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Trauma and Desire

In the novel *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, characters Humbert Humbert and Dolores Haze, otherwise known as Lolita, challenge the boundaries of desire by pursuing a sexual relationship despite their familial connection. The controversial nature of this novel is thinly veiled by Humbert's darkly provocative and eerily persuasive voice. Language becomes a tool used to manipulate the audience in the same way Humbert manipulates Lolita. However, he is unable to use language to cope with the loss of his mother and his first love Annabel; he only briefly addresses the scenes of their death and rarely acknowledges the emotions that follow the loss of a loved one. Therefore, the trauma is repressed and manifests itself in the form of perverted desire toward pubescent girls. In terms of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's structural model, Humbert operates in the Symbolic realm of language by romanticizing his involvement with Lolita in order to justify his hebephiliac fantasies and avoid the reality of his destruction. Although Humbert is capable of using language to convey the sexual obsession surrounding his and Lolita's relationship, he fails to use his words to capture his emotions towards the loss of his mother and Annabel. In a novel overflowing with Humbert's unbridled expression of his sexual deviancy, the occasions when he says the least reveal the most about the nature of his desire.

Humbert Humbert glazes over the death of his mother in a single sentence structured in such a way that the whole event can be summarized with a mere four words: "freak accident" and "picnic, lightning," (Nabokov, 10). He states that he has warm memories of her, but holds nothing concrete about her in his conscious mind. He can find no other words to describe her

beyond saying that she was photogenic. Granted, he was three when his mother was killed, and 3-year-olds usually do not have language capacities sophisticated enough to verbalize grief. Even still, the loss of a family member, especially the loss of a mother at such a young age, is no doubt extremely traumatic. The fact that he only briefly mentions her death without any commentary on how the tragedy affected him suggests that he has not properly confronted those emotions. According to Lacan, children derive an image of themselves through what their mother desires them to be (Bernstein, 226). Without a mother, Humbert was prematurely forced out of this mirroring relationship and into the “name of the father” stage at a time when—upon later recognition—his father was carelessly taking advantage of his Aunt Sybil, who was in love with him. This argument is made all the more poignant when Humbert says, “Perhaps [Sybil] wanted to make of me, in the fullness of time, a better widower than my father,” (Nabokov, 10). Unfortunately, the template had already been imprinted on Humbert’s psyche of what a widower looked like: a man who, despite having lost someone valuable, was able to capitalize on the weakness of others.

Although the mother is never addressed in the rest of the novel, the theme of mothers returns when Humbert marries Charlotte. Once they are married, he fantasizes about how he can get rid of her in order to get closer to Dolores. Even though Charlotte is not killed by Humbert’s hand, he still indirectly renders Dolores motherless, like himself. In his narcissism, Humbert fails to recognize the essential role the mother plays in the life of her child. He projects his own motherless-ness onto Dolores and believes she would be better off with him as her sole caretaker rather than Charlotte. Humbert’s confession to Dolores about her mother’s death is another instance when language fails to bring closure to a tragic situation. Humbert immediately moves from succinctly telling Dolores her mother is dead to listing off a number of items he buys her in

an attempt to assuage her grief (Nabokov, 141). Dolores is essentially robbed of a proper mourning period as Humbert's tunnel vision only allows him to focus on making his sexual fantasies a reality. The rapid transition from death to life after mourning reflects Humbert's own experience with his mother's death. Returning to Lacan's structural model of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, Humbert never utilized the symbolic realm of language to make sense of his mother's death (Bernstein, 231). Therefore, it was repressed and manifested itself in a desire to rid his sexual object of her own mother. The shared experience of losing a mother brings Dolores closer to Humbert in terms of similarity and makes it easier for him to project his fantasies onto her and believe that she is reciprocating those same feelings.

The second traumatic loss Humbert experiences is the death of Annabel. Again, he limits his description of her death to only a fraction of a sentence (Nabokov, 13). The difference between this occasion and his mother's death is that here he recognizes the after-effects of her absence: "I also know that the shock of Annabel's death consolidated the frustration of the nightmare summer, made of it a permanent obstacle to any further romance throughout the cold years of my youth," (Nabokov, 14). He acknowledges that her death will continue to haunt his romantic endeavors, but never addresses any emotions pertaining to the mourning process. Although he claims he moved on from Annabel once he met Lolita, her presence echoes throughout his relationship with the latter. For example, Humbert tries to recreate an intimate moment he and Annabel shared on a beach while on a cross-country road trip with Lolita. In his retelling of the event, Humbert crosses Annabel and Lolita's names: "...Annabel Haze, alias Dolores Lee, alias Loleeta..." (Nabokov, 167). The images of each girl are literally blending as Humbert tries to integrate the nymphet fantasy left behind after Annabel's death into his conscious life through a Symbolic relationship with Lolita. He believes engaging in sexual acts

with a young girl like Lolita will complete the sexual acts that never came to fruition with Annabel. However, this gap between what happened with Annabel and what Humbert wanted to happen is exactly where desire resides. Lacan theorizes that desire is emptiness, the acknowledgement of something missing, a lack that can never be fulfilled or else it would be considered a need (Bernstein, 228). That being said, Humbert will never be satisfied because his true desires can never theoretically be met.

Trauma is the one aspect of the human experience where he needs language most to bring him closure, but instead he represses the trauma and reallocates his linguistic skills to be used for romanticizing his sexual fantasies. He paints a vivid image of his sexual encounters with Lolita because he loves her physical nymphet existence and completing his idolized, unfulfilled fantasy through her is his only aim, but has little to no interest in addressing the traumatic experiences that cultivated the ground where his desires take root. As stated in Bernstein's essay on Lacan, "it is only through the gradual work of symbolization that some traumatic experiences can be recast into words, thus losing their powerful grip on the subject," (231). Unless Humbert goes through this process, he will continue to be held captive by his desires until he reunites with his mother and his first love.

Works Cited

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