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English 477B

12 April 2022

Layers of Reality: The Use of Fantasy in *Lolita*

Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* is a clear exploration of the limits of aesthetic language that asks the audience to grapple with the limits they are willing to overlook subject matter for the appreciation of prose. This is seen through Humbert Humbert's narrative which is laced with allusions to classic fairy-tales and mythology. Humbert's incorporation of these myths and fantasies serves as a way to show the audience that his own perverted affair with Lolita is a type of fairy-tale itself. He does this through the utilization of fantastical language, direct references to popular fairy-tales, and the implementation of fairy-tale archetypes. Each of these elements works together to compose Humbert's own twisted fairy-tale that is meant to aestheticize his pedophilic love for Lolita while simultaneously blurring the line between fantasy and reality.

Fairy-tales have long been idealized versions of reality that contain recognizable stock characters such as the jealous mother, the damsel, the hero, and the villain. Humbert's narrative does its best at attempting to replicate these characters in order to demonstrate to the audience that his tale is that of a whirlwind romance between a hero and his enchanting woman. This is first seen in the way that he describes Lolita's mother as envious and spiteful of her child. Humbert writes, "She had been annoyed by Lo's liking me; but my feelings she could not divine". (83) Essentially, Humbert's affection is so desired by Charlotte that she views her

daughter as an obstacle rather than her own child. Furthermore, Lolita is perceived as the sole barrier between Charlotte and her fantasy of a life with Humbert, adding to the multiple layers of fantasy and dreams of happy endings throughout the novel. This idea is reinforced by the imagery of apples in Humbert and Charlotte's introduction. Humbert states, "she kept making spasmodic dashes at three ashtrays near the fender (where lay the brown core of an apple)" (37). Here is a significant reference to the poison apple in *Snow White* that symbolizes the poisonous relationship between mother and daughter as well as the obstruction of innocence that occurs later in the novel. However, despite Humbert's attempt to portray Charlotte as an unfit mother, her presence acts as a protective barrier from the true tale's true villain. Lolita is a damsel not by her mother's doing but by Humbert's sexual perversity which further highlights Humbert's inability to separate fantasy from reality.

By casting Charlotte as the archetypal evil mother, Humbert is able to then cast Lolita as the fairy-tale damsel in need of saving from her cruel parent. Humbert repeatedly refers to Lolita as "princess" and "queen", a clear verbalization of the role he has given her as the heroine of his elaborate fantasy. Lolita's position as an archetypal damsel is also apparent in Humbert's recognition of her vulnerability. He writes, "And, as if I were the fairy-tale nurse of some little princess (lost, kidnapped, covered in gypsy rags through which her nakedness smiled at the king and his hounds), I recognized the tiny dark-brown mole on her side". (39) Humbert admittedly manufactures this fantasy of an exposed Lolita in an attempt to rationalize his thoughts and provoke a similarity between the romantic fairy-tale and his corrupt love of Lolita.

Lolita's characterization as a helpless damsel is reinforced in Humbert's first sexually gratifying experience with her in which he appropriates a multitude of popular fairy-tales.

Humbert's replication of the apple scene in *Snow White* demonstrates how Humbert lures Lolita into a trap that preys on her uncorrupted youth. He writes "I produced Delicious. She grasped at it and bit into it and my heart was like snow under thin crimson skin" (58) Humbert inserts this fragment of folklore to disguise his predatorial tendencies as an unexplainable enchantment. Essentially, he maintains that his intention was not originally to take advantage of her vulnerability, but her power as a nymphet was too bewitching for him to resist. Humbert also alludes to *Cinderella* when he writes "her slipperless foot" (59) and to *Beauty and the Beast* when he writes, "and every movement she made, every shuffle and ripple, helped me to conceal and to improve the secret system of tactile correspondence between beast and beauty" (59). With these references, Humbert manages to escape the conversation of consensuality by clutching to the similarities between his fictionalized Lolita and fairy-tale princesses. Additionally, the intertwining of these fairy-tales with his own prose shows that his relationship with Lolita was not one fixated on sexual gratification but was instead a tale of romance and appreciation of Lolita's beauty.

While Lolita and Charlotte adhere to classic fairy-tale character archetypes in Humbert's narrative, his own characterization is less evident. At different points in the text, he can be viewed as the tragic hero, the monster, and the huntsman which further demonstrates his ability to slip between roles and further blend fantasy with reality. This is most evident in Humbert's sexual affair with Lolita at The Enchanted Hunters Inn which disguises itself as a version of Sleeping Beauty. In preparation for rescuing Lolita from the prison of summer camp, Humbert describes himself as "a comic, clumsy, wavering Prince Charming" (109). He views himself as a hero destined for a life of pleasure with his princess. However, this image of princely behavior is

tainted by the drugging of Lolita with “Papa’s Purple Pills” (122). Humbert states, “As I expected, she pounced upon the vial with its plump, beautifully colored capsules loaded with Beauty’s Sleep. ‘Blue!’ She exclaimed. ‘Violet blue. What are they made of?’ ‘Summer skies.’ I said, ‘and plums and figs, and the grape-blood of emperors.’” (122) This passage is important for a couple of reasons. First, is Humbert’s use of color. Along with many other references to the color purple in his narrative, the color purple is most notably a symbol of aristocracy and power which fit well into Humbert’s fantasization of Lolita as a Princess and himself a prince. Moreover, the color purple is a combination of red and blue which could serve as a representation of how Humbert borrows from both fiction and truth to construct an improved reality immortalized as a work of literary art.

Additionally, the transparent reference to Sleeping Beauty is a key component of both this passage and the chapters set in the Enchant Hunters Inn because it is how Humbert is able to transform the sexual assault of Lolita into yet another aestheticized profession of mutual love. His use of the adjective “pounced” indicates Lolita’s willingness to ingest the pill and prevents him from being an irredeemable villain capable of rape. Humbert refers to the drug as a “magic potion” which is another example of Humbert masking the truth through a veil of fantasy. Furthermore, the spell of Sleeping Beauty can only be undone by her prince charming who awakens her with a kiss. Yet in Humbert’s re-telling, Lolita is never subject to a comatose slumber. Humbert states, “I had the odious feeling that little Dolores was wide awake and would explode in screams if I touched her with any part of my wretchedness.” (129) The use of Dolores’s true name here exposes a breach in Humbert’s fairy-tale and questions his own role as a hero. This deviation from the formulaic composure of Sleeping Beauty is an indication that

Humbert is not Dolores's prince charming and Dolores is not the same Lolita that Humbert has fabricated.

Humbert's role in the composition of his own fantastic tale could also embody that of the tragic hero whose fatal flaw is beyond his control. This is seen in his explanation of nymphets. He writes, "Between the ages limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than the, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is demoniac)" (16) Here, Humbert makes the crucial distinction that nymphet girls are not human and are instead a mythical creature rooted in Greek mythology who possess the power to seduce certain men. This is again shown when Humbert writes, "...had he known that every nerve in me was still anointed and ringed with the feel of her body – the body of some immortal daemon disguised as a female child." (139) By crafting this fictional creature, Humbert views himself not as a man who preys on young girls but the opposite. In Humbert's alternate reality, it is the non-human nymphets that are responsible for preying on him. He describes their appeal as otherworldly and evil, yet he is unable to refrain from their allure. This idea is reinforced when he states, "generally thirty or forty, and as many as ninety in a few known cases, between maiden and man to enable the latter to come under a nymphet's spell." (17) Essentially, Humbert, and many others like him, are powerless to stop the enchanting forces of a nymphet.

With Humbert's carefully crafted definition of a nymphet and her effects, he is able to pose as the victim of his own creation. In the Enchanted Hunters inn, Humbert writes, "I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me." (132) Not only does this statement attempt to erase the possibility that he is a predator that stole Lolita's innocence, but it

also paints Humbert as the victim of Lolita's spell. He later states, "A great endeavor lures me on: to fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets." (134) Here, Humbert speaks as though he is a tortured hero on a grand quest to find the cure for the magical spell of the nymphet. The irony here is that the downfall of Humbert is a construction of his own lucid imagination. He will never find a cure for his spell because Lolita is a human child, not the enchantress that Humbert envisions her to be.

To add to the multiple layers of folklore that are used throughout the text to paint a distorted image of reality, Humbert also includes several references to Greek and Roman mythology. For example, Humbert states, "One mercifully hopes there are water nymphs in the Styx" (250). In Greek literature, the River Styx acts as a barrier between the living world from the underworld, which indicates that his nymphets lie in a world between good and evil. The same can be said for the question of Humbert's own characterization. Through the construction of his tale, he dilutes the traditional roles of hero and villain and attempts to display that he is both. In addition, Lolita is also cast as Diana, an allusion to the Roman Goddess of the hunt who acted as an ally to nymphs and protector of virgins. Humbert's depiction of Lolita as Diana enhances his romanticization of her as a type of goddess while again demonstrating how myth can be nearly indistinguishable from reality.

Although Humbert fails to adhere to any singular character type presented in works of fantasy, his own story still attempts to echo a fairy-tale romance by grasping for a piece of the traditional happy ending. He says to Lolita "Come just as you are. And we shall live happily ever after." (278) The happily ever after statement seen here is an omnipresent trope littered throughout all genres of fantasy and Humbert's clear desperation for a happy ending with Lolita

but failure to obtain her consent upholds that his narrative is truly a mangled impersonation of a fairy-tale. Humbert's only hope for any satisfactory ending to his and Lolita's story is to write it himself, which is exactly what he does. Humbert writes, "I wish for this memoir to be published only when Lolita is no longer alive. Thus, neither of us is alive when the reader opens this book. But while the blood still throbs through my writing hand, you are still as much part of blessed matter as I am" (309) Here, Humbert's assertion that Lolita has to be dead before his work is published is the ultimate way to ensure his tale remains unquestioned for eternity. Moreover, Humbert's happily ever after is one where the perversity of his sexual acts are left to be resolved by his audience who are subjected to the blurred borders of his reality.

Humbert Humbert's narrative utilizes myths and fairy-tales to not only romanticize his pedophilic affair with Lolita but to suggest that his tale is in many ways similar to that of a beloved work of fantasy leading his audience to question the distinction between his love for Lolita and the love a prince has for his princess. Additionally, Humbert's ability to manipulate Charlotte and Lolita to conform to certain archetypal molds such as the jealous mother and the damsel is done in a way that toys with the faint line separating reality and fantasy. This faint line coupled with Humbert's appropriation of fantasy ultimately allows him to fabricate his own fairy-tale in which the artistry of the story is immortalized despite the unclear identification of hero and the villain.

Works Cited

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