop a mature relationship with their peers.

Freud's theories on the different types of anxiety and cores issues are useful in teasing out the development of Humbert's personality and the psychological motivations behind his actions. In what follows, the study will apply Freud's theories on the character of Humbert to understand the inner, moral and psychological conflicts that he goes through.

Humbert's Growing Fear and Anxiety

One of the Freudian core issues that Humbert of *Lolita* deals with is the fear of abandonment which was triggered by his mother's early death. The feeling of abandonment was further reinforced by the death of his first love, aggravating his sense of being left alone. Humbert's fear is later realised when his first wife Velaria leaves him for another man and his second wife Charlotte dies from being hit by a car. The continuous re-enactment of the childhood traumatic experience of being abandoned ultimately leads to development of certain psychological anxieties that in turn instil the irrational fear of being betrayed by the loved ones. According to Hamrit (2009), the death of Humbert's childhood lover Annabel Leigh left him with another disfiguring psychological scar, provoking in him reality anxiety. This is

due to the fact that Humbert failed to consummate his love with her, and grew up with unfulfilled desires.

Even though Humbert had a comfortable lifestyle, his life was permanently afflicted by the lack of supportive parents. The physical absence of his mother was followed by the emotional detachment of his father. Yet, Humbert explains to the reader that he grew up as a “happy, healthy child in a bright world of illustrated books, clean sand, orange trees, friendly dogs, sea vistas and smiling faces” (Nabokov, 1955, p. 8). Even so, Humbert does not explain about his relationship with his father, as he did not have his parents to look up to as a child. The significance of having a parental figure is to provide physical, social, and emotional support for the child to grow up and develop a healthy state of mind, and this was denied to Humbert as he grew up. It is during this period of emotional lack that Humbert becomes fixated with Annabel. As he tells us, they were both “madly, clumsily, shamelessly, agonisingly in love with each other” (Nabokov, 1955, p. 10). This strong state of emotional and romantic attachment, however, is disrupted by the unavoidable death of Annabel, and hence a re-enactment of a childhood trauma of the loss of love objects. Humbert thus experiences reality anxiety once again (Bastuevna, et al 2018).

The growth of reality anxiety produces in the subject’s psyche certain defence mechanisms to tackle with (re)surfacing of unwanted feelings such as guilt and painful memories (Baumeister, Dale & Sommer, 1998). To overcome the fears of betrayal and abandonment, Humbert develops a liking for girls that resemble Annabel. As we are told, after spending some time with prostitutes, he finds himself attracted to a certain type of girls “between the age of nine and fourteen,” and coins the term “nymphets” for these types of girls (Nabokov, 1955, p. 15). In other words, instead of letting go of his past love objects, Humbert looks for other people to fill their place as a substitute. Hence, his emotional and physical approach towards Lolita is indeed a desperate endeavour to nullify the traumatic fear of being left alone.

Nevertheless, Humbert’s love and sexual desire for Lolita is followed by a conscious struggle to restrain himself from being sexually involved with Lolita. The constant repression of his sexual desires leads to the increasing growth of neurotic anxiety. Humbert represses his sexual desires not to defile Lolita. As he confides to us, “I felt proud of myself. I had stolen honey of spasm without impairing the morals of a minor. Absolutely no harm done” (Nabokov, 1955, p. 68). His attempt to satisfy himself without defiling Lolita’s innocence was a conscious act of repressing his insatiable sexual desires. The repression is enacted because Humbert is very well aware that a sexual relationship with a minor is against the law, and he can save himself from punishment by restraining himself. As he states, “Lolita was safe—and I was safe” (Nabokov, 1955, p. 68). However, the excitement of not being caught leaves Humbert with a desire to repeat the experience again. The desire emanates from the

most critical and unresolved core issue that Humbert suffers from, the oedipal fixation. A man suffering from oedipus complex has a hard time developing a mature relationship with his peers (Fear, 2016; Ingham, 2002). Likewise, Humbert's fixation in the Oedipal stage teases out the reason for his paedophilic activities which serve as a replacement for a relationship with his mother. Throughout the novel, Humbert refuses to have a close relationship with anyone to allay suspicions about his paedophilic tendencies.

Yet Humbert's growing fear that others may find out about his relationship with Lolita leaves him in a constant state of anxiety. A man that has a relationship with young girls is known to be a paedophile. To ensure that his relationship remained a secret from the public he began his extensive travels all over the state. As he confesses, "In my dread of arousing suspicion, I would eagerly pay for both sections of one double unit, each containing a double bed" (Nabokov, 1955, p. 163). This also shows that Humbert went to great lengths to make sure no one suspected anything between him and Lolita. According to Kopelson (2008), being aware of his unforgivable crime, Humbert tries to manipulate the public into believing that his intentions were pure and that he had truly loved Lolita. Yet, his growing anxiety is aggravated with an obsessive feeling of being followed by someone while travelling around the states. Humbert suspects that someone is following them, and tells Lolita, "That person has been following us all day, and his car was at the motel yesterday, and I think he is a cop. You know perfectly well what will happen and where you will go if the police find out about things" (Nabokov, 1955, p. 248). Humbert warns Lolita about the unfortunate consequences of divulging their secret relationship only to manipulate her into thinking that her life would be miserable without him. Accordingly, Lolita begins to feel that "she had absolutely nowhere else to go" if Humbert gets caught (Nabokov, 1955, p. 160). Humbert's attempts to ensure that Lolita never betrays and leaves him is to prevent the re-enactment of the traumatic experience of being abandoned. Lolita "would never, never be permitted to go to with a youngster in rut to a movie, or neck in a car, or go to a boy-girl parties at the houses of schoolmates, or indulge out of my earshot in boy-girl telephone conversation" (Nabokov, 1955, p. 211). The constant state of fear ultimately leads to anxiety attacks, driving him crazy, paranoid and obsessed over trifling issues. Humbert explained that he had "a dreadful breakdown" and was sent "to a sanitarium for more than a year" (Nabokov, 1955, p. 34). Humbert went back to work after that but was "hospitalised again," making it his second time at the psychiatric clinic (Nabokov, 1955, p. 34).

Towards the end of the novel, however, the paedophilic protagonist experiences moral anxiety as he realises that he has robbed Lolita of her childhood. Blinded by his desire for Lolita, he finally comes to a realisation that he has regarded Lolita as nothing but a love object. This is revealed to us when Humbert states, "I did not know a thing about my darling's mind" (Nabokov, 1955, p. 324). Humbert also acknowledges the fact that he was "not a boy-friend, not a glamour man, not a pal, not even a person at all, but just two eyes and

a foot of engorged brawn” (Nabokov, 1955, p. 323). On top of that, Humbert could not help but compare Lolita’s life to that of Avis, her friend. Avis had “a wonderful fat pink dad and a small chubby brother, and a brand-new baby sister, and a home, and two grinning dogs, and Lolita had nothing” (Nabokov, 1955, p. 326). This comparison is to show that Lolita has missed out on a normal childhood. Finally, Humbert concludes that “even the most miserable of family lives was better than the parody of incest which in the long run, was the best I could offer the waif” (Nabokov, 1955, p. 327). This final realisation leaves Humbert feeling overwhelmed with guilt as he realises that Lolita misses her mother and desires a normal childhood just like her friend, Avis.

Conclusion

The male protagonist of Nabokov’s novel *Lolita* is known to be a paedophile, rapist, and murderer. This study applied Freud’s theory on anxiety to understand the development of his personality and the moral conflict he had to endure throughout his life. It is found that Humbert is struggling with certain psychological core issues namely fear of abandonment, fear of betrayal, and oedipus complex, which together lead to the creation of different forms of anxiety, such as reality, neurotic and moral anxiety. All these fears and anxieties are rooted in the subject’s loss of his childhood love object. The physical absence of his mother, which was ensued by the emotional detachment of his father, was followed by a similar traumatic experience of the death of his first love, Annabel Leigh. This pattern of abandonment, aggravated by betrayal of his first wife and the death of the second one, eventually led to the development of the fear of betrayal. As for the oedipal fixation, Humbert fills the absence of his maternal love object with nymphets as close substitutes whose youth and innocence remind him of his mother. Humbert thus finds himself instantly attracted to Lolita as a replacement for his childhood love object. To avoid the re-enactment of the trauma of betrayal, Humbert controlled Lolita’s life. Yet, towards the end of the novel, Humbert experiences moral anxiety. As much as he was projected to be a monster, he sympathises with Lolita’s helpless situation. Humbert is therefore not just a paedophile as the society has labelled him to be. He suffers from a psychological disorder that has led him to be a paedophile in his adulthood. There are three defining moments that have shaped Humbert’s childhood: the trauma of loss of mother, the death of childhood lover, and feeling of insecurity. Despite his constant struggles to live a normal adult life, he turns into a paedophile whose psyche is afflicted by moral anxiety.

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