
**Summary**

‘Foreword’

The novel is introduced by a foreword by the fictional editor, ‘John Ray, Jr., Ph.D.’, who was supposedly asked by a friend to prepare for printing the manuscript entitled ‘Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male’, whose author ‘Humbert Humbert’ died a natural death in legal captivity before his trial could begin. Besides for removing all clues that could identify actual people in the story, the manuscript was left intact. The editor condemns the author as ‘a shining example of moral leprosy’ and present his memoir for its ‘scientific significance and literary worth’ and above all for ‘the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader’ (p. 5).

‘Part One’

‘Lolita, the light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul’ (p. 9). Thus begins the memoir whose author, under the pseudonym of ‘Humbert Humbert’, writes his confessions in prison.

Humbert was born in Paris in 1910 to an English mother and a father of mixed European origin. His mother died when he was three and he was brought up by his mother’s sister Sybil. She died when he was sixteen. He originally studied psychiatry but switched to English literature.

When he was about thirteen, he fell in love with Annabel, a girl of about the same age. He madly desired her but his desire was never consummated. Short time later, still a young girl, Annabel died of typhus. He was constantly haunted by the unfulfilled desire for Annabel, ‘the initial fateful elf’, and managed to break her spell only by incarnating her in another girl, Lolita, twenty four years later (p. 18).

Humbert, a strikingly handsome man, is capable of normal sexual intercourse with adult women, his actual desire are however ‘nymphaets’, a special kind of girls between nine and fourteen. The peculiar quality of nymphets is recognized only by ‘an artist and a madman’ (p. 17). Humbert satisfies his basic sexual needs with prostitutes, he concentrates especially on those very young ones whom he judges as former nymphets.

He decides to marry for his own safety. He chooses Valeria, a girl-like creature, though in her late twenties. The marriage lasts from 1935 to 1939. Valeria, herself of Polish origin, divorces him for a Russian taxi driver. On an unexpected inheritance, Humbert moves from Paris to New York. He does office work at his leisure and writes a history of French literature for English students. He is treated for mental problems but he teases his psychiatrists.

A friend suggests him to spend the summer of 1947 in the house of one McCoo in the village of Ramsdale. He takes the advice only when he learns about the presence of a young girl-child in the house, a possible nymphet. McCoo’s house burns down the night before Humbert arrives and he is offered to lodge in the messed-up house of Mrs Charlotte Haze, a widow in her mid-thirties. He is ready to refuse the offer until he encounters Dolores.

Humbert regards Dolores, born in 1934, as a resurrection of his ‘dead bride’ Annabel and his gradual involvement with her as ‘a fatal consequence of that “princedom by the sea” in [his] tortured past’ (p. 39-40). Humbert runs a diary in which he records all details concerning Lolita in his illegible miniature handwriting and obscure abbreviations. He notices in Lolita a mixture of ‘tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity’ (p. 44).

The Haze family originally lived in Pisky, a town in the Mid-West, but Lolita was bullied at school and so they moved. The relationship of Mrs Haze to her daughter is cold to hateful. The mother adores Lolita’s late brother, two years her junior, who died at the age of two. The Hazes have no other living relations. Mrs Haze soon fancies turning her lodger into her lover, Lolita enjoys Humbert’s presence too, so the mother and daughter become rivals.

One Sunday morning Humbert and Lolita remain alone in the house, Mrs Haze being gone to church. Lolita joins Humbert sitting on a davenport in the living room and casually stretches her legs on his lap. By a series of discreet movements and adjustments, Humbert manages to derive sexual climax from the position without Lolita noticing anything. Humbert is exceedingly proud of his having done absolutely no harm to the morals of the child.

Mrs Haze becomes increasingly jealous of Lolita and decides to remove her to a summer camp. Humbert is depressed because he is going to lose two months of the two years remaining of Lolita’s nymphage. He is rewarded only by Lolita’s passionate leave-taking embrace before her departure. Mrs Haze leaves for Humbert a love letter in which she bids her lodger to clear the house immediately unless he requites her feelings.

On considering the situation, Humbert decides to marry ‘that sorry and dull thing’ in order to ensure himself the right of a legitimate fatherly love for Lolita (p. 72). At the marriage ceremony, Humbert signs his name as ‘Mr Edgar H. Humbert’, adding the first name ‘just for the heck of it’ (p. 75). Lolita does not attend the wedding because she is extremely happy in her Camp Q, despite her initial unwillingness to go there.

Charlotte’s jealousy of Lolita does not abate, though she does not suspect the nature of Humbert’s affection for her daughter. In a diligently filled in questionnaire in a parent’s guidebook, Charlotte describes Lolita’s personality as ‘aggressive, boisterous, critical, distrustful, impatient, irritable, inquisitive, listless, negativistic (underlined twice) and obstinate’ (p. 81). Much to Humbert’s dismay, she plans to enrol Lolita in a strictly-run boarding school.
Charlotte loves Humbert passionately but she would not be manipulated by him, unlike his first wife Valeria. Humbert does not want to raise suspicion by opposing Charlotte’s decision of sending Lolita away, he occupies himself with planning Charlotte’s murder instead. A perfect occasion comes when they are alone, swimming in a lake, but he finds himself incapable of executing the drowning plan:

‘Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the majority of sex offenders that hanker for some throbbing, sweet-moaning, physical but not necessarily coital, relation with a girl-child, are innocuous, inadequate, passive, timid strangers who merely ask the community to allow them to pursue their practically harmless, so-called aberrant behavior, their little hot wet private acts of sexual deviation without the police and society cracking down upon them. […] Emphatically, no killers are we. Poets never kill.’ (p. 88).

One day Charlotte breaks in the locked drawer where Humbert keeps his diary of lust. After a confrontation with Humbert, she rushes out of the house to the post office but is accidentally overrun by a car. Humbert rejoices at this stroke of good luck provided what he calls ‘McFate’. After the necessary formalities, Humbert takes Charlotte’s blue sedan and drives to call for Lolita at the camp under the pretext of her mother’s grave illness. Lolita teasingly reproaches Humbert for his having stopped caring for her. In an innocent girlish game of hers, she kisses him on his lips. They drive to a hospital in Lepingville to visit the sick mother. They stop for the night in the hotel ‘Enchanted Hunters’ in Briceland which Charlotte once mentioned. On Humbert’s awkward attempt to assume the father role, Lolita responds with strange knowingness, announcing that ‘[t]he word is incest’ (p. 119).

Humbert gives Lolita a sleeping pill, claiming that it is vitamins, and plans to ‘operate’ on her sleeping body while ‘sparing her purity’ (p. 124). He experimented with various sleeping powders already in Ramsdale, trying them on Charlotte. The pill was sufficient for a neurotic, like Charlotte, but it did not work on Lolita. Humbert spends a sleepless night, reinforced by his evening dialogue with a stranger who addressed him on the hotel veranda:

‘Where the devil did you get her?’
‘I beg your pardon?’
‘I said: the weather is getting better.’
‘Seems to.’
‘Who’s the lassie?’
‘My daughter.’
‘You lie––she’s not.’
‘I beg your pardon?’
‘I said: July was hot.’ (p. 127).

In the morning it is Lolita who seduces Humbert. She is shocked that Humbert never had sex as a child. She was early trained in kissing by the respectable Elizabeth Talbot. In Camp Q she made her first sexual experience with the thirteen-year-old Charlie Holmes, the son of the camp’s mistress. ‘Sensitive gentlewomen of the jury, I was not even her first lover,’ comments Humbert on the ‘utterly and hopelessly depraved’ modern girl (p. 135, 133). Humbert and Lolita become lovers. Humbert does not go into details, his focus is not to describe sex but ‘to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets’, to fix the point at which ‘[t]he beastly and beautiful’ are merged (p. 134, 135). He tells Lolita about her mother’s death. He feels remorseful for having hurt the child, both physically and mentally. He compensates the harm by buying Lolita a heap of presents and the two lovingly reconcile:

‘At the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go.’ (p. 142). [The conclusion of Part 1].

‘Part Two’

Humbert and his young lover embark on a year of travels throughout the States, lasting from August 1947 to the same month of 1948. Humbert does not cease to be fascinated by Lolita’s ‘combination of naïveté and deception, of charm and vulgarity’, though he finds her mentally ‘a disgustingly conventional little girl’ with interest but for films and comics (p. 147-8). Lolita is cynical, even cruel, and at times ‘a most exasperating brat’ (p. 148). Humbert fears that Lolita might betray him to police, but he manages to persuade her into ‘shared secrecy and shared guilt’ (151). Lolita is easy to get bored, so they pick sights from travel books almost on random and travel to keep her ‘in passable humor from kiss to kiss’ (p. 154). Lolita proves to attract the attention of men, which incites Humbert’s jealousy and leads to many minor and major rows:

‘She had entered my world, umber and black Humberland, with rash curiosity; she surveyed it with a shrug of amused distaste; and it seemed to me now that she was ready to turn away from it with something akin to plain repulsion. […] There is nothing more atrociously cruel than an adored child.’ (p. 166).

Humbert tries to re-create a scene from his incomplete childhood romance in which he and his lover were surprised on the beach by bathers and prevented from consummating their desire. All his attempts of rehearsing the scene fail, either due to foul weather or due to lack of privacy on sunny days. He gives up rural settings altogether after they are discovered naked on a blanket by a mother and her children on a walk. Humbert lives on an independent but modest income and the travelling and Lolita’s demands consume considerable sums of money. The couple follows a system of monetary bribes for Lolita, who charges Humbert even for each extra embrace. She cries every night but she keeps on hoarding her earnings diligently. Through a trustworthy
friend, Gaston Godin (presumably a homosexual paedophile), Humbert arranges to hire a house in Beardsley. Lolita is enrolled in the local expensive day school for girls as Dorothy Humbird. Humbert has not yet tackled the problem of his legal status with respect to Lolita but he passes her off as his natural daughter. Lolita’s school results are poor but the school’s mistress, Miss Pratt, calls Humbert for an interview for a different reason. Lolita shows alarmingly little interest in boys, so she should be encouraged to dating and mingling with others. Accordingly, Humbert organizes for Lolita a Christmas party with both girls and boys. The evening is a failure, spoilt both by Humbert’s would-be-discreet supervision and Lolita’s dislike for the boys of her age. Also in keeping with Miss Pratt’s suggestion, Lolita is allowed to play a little nymph in a piece called ‘The Hunted Enchanters’, which is being rehearsed at school.

Humbert discovers that Lolita missed two of her piano lessons. Lolita claims that she was rehearsing with Mona Dahl, who confirms her version, but Humbert does not believe it. There is a shouting argument, interrupted by a call from an angry neighbour, during which Lolita runs away. Humbert finds her just leaving a phone booth. Lolita submits to Humbert and back home, she has herself carried upstairs, claiming she feels ‘sort of romantic’ (p. 207). After this incident Lolita decides to quit school and wants to travel again, but this time where she chooses herself. Humbert soon realizes that they are being followed by a man in a red convertible. The middle-aged stranger is bald-headed, moustached, and broad-shouldered. Humbert fears that he is a detective or someone in alliance with Lolita, whom he increasingly distrusts. Humbert dubs him Gustave Trapp for his resembling his relative of the name. In Wace Lolita uses a moment of Humbert’s inattention when they are in a post office and runs away. When Humbert finds her, she makes poor excuses and provokes Humbert into slapping her on her face. A reconciliation follows. Humbert took down the licence plate of Trapp but Lolita erased and changed the note. Trapp adopts new tactics and follows them henceforth in different rented cars.

One day they have a tire defect and when Humbert notices that Trapp stopped a few steps behind them, he goes to talk to him under the pretext of asking for a jack. Lolita sets the car into motion and hinders the interview. Another day Humbert is called off from a tennis game with Lolita, who is a talented but hopelessly polite player, to answer an urgent call from Beardsley. The call is a pretence and when Humbert returns, he finds Trapp playing with Lolita. Lolita incurs a virus infection and is forced to spend a week in a hospital. Lolita leaves the hospital with ‘uncle Gustave’. Humbert makes a hysterical scene in the hospital and calms down only on the appearance of a policeman. On the day of Lolita’s fifteenth birthday, Humbert sends her belongings as a gift to an orphanage. Between 1950 and 1952 he lives with the thirty-year-old Rita, a notorious divorcee and heavy drinker, whose soothing presence however saves him from mischief and madhouse. When he gives up his search for Lolita, he settles in New York. There he unexpectedly receives a letter from Lolita, now ‘Mrs Richard F. Schiller’, asking for financial help. Lolita lives in Coalmont, within a single-day drive from New York. She is married to Dick, a war veteran with impaired hearing, and is in the final stages of her pregnancy. At seventeen, her former beauty is irretrievably lost. The conditions of the young family are very poor. Lolita joyfully accepts the cash she asked for plus a cheque for 4,000$ which is the money that Humbert saved for Lolita from the sale of the old Haze house in Ramsdale. Humbert demands from Lolita the name of her kidnapper and supposed seducer. Lolita finally tells him. He is dubbed ‘Cue’ among friends and he was the only love of Lolita’s life. He took her to a ranch where he wanted her to act in obscene films, which Lolita refused and was consequently thrown out. Humbert still madly loves his nymph and offers her to return to him. She absolutely refuses even to give him any hope:

‘You are sure you are not coming with me? Is there no hope of your coming? Tell me only this.’
‘No,’ she said. ‘No, honey, no.’
She had never called me honey before.
‘No,’ she said, ‘it is quite out of the question. I would sooner go back to Cue. I mean—’
She groped for words. I supplied them mentally (‘He broke my heart. You merely broke my life.’)

Humbert feels remorseful because he fully realizes how Lolita has suffered. He sees that she found out for herself ‘during [their] singular and bestial cohabitation that even the most miserable of family lives was better than the parody of incest’ (p. 287). Humbert revisits Ramsdale in order to learn from Dr Quilty, the local dentist, the whereabouts of his famous nephew, Clarence Quilty the playwright. Humbert finds Quilty in his house at Grimm Road, near Parkington. He prepares his pocket automatic, inherited from Harold Haze, which he affectionately calls ‘Chum’, and has a few drinks. He enters the house in the morning after a party and finds Quilty unsuspicious and still dazed by liquor. He desperately tries to explain to Quilty why he is going to kill him. Quilty denies having anything with Lolita, as he is ‘practically impotent’ (p. 298).

After a series of an awkward wrestling, chasing, and shooting, during which the both elderly men pant heavily and Quilty still tries to bribe Humbert for not killing him, Humbert leaves Quilty with multiple shot wounds upstairs and quits the house. Downstairs he comes across a group of guests gathering for another party. Quilty manages to crawl to the top of the stairs but nobody pays the dying man any attention.
Humbert gets in his blue sedan and drives away: ‘it occurred to me—not by way of protest, not as a symbol, or anything like that, but merely as a novel experience—that since I had disregarded all laws of humanity, I might as well disregard the rules of traffic’ (p. 306). He crosses to the left side of the road and drives on until he is stopped and arrested. He has the many hands carry him limply out of the car, without resisting and without cooperating. He recalls one day soon after Lolita’s disappearance when he grew sick and got out of the car on the top of a hill. He was enchanted by the melodious sounds of children playing in a village below and realized ‘that the hopelessly poignant thing was Lolita’s absence from [his] side, but the absence of her voice from that concord’ (p. 308). He asks his memoir to be published only after Lolita’s death and finishes his task of capturing Lolita in art, concluding that ‘this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita’ (p. 309). The reader already knows from the ‘Foreword’ that Lolita dies in childbirth after delivering a stillborn daughter in Gray Star on Christmas Day 1952.

**Analysis**

**Language Virtuosity**

The author proves his mastery of English not only by his long, winding complex sentences but also his original word inventory. His favourites are polysyllabic, difficult, rarely used words (‘a mixture of ferocity and jocularity’, ‘ponderously capricious’, p. 5). He uses high literary prose style which at some places aspires to the resonance of poetry (‘I had stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor. […] The conjurer had poured milk, molasses, foaming champagne into a young lady’s new white purse; and lo, the purse was intact.’ P. 62). He exploits marked word order for special effect (‘no killers are we’, p. 88) and experiments with unusual collocations or connections of incongruous elements (‘[w]hy do those people guess so much and shave so little’, p. 275). As the narrator observes: ‘Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with’ (p. 32)!

The author also includes whole untranslated sentences or phrases in French. There are broad cultural and specifically literary allusions, as for instance Humbert is fond of painting and looks for a precedent of paedophilia to Edgar Allen Poe’s young bride Virginia, Dante’s Beatrice, and Petrarch’s Laura. Poe is the very favourite: the opening chapter of the novel echoes Poe’s poem ‘Annabel Lee’; Annabel is also the name of Humbert’s first child love; and Humbert adds ‘Edgar’ to his name on his marriage. Many of the character names are at the same time their thinly disguised characteristics: Clarence Quilty (‘guilty’), Gustave Trapp (‘trap’), Miss Pratt (‘prat’). Also of interest is the hotel name ‘Enchanted Hunters’, which characterizes the first part of the book, and the reversed name of the play ‘Hunted Enchanters’, which in turn characterizes what is happening in the second part.

**Narrative Complexity**

Humbert originally conceives his memoir to be used at the court trial. Therefore he occasionally addresses the ‘ladies and gentlemen of the jury’ and presents one or two numbered exhibits, as if supplying judicial evidence. He also at times addresses the psychiatrists and sexologist who would examine his case. Of course he also addresses Lolita, especially at the conclusion of the novel where he gives her several pieces of well-meant fatherly advice. The tone of the narrator is shifting constantly, according to the development of his situation. He is both serious and mocking, remorseful and elated, but always sincere.

There is a peculiar kind of humour in the narrative. The retrospective point of view enables the narrator to observe what he describes from a safe distance, so there is place enough for occasional self-mockery. There is hardly any pure humour, it is rather dry-mock on the part of Humbert (‘[b]eing a murderer with a sensational but incomplete and unorthodox memory…’, p. 217) and savage, cynical humour on the part of his nymphet (when the two pass by a crashed car with a woman’s leg protruding from it, Lolita observes: ‘That was the exact type of mocassin I was trying to describe to that jerk in the store.’ p. 174). There is also much of the grotesque, at its best especially in the final pitiful confrontation of Humbert and Quilty.

**(No) Pornography**

Despite such reactions from some of its first readers, the novel cannot be described as pornography. Sexual scenes are surprisingly rare and where they do appear, they are implied or rendered into metaphors rather than described in any explicit detail. The narrator emphasizes throughout his accounts that he loves Lolita and this seems to be actually the case, as manifested in his last plead for Lolita to return to him despite her being no longer a nymphet or more generally in his loving descriptions of the various parts of Lolita’s body, reaching from her toe to her spine. The novel may be viewed rather as an entanglement of one-sided love stories: Humbert loves Lolita, Lolita loves Quilty, and Charlotte loves Humbert, but the feelings of none of them are requited.

**Motif of Murder**

The novel may be read also as a detective story in which the murderer is known from the beginning but the identity of the victim is withdrawn until the very end. Humbert identifies himself as a murderer early in the novel, in fact so early that a first-time reader will probably not take the hint: ‘You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style’ (p. 9). Allusions to the murder are dropped throughout the novel but grow denser towards its end when...
Humbert becomes somewhat paranoid when he is followed by Trapp and then when he verges on the edge of madness as Lolita leaves him. The narrator sports with the reader whom he imagines guessing at the identity of the victim and then disappoints the reader’s expectations: ‘I could not kill her [= Lolita], of course, as some have thought. You see, I loved her. It was love at first sight, at last sight, at ever and ever sight.’ (p. 270). Or: ‘Then I pulled out my automatic—I mean, this is the kind of fool thing a reader might suppose I did. It never even occurred to me to do it.’ (p. 280).

Works Cited