

Taboo Topics in Fiction:

The Case of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

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- Morality



Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* (1955) is set in the 1950's U.S.A. It tells a story about an aging literature professor from Europe, Humbert Humbert, who obsessively pursues his sexual passions for underage girls he calls nymphets. He undertakes to tutor a young girl, Dolores Haze, who he refers to as "Lolita". He lodges with the widowed mother and daughter and agrees to marry Lolita's mother, Charlotte Haze, in order to better pursue his sexual desires for Lolita. The novel takes the form of a monologue in which Humbert, who is at this point on a frantic search for Lolita after she escaped with her former drama teacher, Clare Quilty, from hospital where she was admitted with a bad case of the influenza, attempts to justify his love and obsession with the pubescent Lolita.

An important aspect of my thesis is the discussion of the various narrators in the novel; Vladimir Nabokov, John Ray Jnr. and Humbert Humbert. The novel, or Humbert's memoirs, is only published after Lolita has died in order to preserve her dignity. John Ray Jnr. is the psychologist who is charged with editing Humbert's memoirs to ensure that no lewd details are published. This brings problems of their own, as we find that John Ray Jnr. has clear moral perceptions of Humbert as a person. This effectively creates a fiction within a fiction, which is already set in the fictitious genre of the novel. Vladimir Nabokov arguably informs the novel with his own ethics and ethos. This interrogates the reliability of the narrators and calls into question the truth-value of fiction and the inappropriateness of the law to ban fiction that discusses taboo issues.

The main aim of my thesis is to discredit Humbert as a reliable narrator and character by analysing the taboo issues of paedophilia, incest, rape and murder. This will be done in order to show how Nabokov proposes alternative morals by deconstructing traditional morality using taboo topics in fiction.

The particular focus on paedophilia, incest and rape within the novel prioritises child sexual abuse as Humbert's main transgression. However, my thesis further suggests that this is not his only crime. The narrative of the novel, being in the first person, gives Humbert the power to effectively erase the voice of Lolita, a power which he exercises with impunity. Humbert can tell his version of a story in a way that elicits the reader's sympathy. The reader is left with a sense of confusion as they at once are seduced by Humbert's charm, yet abhor him for the crime of child sexual abuse. This internal moral struggle by the reader has led to the novel being read with confusion or with preconceived expectations.

My thesis further looks at the banning of the novel in developing countries under totalitarian rule. Tehran under strict Islamic rule and South Africa under the Apartheid regime are analysed. Chapter two looks at how approaching a reading of the novel with preconceived notions of morality, particularly under the totalitarian rule of these two regimes, has affected the free publishing and distribution of the novel.

My thesis proposes that writing fiction is a self-conscious artistic action that can transgress socially acceptable morality. Using the fiction as a catalyst, it can propose alternative morals and does not simply promote the taboo issues it discusses. By doing this, my thesis discusses

how the novel deconstructs traditional morals using taboo topics without making the novel undesirable or objectionable.

My thesis concludes that fiction can use sensitive and taboo topics to discuss and teach alternative perceptions and worldviews, and that no fiction should be banned unless it violates and impinges on fundamental human rights.



Declaration

I declare that “TABOO TOPICS IN FICTION: THE CASE STUDY OF VLADIMIR NABOKOV’S LOLITA” is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university, and that all sources I have utilized or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.

CHAD BREVIS

May 2014

Signed:



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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents who offered up much of their time, energy, labour and own comforts to afford me this opportunity.

To my mother: Thank you for taking every knock that has come your way. I have always known that you have done this so that I would never be hurt. For this, I am grateful.

To my father: Thank you for suffering in silence. I have always known you have done this so that my voice will always be heard. For this, I am grateful.

I would like to thank my family for always encouraging me and believing in an inalienable knowledge that I possessed. Though I did not think it true, your unwavering faith kept me going.

Finally, I would like to thank four of my closest friends who played an integral role in the creation of this thesis; Byron Geduld, Horaycio Williams, Gay-lyne Langeveld and Aisha Ismail:

Naturally pretending to
Fill the emptiness
With nothingness:
Reductio ad absurdum.

(Chad Brevis)



Contents

Keywords		ii
Abstract		iii
Declaration		v
Acknowledgments		vi
Dedication		viii
Introduction		1
Chapter one:	An Introduction to <i>Lolita</i> and Paedophilia	4
	1) A Brief Synopsis of the Novel	4
	2) A Brief Biography of Vladimir Nabokov	8
	3) A Brief View of Paedophilia: A South African Case	11
	4) Nabokov's Ethic: A View of Paedophilia in <i>Lolita</i>	14
	5) <i>Lolita</i> Banned: A look at the Controversy of, and Contestation over, the Novel	21
	6) Defining the Taboos in <i>Lolita</i>	31
Chapter two:	Paratext and Authoritarian Responses to <i>Lolita</i>	48
	1) Critical Essays Commenting on the Resistance to <i>Lolita</i>	50
	2) <i>Lolita</i> as Artistic Expression and Cultural Phenomenon	69
	3) Authoritarian Responses to <i>Lolita</i> : The Tehran Case	75
	4) Authoritarian Responses to <i>Lolita</i> : The South African, Apartheid case	84
Chapter three:	Humbert: An Analysis of Deception	95
	1) Humbert's Unreliability: Deception	95
	2) Humbert's Request for Reader's Participation in Abuse	111
Chapter four:	<i>Lolita</i> and Nabokov: Taboo Topics in Fiction	121
	1) The Taboos in Fiction: <i>Lolita's</i> Paedophilia, Incest and Rape	121
	2) Nabokov's Taboos: The <i>Afterword</i> Worldview	137

	3) Taboos: The World of the Text and the World Outside of the Text	147
Conclusion		150
Bibliography		155



In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

(William Blake *London* 26)



Introduction

Taboo topics in society are immensely sensitive because people are too afraid or ashamed to acknowledge discourses that are deemed undesirable. This associated or learned behaviour is passed down from one generation to another. When comparing older generations' perceptions to more modern, twenty-first century perceptions on "what may be spoken about", there is a distinct prudery in the former and an inhibition within the latter. In today's society, discussions about taboos are a source of embarrassment or shame as opposed to the past where censors acted as the proclaimed guardians of both private and public morality. Our morality is taken for granted as truth because our parents have taught us in certain ways and we readily accept these lessons as truths and follow them without question, or rather, usually without question.

Even in the ancient world of Greek philosophers and religious doctrines written for church and state, freethinkers have emerged in the literary world. Often deemed as deviants, these freethinkers pioneered the way for freedom of speech and the right to a free press that we enjoy today. Vladimir Nabokov is one such freethinking author, who, by virtue of his love for obscure topics, has added a voice against the physical banning of literature for addressing taboo issues. The struggle against censors to have his most famous, and famously sensationalist, novel *Lolita* published reads as a legal soap opera, pitting prudish censors against literary enthusiasts who saw more than just proposed moral corruption in the pages of this literary work.

Lolita addresses many taboos, but what makes it particularly sensitive is that it deals with the sexual taboos of paedophilia, rape and molestation of a young girl. The taboos are further made abhorrent by the fact that Humbert Humbert, a learned scholar and Lolita's guardian, breaks the central tenets of parenthood and morality in order to pursue his paedophilic desire for her. This

goes against the culture of the Middle-American morality in which the novel is set and certainly raises concerns about the author's intentions behind writing such a risqué novel.

Nabokov's motives behind addressing the taboos of paedophilia and child sexual abuse are difficult to identify, as he takes no moral stance in the novel. Like any good work of literature, it is up to the reader to determine what they deem to be acceptable. It is furthermore up to the receptive reader to identify whether simply telling a salacious story is what Nabokov is attempting to do. Very subtle breaks in consciousness and a distinct lack of voice from certain characters undermine the views that Nabokov merely deals with taboos instead of deeper reflections that the novel's caricaturing achieves.

Readers who are not as perceptive to the subtle morals in the novel have made up the readership that detests it. As a result, the ban on *Lolita* had been maintained for many years in varying countries. The controversy alludes to a deeper contestation than merely discussing taboo issues: if the learned morality of prudish readers' is to be questioned and proven obsolete or ridiculous, then the ethical basis for all readers' moral convictions may be questioned. The moral destabilisation of an individual or group is centrally what is at stake when discussing taboo issues in literature.

Totalitarian states are examples of how an imposed ethos determines the status quo for communities and cultures. The ban on *Lolita* is still in effect in many Islamic states—a moralistic response to taboos being discussed under authoritarian rule. Likewise, a moralistic and prudish reading of the novel was adopted in South Africa under the Apartheid regime to avoid possible moral corruption in the republic. It is due to the novel's covert and nuanced manner in proposing subtle lessons and morals, that misreading has led to its ban. Nabokov's literary skill in writing *Lolita* is evident to receptive readers who take their time to understand the layers of fiction involved in the creation of the characters.

The anti-hero of the novel, Humbert Humbert, comes to represent Nabokov's deep concern with desire and the workings of the human mind. Through deception, unreliability and manipulation, receptive readers are called to read between the lines of Humbert's biased story—reading the breaks within his consciousness in order to gain a fuller picture of the story he tells—saturated with only his first person narration as proposed truth. Merely analysing Humbert's character in depth provides the reader with a fairground of possible areas of concern, from psychological issues to deviation from socially accepted behaviour and morality in modern society.

With this in mind, it is important to identify what is so taboo about paedophilia, incest and rape within society. From here, a better picture can be developed towards the understanding of why readers are so resistant to taboo topics depicted in fiction. Fiction, after all, should be understood as fantasy and be given fair appraisal as such so it can freely portray the world outside of the text without fear of repercussions from prudish moralists. Jacques Derrida captured this sentiment in his adage: "What cannot be said above all must not be silenced but written" (Derrida 2).

However, the treatment of *Lolita*, as portrayed in its ban, seems to contradict this idea. The discussion around the truth-value of fiction, that is fiction's portrayal of a truth or of a reality, becomes essential to giving the novel its due as a work of high art. Worldviews as portrayed in fiction are often presented as a critique to the worldviews outside of fiction. The problem is that readers who are not sensitive and receptive enough to the critique the novel provides on socially acceptable conventions confuse the world within the text with the world outside of the text. High art is then given the same harsh treatment for portraying undesirable acts as it would for people in the world outside of the text who perpetrate crimes. A consideration as to whether the law is a suitable gatekeeper for the governance of high art is essential to providing classical fiction with the proper treatment it deserves in society.

Chapter one:

An Introduction to *Lolita* and Paedophilia

1) A brief Synopsis of the Novel

Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* (1955) is set in 1950's U.S.A. It retells a story about an aging literature professor from Europe, Humbert Humbert, who obsessively pursues his sexual delectation for underage girls he calls nymphets. In the novel, Humbert undertakes to tutor a young girl, Dolores Haze, who he refers to with many nicknames, the most prominent one being Lolita. He lodges with the widowed mother and daughter and nearly marries Lolita's mother, Charlotte Haze, in order to better pursue his sexual desires for Lolita. Charlotte discovers his true feelings about Lolita and is accidentally killed when she runs across the street in a fit of rage at Humbert's perversion, before she and Humbert are to be married. Humbert uses this situation to pose as Lolita's stepfather. He removes Lolita from her all-girls boarding school and starts a road trip through America with the object of his desire. This is where their sexual encounters take place. Along the trip, Lolita becomes rebellious. Humbert bribes, tricks and coerces her to make her compliant to his desires. She finds another lover in a character named Claire Quilty, her former drama teacher and old friend of Charlotte's. The novel takes the form of a monologue in which Humbert attempts to justify his love and obsession for the pubescent Lolita. Humbert is contrasted with Quilty who pursues Lolita out of lust as opposed to his pure love for her. Quilty functions as a double for the purportedly pure motives of Humbert. In the end, though, Humbert murders Quilty, who reflects the true expression of his feelings and desires towards Lolita.

A literary scholar, Humbert Humbert has been obsessed with young girls, or nymphets for most of his life. He suggests that the death of his childhood love, Annabel Leigh, who we are introduced to in the beginning of the novel, was the cause of his obsession. After an abusive and unsuccessful

marriage in France, Humbert moves to an American town named Ramsdale to better pursue his writing ambitions. He rents a room from a widow named Charlotte Haze. It is here where Humbert first meets the object of his obsession, Dolores—or Lolita—and becomes infatuated with her.

Humbert was at first uninterested in the home of Charlotte, but stays to remain near to Lolita.

Charlotte, having a tumultuous and strained relationship with her daughter, sends Lolita away to a summer camp and during this time she falls in love with Humbert. In a most dramatic fashion, Charlotte leaves Humbert a letter, during the delivery of Lolita to the summer camp, stating that he can no longer stay in her home if he does not marry her, as she has fallen in love with him.

Humbert decides to marry Charlotte, but only to indulge his perversion and be close to Lolita.

Charlotte seems unaware of Humbert's lack of interest in her and in his paedophilic desires for the young Lolita, until she discovers his perverted thoughts in his diary. When she discovers

Humbert's true desires and intentions, Charlotte threatens to tell everybody that Humbert is a "detestable, abominable, criminal fraud" (Nabokov 107). However, Humbert's secret is secured when a car kills Charlotte as she runs across the street in despair at the news of Humbert's perversion.

Humbert then fetches Lolita from camp with the excuse that Charlotte has been hospitalised and, instead of returning home, takes Lolita to a hotel. Here Humbert gives Lolita sleeping tablets so he may have his way with her. He leaves Lolita in the room and waits for the medication to take effect. While roaming the hotel, Humbert meets a man who appears to be familiar with him. The man strikes up a peculiar conversation that makes Humbert uncomfortable and he excuses himself to return to his room. In the room, he attempts to molest Lolita but finds that Lolita keeps waking up as the drug he gave her was too weak. Humbert gives up his idea of sex with Lolita until the next morning when, according to Humbert, she initiates it. After their first consummation,

Humbert reveals to Lolita that her mother is dead. At this point Lolita has no choice but to accept Humbert as her stepfather or face foster care.

Humbert and Lolita begin touring America, weaving between states and motels. Humbert exercises a constant form of pressure over Lolita to keep their relations secret. He constantly bribes Lolita for sexual favours to maintain their sexual relationship, as he knows that she does not share his perverse desires. After a long time of travelling North America, Humbert and Lolita find a new home and she is enrolled in an all-girls school. Humbert restricts many of Lolita's activities to keep Lolita for himself. He becomes very possessive. She is often forbidden from participating in school activities or to socialise with boys.

Lolita begs Humbert to take part in the school play. Humbert reluctantly gives his permission, but only on the condition that he receive sexual favours in return. Clare Quilty, an old associate of Charlotte Haze, writes the play. Lolita and Humbert have an intense argument on the eve of her play and she runs away from him. Humbert searches for her until he finds her exiting a phone booth. Lolita seems to be in high spirits, claiming she tried to phone him at home and that a "great decision has been made" (Nabokov 234). She tells Humbert that she no longer wants to participate in the play but wants to resume their travels. Humbert agrees to this with the inference that he will satisfy his sexual desires while touring America with Lolita.

As Lolita and Humbert continue their touring, he becomes paranoid that they are being followed. Humbert suspects that Lolita is plotting something or may have revealed their secret sexual relations to others. Lolita becomes very ill and is admitted to hospital while Humbert stays in a nearby motel. Lolita then disappears from the hospital one night; the nurse tells Humbert that Lolita's "uncle" came to fetch her (Nabokov 280). Humbert becomes distraught and searches to find Lolita whom he believes was abducted. After a fruitless search, he gives up. During this time, Humbert strikes up a relationship with a woman called Rita and finds some respite from obsessing

over Lolita, but never really gives up his search for her. The relationship between Rita and Humbert ends when he suddenly hears from Lolita, now seventeen, through a letter, informing him about her marriage, pregnancy and her desperate need for money. Humbert goes to see Lolita only agreeing to give her money if she tells him the name of her abductor. Lolita tells him that Clare Quilty, the man she truly loved, checked her out of the hospital. She also reveals that he tried to make her participate in his pornographic films. She refused to be a part of Quilty's films and was hastily thrown out of his ranch where she had been staying after leaving the hospital. Lolita worked a few jobs to get by before meeting and marrying her husband, Dick. Humbert attempts one last effort to get Lolita back and asks her to leave her husband. Lolita refuses but Humbert still gives her a large sum of money. The two part on good terms.

Humbert goes after Quilty and finds him at his mansion. Humbert intends is to kill Quilty, but wants him to understand why he must die. The reason Humbert gives is that Quilty took advantage of a "sinner", referring to himself (Nabokov 341). Humbert shoots Quilty numerous times, while Quilty makes bizarre comments on the experience of being shot. Humbert leaves Quilty's house after which he is arrested. The novel closes with Humbert wishing Lolita well. At this point, we learn that Humbert only wished to publish his recollections after Lolita has died in order to spare her embarrassment. The ending of the novel connects with the foreword, as it is here that we are first told that Lolita, or rather "Mrs. Richard F. Schiller", dies in childbirth (Nabokov 2).

2) A Brief Biography of Vladimir Nabokov

According to the *Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov was born to parents Dmitrievich Nabokov, “a teacher of criminal law at the Imperial School of Jurisprudence”, and Elena Ivanovna Nabokov, in Saint Petersburg, Russia on the 23 April 1900 according to Western calendars (Connolly et al xv). Some historians differ on the dates as politics involving the Western calendar has disrupted this linear timeline. Alfred Appel in *The Annotated Lolita* marks the date of his birth to be “April 23, 1899” (Appel *The Annotated Lolita* xvii).

Vladimir Nabokov began learning English from a British governess, Rachel Home, at the age of two, where the basis of his English proficiency was laid. His love and enthusiasm for butterflies started when he became seriously ill with pneumonia in 1907 and began studying them during his recovery (Connolly et al xvi). Young love never appeared to be distant from Nabokov. His first love interest was a nine-year old girl named Claude Deprés whom he met during his family travels to Biarritz two years later (Connolly et al xvi). It was during 1910 that Nabokov’s love for butterflies lead him to pursue his studies in lepidoptery. During the same year, 1910, his family travelled to Germany. These constant travels enabled Nabokov to assume the role of cultural chameleon, where he was able to recreate and freely express the art form of writing from a unique perspective, uninhibited by cultural ethnocentrism. In an interview with Nabokov, Alfred Appel asked about Nabokov’s position as both a Russian and American writer, to which Nabokov responded: “The writer’s art is his real passport. His identity should be immediately recognized by a special pattern or unique coloration. His habitat may confirm the correctness of the determination but should not lead to it” (Appel *An Interview With Vladimir Nabokov* 127).

Nabokov's writing career began around 1916. He published a ‘translation of Alfred de Musset’s “La Nuit de décembre” in *Iunaia mysl* and a collection of poetry entitled *Stikhi* at his own expense’ (Connolly et al xvi). His poem “Lunnaia greza” or “Lunar Reverie” was circulated in the

journal *Vestnik Evropy* (Connolly et al xvi). A further boost for the development of his art was the generous inheritance, worth several million dollars, that he received from his uncle, Vasily Rukavishnikov. Nabokov also inherited his uncles' Rozhdestveno estate. This financial freedom allowed him to focus on and pursue his artistic ambitions (Connolly et al xvi).

The Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 made the Nabokov family's residence in St. Petersburg impossible. At the age of eighteen, Nabokov and his family were forced to move from Russia. In 1919, Nabokov's family moved to London where he studied zoology and then modern languages, French and Russian, at Cambridge (Connolly et al xvii). During this time, his love for writing increased as he wrote poetry in Russian and English and published his first entomological paper in 1920 (Connolly et al xvii).

During 1922, Vladimir Nabokov received his B.A. degree and moved to Berlin. He received a commission to translate Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* into Russian. This may have inspired his interest in controversial authors known for their interest in obscure subject matters (Connolly et al xvii). An author, mathematician, logician, Anglican deacon and photographer, Lewis Carroll was an intriguing novelist for Nabokov to find an interest in due to Carroll's fascination with photographing nude children, particularly little girls. Though justified as a Victorian child cult where the perception was that child nudity was a Romantic idea and essential to portray the pure nature of children, some critics marked this form of "artistic expression" as paedophilia. Interesting analogies begin to emerge between the figure of Carroll and Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*.

Twenty-eight years later, in 1950, Nabokov began his first novel entitled *The Kingdom by the Sea*, with an obvious reference to Edgar Allan Poe's poem "Annabel Lee" (Connolly et al xx). This later developed into the first transcript of *Lolita*, which Nabokov finished in December 1953 (Connolly et al xx). Nabokov eagerly sought a publisher in America for *Lolita* during 1954, but

was unsuccessful due to the topics of paedophilia, rape murder and suggested incest that the novel portrayed. After five different American publishing houses rejected the novel for its content, *Lolita* was eventually accepted for publication by Maurice Girodias of Olympia Press in France, best known for works of frank sexual content (Pifer 185). *Lolita* was named one of the “best books of 1955” by Graham Greene in the London *Sunday Times* (Connolly et al xx). This accolade, however, did not last as John Gordon denounced and condemned the novel in the London *Sunday Express*, which led to the French government banning *Lolita* and several other titles published by Olympia Press during 1956 (Connolly et al xx). The first engagement of *Lolita* by literary critics emerged in the *Anchor Review* in 1957, specifically by Fred Dupree, when passages of the novel were printed and “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*” by Nabokov himself was published (Connolly et al xxii).

During 1960, Nabokov worked on the screen adaptation of *Lolita* with Stanley Kubrick, which was released in 1962 (Connolly et al xxii). Further developments on the novel were a Russian translation published in 1967 and *Lolita: A Screenplay* appeared in 1974 (Kubrick DVD).

It was during 1977 that Vladimir Nabokov was first hospitalised in Lausanne with fever and influenza from March to May. He briefly recovered from these ailments but returned to hospital in Lausanne in June. He died in hospital on 2 July. After his cremation, his ashes were interred in Clarens cemetery in Montreux, Switzerland, where they remain until this day (Connolly et al xxiii).

3) A Brief View of Paedophilia: a South African Case

In South Africa, paedophilia is an issue that is particularly taboo in a society that emphasises the sanctity of the family unit. The preservation (before damage) of children and conservation (the maintenance of protection) of their rights has been the focus of government and socio-political organisations alike. Many organisations such as HOOC (Hands Off Our Children), HealTheHood Foundation, Nicro and The Mustadafin Foundation show how South African society members are focusing time and effort on bringing awareness about children's safety. Many campaigns are held at grassroots levels to make civil society aware of the importance of protecting children who have been identified as the future of South Africa. This, however, is not to say that South African society is short of reports of child abuse.

There seems to be a link between the physical abuse of children and spirituality. Tabloid newspapers have bombarded readers with stories about children being harmed, many in a sexual manner, in an attempt at religious and cultural remedies to socio-political problems. International media has noticed this trend. The headline for an online article by Allan Little for online news outlet *BBC News World Edition* reads: "AIDS: A South African horror story" (Little news.bbc.co.uk). In this article, Little reports:

[...] a third of South Africans believe in an ancient and bizarre 'cure' for AIDS. This 'cure' involves having sex with a virgin in the belief that it will cleanse the body of venereal diseases like AIDS. It was this belief which led to the rape of an eight-month-old baby called Tshepang in Louisvale, South Africa. (Little news.bbc.co.uk)

Unfortunately, these stories have been so common that they are pushed to the back pages of South African tabloids. Many times, they are ignored.

The law follows suit when it comes to downplaying the seriousness of child sexual abuse. A good example is the sensationalist headline found in a Cape Town tabloid after a priest was

apprehended for the rape of a seventeen-year-old boy. It reported that “The pastor was arrested on [...] a charge of rape. But in court [...] prosecutors changed that charge to indecent assault” (Lepule *The Daily Voice* 10). The priest was later allowed to “[walk] out of [the] Khayelitsha Magistrates’ Court after his wife paid R500 for his release” (Lepule *The Daily Voice* 10). The state did not see this as a crime serious enough to warrant that the offending priest be locked up until the child’s case was heard by the courts and, as the state prosecutor makes clear: “The state [did] not have any objections if [the priest was] released on bail” (Lepule *The Daily Voice* 10). From the state’s lack of concern for the rape of a child, there is an evident injustice served to the victim. Many sexual predators have been allowed to roam free because it appears, from the state’s point of view, that one can allay prosecution from paedophilia with a petty fine of a few hundred Rands. This leaves the victims open to emotional distresses and further victimisation, serving only to aggravate their circumstances.

Society acts in contradictory ways. On the one hand there appears to be a naturalisation that has led society to become complacent towards crimes against children. On the other hand, sexual crimes against children are particularly taboo as they stigmatise not only the victims’ but the victim’s family. This is a double-edged stigmatisation, as it affects the perpetrator and their families as well. Fear of public rebuke and mob justice is not uncommon. Anxiety over public drama and upheaval leads to paedophilia and child sexual abuse being swept under the rug in many cases. In instances where it does become public knowledge, we find that sensationalism and theatricals obscure the real issue of a child being abused.

In the case of the Cape Town paedophile priest, posters ranted that the priest called his crime “sexual healing”, while he testified that no sexual crimes took place. Instead, the priest claimed that he “treated the boy” and that the issue was spiritual (Lepule *The Daily Voice* 10).

Considering the fictions that Humbert creates within *Lolita* we find a common thread in the excuse that paedophilia is in some way metaphysical. Humbert claims a form of spirituality in raping Lolita. In fact, Humbert recreates Lolita as an otherworldly creature, effectively solipsising her, as explained in later chapters (Nabokov 15). In a way, Humbert and the paedophile priest create a metaphysical, fictionalised character whom they abuse, effectively removing their victims' voices in a form of multitudinous abuse. A sensationalist headline such as "Sexual healing" serves to distract readers from the real issue, that the innocence of a child is forcibly removed.

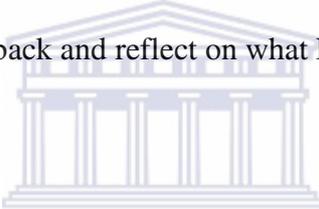
In the same way, the dominant taboo themes in *Lolita* come to obscure the real issue. Readers judge the novel, and the news story, by their dominating themes and approach them with preconceived ideas. It is the victim of the crime who experiences an injustice due to semantics.

The victim is lost in translation. At the same time, the repetition of images and words associated with paedophilia, rape, and sexualisation of underage children serves to naturalise readers into a state of complacency, making it easier for a perpetrator who is sufficiently cunning to manipulate these circumstances and elicit sympathy from readers. This is fitting as we find this occurring within South African society as well as in *Lolita*.

Considering that paedophilia is still taboo in today's South Africa yet not always treated seriously, it is not difficult to understand that in the more conservative Apartheid era, paedophilia was abhorrent. The ban on Nabokov's *Lolita* in South Africa is a reflection of the degree to which the state wished to keep taboo topics censored. Even an allusion to paedophilia within fiction was cause enough for the novel, which merely discusses taboo issues, to be banned.

4) Nabokov's Ethics: A View of Paedophilia in *Lolita*

It is clear that many critics, readers and members of the public who hear about the storyline of *Lolita* assume that the novel's treatment of a child is immoral and unethical. Indeed, it may be so in the world outside of the text where actual acts of paedophilia break laws and violate human rights and central tenets of the family structure. However, the fact that the novel is a work of fiction should not be ignored. The art of fiction is precisely that, a reconstruction, reinterpretation and expression of topics. For Vladimir Nabokov, it is the interpretation of taboo topics through fiction that has led to the treatment that *Lolita* has received in the literary world. While literary critics may speculate endlessly, and in effect create their own forms of fiction by reconstructing, reinterpreting and expressing their views on what Nabokov attempts to achieve by writing the novel, it is necessary to take a step back and reflect on what Nabokov has written about his creation:



Teachers of literature are apt to think up such problems as “What is the author’s purpose?” or still worse “What is the guy trying to say?” Now, I happen to be the kind of author who in starting to work on a book has no other purpose than to get rid of that book and who, when asked to explain its origins and growth, has to rely on such ancient terms as Interreaction of Inspiration and Combination – which, I admit, sounds like a conjurer explaining one trick by performing another (Nabokov 353).

Nabokov states his train of thought when writing fiction in his afterword “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*.” Though teachers of literature may speculate on the motive of “what” the novel and author says, Nabokov views his fiction as a means of telling a story. This we see in his repetition of the words “Interreaction of Inspiration and Combination” which he relies on to describe the development of his fiction (Nabokov 353). Furthermore, Nabokov admits that repetition of phrases, as the above, are redundant loops. He states that they “sound like a conjurer explaining one trick by performing another”, making the point that he uses one fiction in order to describe another (Nabokov 353). This makes the identification of morals within his fiction difficult as they

are hidden within metaphors and interpretations of symbolic language which, in their own rights, are either complicated by ambiguity or are foreign to English readers who lack his knowledge. It appears that Nabokov rejects the idea that his fiction is written with a particular moral in mind. He creates a story and, in the process of explaining its origins, refers to his explanations as a subterfuge. The repetition of terms leads readers into an endless loop of trying to understand Nabokov's novel by trying to understand a fiction created to explain the novel. The reader is thus never free from the fiction that Nabokov creates.

On the misreading of *Lolita* as a salacious, pornographic novel, Nabokov describes his thoughts on how structure plays an essential role in the genres of writing. The treatment of particular genres has come to define the manner of writing these genres. We can only describe these genres through the repetition of patterns that they are defined as. There appears to be another endless loop that Nabokov comments on in his fiction: writing style. Nabokov embraces one kind of endless loop, most notably the use of one fiction to describe another fiction, to highlight socially relevant questions on ways of reading fiction. On the other hand, he criticises generic ways of writing fiction, and this affirms the moral and artistic integrity of his novel. Reading his thoughts, we could argue that Nabokov flouts the maxims of these formulaic writing genres and ways of thinking about it:

[...] in modern times the term “pornography” connotes [...] strict rules of narration. Obscenity must be mated with banality because every kind of aesthetic enjoyment has to be replaced by simple sexual stimulation which demands the traditional word for direct action upon the patient. Old rigid rules must be followed by the pornographer in order to have his patient feel the [...] security of satisfaction [...] Thus in pornographic novels, action has to be limited to the copulation of clichés. Style, structure, imagery should never distract the reader from his tepid lust [...] Moreover, the sexual scenes in the book must follow a crescendo line [...] and [...] the end of the book must be more replete with lewd lore than the first chapters (Nabokov 356).

Lolita does not follow these rigid rules to any extent. In the first instance, what is most striking about the novel is its form. *Lolita* is a work of fiction which can be described as high art. The

informed reader will have experienced that Humbert is well read and educated. Many of his descriptions include foreign terms such as “mais rien” meaning “you’re welcome” (Nabokov 72). This recalls his days in France and brings back images of the sex workers who he indulged in. Sneakily, the same feeling of guilty pleasure—or “*Delectatio morosa*” as Humbert calls it—is evoked when, on the very next page, after nearly getting caught masturbating into Lolita’s clothes by the maid, Humbert is handed a letter from Charlotte (Nabokov 46). The maid takes leave with the words ““You’re welcome”” (Nabokov 74).

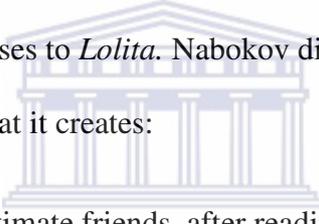
Humbert’s use of Latin terms also come to describe his feelings, such as “*Delectatio morosa*” which has a host of sexual connotations and meanings (Nabokov 46). Humbert uses this term to describe the feeling of sinful pleasure that he derives from the punishment of others, in this instance from Lolita who had an argument with her mother on a trip (Nabokov 46). To understand the significance of Humbert's language use, a reader would need to be sufficiently informed about the meanings, double meanings, connotations and denotations that these often-overlooked phrases have to offer. Nabokov knows that many of these phrases will be misunderstood outside of their context of culture “which the reader will probably skip but must know they exist in order not to feel cheated” (Nabokov 356). Thus, the act of reading *Lolita* is not simply a passive endeavour. It becomes a scholarly undertaking to experience the change in consciousness that the novel can evoke. This requires a conscious effort to understand the meaning of Humbert's use of foreign languages in relation to American culture, but also the context of culture that it is derived from. We could argue that the juxtaposition and satirical use of foreign languages alongside American English is Humbert's way of mocking the “uncivilised” ways of American culture in an attempt to mitigate his superior yet paedophilic desires. It is part of Nabokov’s genius to connect readers through cultural education. This connection is made through the state of “aesthetic bliss” that the language in the novel evokes (Nabokov 358).

Lolita further flouts the maxims of generic pornographic writing by delivering a scene of sexual obscenity and paedophilia in the very early stages of the novel and then tapering off into the recollections of a life lived under the duress of lust for young girls. Thus, it does not follow “a crescendo line” as previously discussed (Nabokov 356). Readers of the novel have noted this and as Nabokov reflects, some of his early readers approached the novel with preconceived notions of a pornographic or lewd book. He states, “They expected the rising succession of erotic scenes; when these stopped, the readers stopped, too, and felt bored and let down” (Nabokov 356). The expectation of continued lewd scenes is let down when the novel does not follow the generic pattern of “new variation[s], new combinations, new sexes and a steady increase in the number of participants [...]” (Nabokov 356). Nabokov sets up this expectation intentionally to disappoint readers, even identifying the disappointment and lack of interest as “one of the reasons” that the publishing firms had not finished reading the novel and rejected it (Nabokov 356). Disappointing readers’ expectations critiques generic structures of writing and, by implication, allows readers to probe their own ways of thinking about morality, ethics and ethos in society. If the taboo themes of the novel are defined by structure, then the treatment of these taboos when not meeting the expectation of the readers is significant for discussing of ways of speaking about these taboos in the world outside of the text. Discussions on generic structures creates a space where readers can interrogate laws that restrict freedoms and rights. Certain ways of thinking and speaking in society are predetermined by older, ineffectual morals that set society in an unequal hierarchy of power. Style and structure is one way that *Lolita* proposes alternative, subtle morals to readers.

Focusing more exclusively on morals in the novel, Nabokov states that: “[...] despite John Ray’s [the fictitious editor of *Lolita* in the foreword] assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art [...] is the

norm” (Nabokov 358). For Nabokov, a work of fiction is an experiential metafiction, the processes or happenings that may involve participants in various circumstances within fiction, as opposed to an instructive work of conduct. The “aesthetic bliss” connects Nabokov with “states of being”, these feelings of “curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy” connect fiction to the reader (Nabokov 358). The language that Nabokov uses in his novel not only explores an exchange between author and reader to convey a story line but also uses language to talk about the world and experiences within the infinite possibilities of the world within the text. Here the emphasis lies not in merely conveying a story, but in the connection between readers through mutual understanding of feelings and emotions.

One of Nabokov’s most telling statements in his afterword can be found in an anecdote, in which he recalls one of his friend’s responses to *Lolita*. Nabokov directly addresses his connection to the novel in terms of the experiences that it creates:



[...] one of my very few intimate friends, after reading *Lolita*, was sincerely worried that I (!) should be living “among such depressing people” – when the only discomfort I really experienced was to live in my workshop among discarded limbs and unfinished torsos (Nabokov 360).

Though Nabokov acknowledges in the afterword that some parts of the novel, namely the recreation of landscapes and names, are based on personal experiences, never does he claim that the recreation of the perversion in the novel is rooted in personal experience. In fact, Nabokov states that “my creature Humbert is a foreigner and an anarchist, and there are many things, besides nymphets, in which I disagree with him” (Nabokov 360). Nabokov makes clear that fiction has a nature that allows the author creative freedom and “aesthetic bliss”, which he revelled in while writing *Lolita* (Nabokov 360). If this is fiction’s nature, then a reader cannot equate the recreation of an act inside the text with the act in the world outside of the text. Fiction creates debates around acts outside of itself. Nabokov abolishes the links between his own desire and that of Humbert's by stating that Humbert is merely his “creature”, a recreation of his mind (Nabokov

360). To suggest *Lolita* is a novel that may provoke latent desires in readers offers a reading of the novel that Nabokov rejects as “childish” and ignores what he expresses as the crux of his endeavours, which is “a sense of being [...] connected with other states of being where art [...] is the norm” (Nabokov 360).

In “Nabokov’s Worldview”, Toker addresses the notion of ethics in Nabokov’s fiction. Toker states that:

The ethical ideology evolved in Nabokov’s fiction can be described as an idealistic variety of rational individualism: moral values are derived not from a vision of a collective good but from respect and concern for the rights of the individual – so long as that individual’s aims do not encroach on the rights of other individuals. Some of Nabokov’s characters [...] respect the rights of others to an independent identity; others solipsistically ignore that right; [...] still others actively violate it (Hermann, Humbert, Kinbote)...

By contrast, in the characters of the second group rational individualism has degenerated into egoism...His fiction creates the conditions not only for aesthetic experience but also for a study of the character’s attitudes and acts in terms of culturally symptomatic ethical tendencies (Toker 237).

Toker’s chapter highlights the root of the ethical concern of Nabokov’s fiction. The ethical concern lies more with the individual character and not the collective good within the novel, a form of autonomy over utilitarian rights and concerns. This implies that characters such as Humbert, who falls in Toker’s second and third group, and *Lolita* are looked at according to their individual treatment within the novel, that is, their way of thinking, acting and being, and not how their personal dispositions impact on other characters within the novel. This is what Toker refers to as “rational individualism” (Toker 237). This notion will later be analysed in the fourth chapter. Toker further describes how Nabokov develops this autonomy in certain characters, like Humbert, to construct them as the fictitious psychologist John Ray, Jr. puts it, as “a shining example of moral leprosy”, to a point of egoism (Nabokov 5). The idea that Humbert ignores the rights of other characters is evidence of Toker’s claim and is further compounded when Humbert is

described as “actively violating” the rights of other characters in the novel as opposed to merely “solipsistically” ignoring them (Toker 237).

Toker speculates further on Nabokov’s intention to construct morally questionable autonomous characters. It should be noted that “culturally symptomatic ethical tendencies” refers more to an ethical absolutism that is determined by society. Ethical absolutism, in this instance, can be defined as an institutionalised ethics based on acceptance of structures of authority. Ernst M. Conradie, in his book *Morality as a Way of Life*, defines the basis of ethical absolutism as those institutions which offer “a clear ethos [...] requir[ing] full loyalty from its members to the teachings and practices of the institution. The authority of the institution and its offices has to be accepted more or less unconditionally” (Conradie 74). Social conformity subscribes to this way of thinking, sacrificing personal morality to group ethos. Nabokov criticises society’s conformity to ethical absolutisms by showing Humbert’s subjectivity. We are only privy to Humbert’s thoughts throughout the novel. Thus, Nabokov shows how Humbert’s subjectivity, which is displayed through his alternative views of morality and ethics, differs from the modern social ethos. This is where readers are called to assess whether people are uniformly inclined to follow ethical absolutisms or ethical relativisms. In Humbert’s case, we find that ethical frameworks are relative and he does not conform to culturally dependant ethical absolutisms (Toker 237). By doing this, Nabokov inevitably opens up these characters to an analysis in which readers are called to “participate in the scene” as Humbert puts it (Nabokov 62).

5) *Lolita* Banned: A Look at the Controversy about, and Contestations over, the Novel

Much fuss has been made about the treatment of taboo issues in *Lolita*, specifically the Western perspective on paedophilia. Many theorists with an inclination to the disciplines of ethics, law and gender studies have taken issue with the sympathetic treatment that the protagonist and “moral leper” Humbert receives (Nabokov 3). The novel’s banning indicates to what extent society condemns taboos like paedophilia. Likewise, banning and sanctions placed on the novel in other parts of the world reflect this social contestation as well. Within some of the court cases on the banning of *Lolita*, one concern that reoccurs is that lawyers analyse the text, and not literary critics who are trained to identify the nuances of high art. The problem with this is that the law is not equipped to deal with subtle aspects of literary criticism such as metaphor and allegory. The law seems to be more of a blunt instrument that comments on high art with the same heavy hand as it would on criminal acts in the world outside of the text. It is, however, only fair appraisal to note that if the law has been a blunt instrument in the case of Nabokov’s *Lolita*, it is not universally blunt.

The decisions made in court about novels depicting taboos are in essence a reductionist approach as legal arguments about literary matters simplify the text to a mere storyline, which tells the tale of a paedophile. This reductionist approach leaves no room for the aspects of satire and allegory to teach greater lessons to society. Furthermore, it leads to the ignoring of subtle morals in high art, limiting the potential fiction has to educate as opposed to corrupt society. Ironically, lawyers often do the very same thing that Nabokov does with *Lolita* and Humbert with Dolores Haze. The endless word games and parody are set as a subterfuge, which Humbert hides behind in order to justify his case to his judgemental reader, much in the same way as the lawyers play semantic games in order to convince the magistrate or judge about the vulgarity of the novel. The struggle for power within Humbert can be seen as an allegory for the struggle in the courtroom over the

novel. Humbert has the ability to manipulate language within the novel, as it is his story. We need only look at how Humbert plays with Lolita's name and thus her very identity in chapter one: "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta" (Nabokov 7). The assonance that is used is like a lingual game played by Humbert. Humbert plays with Lolita's name and every shift of accentuation effectively achieves a restructuring of the original name, Dolores Haze. Dolores becomes a non-entity without a fixed identity outside of the ever-fluctuating recreations of Humbert's mind. In the same way, legislators manipulate language in order to prove that the novel is no more than a tale of perversion set to corrupt the morals of society. In both cases, Humbert's and the legislator's, they have the power to determine the outcomes of their story, Humbert through playing with Lolita's identity and distinctly erasing her voice with his own retelling of the story and legislators by playing linguistic games which rival that of Humbert's. The flaw with this is that the law's judicial minimalism falls into the same trap as Humbert's subjective view of the world. While defending a particular worldview, both blatantly ignore the rights of the silenced voice—the voice of the educated reader. This assumes that all readers are ignorant and have no thought, no conscience, and no voice of their own. This is strikingly similar to Humbert's description of the solipsised Lolita after reaching his first orgasm, while thrusting against her, as having "no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own" (Nabokov 68).

A.G. Davis in the article "*Lolita*: Banned in New Zealand" analyses the language used in a court case on the banning of *Lolita* in 1964. He quotes the specific law under which the novel was banned. The relevant sections of the Act of 1910, as amended, are as follows:

Section 5 (1). In determining whether any document or other matter is indecent within the meaning of this Act the Magistrate shall take into consideration-

(a) the nature of the document or matter;

(b) the nature and circumstances of the act done by the defendant with respect thereto, and the purpose for which the act was done;

(c) the literary or artistic merit or medical, legal, political, or scientific character or importance of the document or matter;

(d) the persons, classes of persons, or age groups to or amongst whom the document or matter was or was intended or was likely to be published, distributed, sold, exhibited, given, sent, or delivered; and the tendency of the matter or thing to deprave or corrupt any such persons, class of persons, or age group (notwithstanding that persons in other classes or age groups may not be similarly affected thereby) (Davis 768).

While many of these aforementioned aspects may easily be manipulated by legislators to conform to the description of *Lolita*, according to Davis, “the crucial question for determination was whether the novel ‘unduly emphasised matters of sex’” (Davis 768). The concern with *Lolita* at the time was whether there was an immoral or harmful tendency by the author to unduly emphasise matters which may be seen as taboo and whether a court should decide if the novel was “indecent within the meaning of this Act” (Davis 768). Essentially, the problem lies with the analysis of the novel itself. Aspects such as the artistic merit of the novel would need to be assessed. Section 5.) (c) acknowledges this by referring to “the literary or artistic merit or medical, legal, political, or scientific character or importance of the document or matter” (Davis 798). Despite the foreword of the novel clearly stating that “not a single obscene term is to be found in the whole work”, the novel was still banned (Nabokov 2-3). The fiction itself recognises and affirms that it does not transgress what is deemed as indecent, yet is still punished by law due to the theme itself and not the treatment of the theme.

The issue about the nature of “the document” also needs proper analysis (Davis 768). Because this is a novel and is a fiction, it is ludicrous for a court to judge it as “indecent” (Davis 768). Poetic licence alone allows novels to express, within a fiction, taboos. Grotesque acts that impinge on human rights committed in fiction are abstracted from acts outside of the text, and thus should not be punished in the same manner. To deem a fiction undesirable as it may stimulate latent desires

in readers is to assume that readers cannot tell the difference between fact and fiction—the world outside of the text and the world inside of the text. The law does readers an injustice when it assumes that all readers will interpret a novel in one way. Setting precedence indicates this and thus parameters on what society should deem as moral or immoral are set on behalf of society by lawyers and judges, and not determined by society itself.

Frankly, the study of law is not equipped to deal with the finer nuances of metaphor and allegory within fiction, as the law would apply the same standards of assessment to an action in the world of the text as it would to an action in the world outside of the text. It therefore seems inappropriate for legislators, lawyers and ultimately judges to decide on the fate of an artistic form that they are not experts in.

Davis further explores how the court came to decide whether the novel could be construed as unnecessarily emphasising sexual matters, namely that: “‘unduly emphasising matters of sex’ should be construed as dealing with matters of sex in a manner which offends against the standards of the community in which the article is published” (Davis 769). The opinion of Martin, J. is given on an older ruling defining sexual matters as obscene in the case of *Wavish v. Associated Newspapers Ltd* (Davis 769). There is some attempt to preserve the integrity of the novel as a work of literature. The standards of the community is a precedent which has been used well before the case of *Lolita* in order to ascertain the desirability of film and literature for the New Zealand public. However, we find that it was lacking:

Cleary, J. agreed that the ‘standards of the community’ test should be applied, even though it was lacking in precision. He was of the opinion, however, that [...] it must be found both that the publication unduly emphasises matters of sex and that it has a tendency to corrupt and deprave...But he added that when he came to apply the statutory provisions [...] he could see little real distinction between the two topics of undue emphasis on matters of sex and a tendency to deprave and corrupt (Davis 770).

The first problem that we come up against is who decides what the standards of the community are. If, as the document suggests, it were the prerogative of the law, then indeed it would be flawed in terms of analysing and passing judgment on forms of high art. The second problem should be looked at from the perspective of the expert. If indeed the novel does impinge on the moral standards of the community, Cleary admitted that he found no distinctions between the “undue emphasis on matters of sex and a tendency to deprave or corrupt” (Davis 770). Instead, these two matters “largely merge into and coalesce with one another” (Davis 770). What we can infer from this is that *Lolita* is seen to deprave or corrupt due to its treatment of a perverse and taboo sexual issue. This foregrounds paedophilia and rape as the central theme of the novel, evidencing a reductionist view of the novel and ignoring the subtle morals that the novel has to offer.

It would be beneficial, at this point, to define the stance this thesis takes on the idea of “the reasonable reader” upon whom the novel may have the potential to “deprave and corrupt” as described in the court case (Davis 770). Though it is seen as a flawed paradigm to assume that a readership, at once, interprets a novel in a particular way, for the purposes of this thesis I will use the example of “the reader” for ease of reference. The idea in law that a readership would interpret a novel in one particular way universalises the notion of reading. This is an idea which this thesis rejects and is defended later in this thesis. Even if the idea of a standard or “ordinary reader” is accepted, by definition, this reader could not exist. The complex narrative of *Lolita*, coupled with the cultural and linguistic games the novel plays, means that any given reader would not fully understand the text. The text draws on multitudinous contexts of situations and cultures, requiring not only a superficial reading but also an in-depth scholarly annotation to understand the ambiguities that they are written with. This does not mean that the law should prevent readers from access to the novel, as this would imply a restriction of self-education through interrogating

one's own moral stance on taboo topics. The artistic merit of the novel lies essentially with the novel's moral lessons that it holds. For *Lolita*, these morals are not the idea of a standard reader. Rather, the novel's moral lies in more subtle and nuanced discussions that the taboos of paedophilia, rape and incest bring about within the individual reader.

Davis then further discusses the artistic merit of the novel according to the analysis made by the literary expert appointed by the court:

Dealing with the literary or artistic merit of the book [...] the court was concerned with a contemporary novel which had already aroused controversy in other countries [...] With a contemporary work the court was obliged to endeavour to make an assessment of the merits of the work as a piece of literature so that it could say whether its general distinction would result in an appeal to those likely to read it seriously for the purpose of appreciating its literary worth, or whether its appeal to readers would rest on any salacious content of the book. In his opinion, *Lolita* was not saved from being indecent by reason of its literary merit (Davis 770).

One issue that stands out is that the courts would need to base their assessment on previous discourses and preconceived notions of what high art or the classics ought to be. The books which had already been accepted as classics thus form a literary canon. This already makes it difficult for newer novels to enter into the ranks of the classics. The judicial minimalism involved in reducing *Lolita* to a novel that morally corrupts readers ignores the subtle morals the novel offers and does not ask if the novel could enlighten and educate society, or become a classic.

Another challenge is that the court would need to speculate on whether the community of readers would deem the work of art salacious or whether it would be acceptable as a potential classic.

Many critics have argued that the novel's use of language is exceptionally lyrical and well executed and thus lends credence to its artistic merit. Nabokov's skill in using language to propose alternative morals is yet another factor that lends power to the case for the novel's artistic merit. *Lolita's* potential to enlighten and educate readers is a point that cannot be ignored when considering that the novel may become a classic. Considering that *Lolita* may be a potential

classic stresses the importance of having a literary critic trained to identify and highlight the finer points and subtle lessons that a work of fiction may hold. This would give the novel fair appraisal as a work of art. It is unfair to analyse a novel and pass judgment on the nature of the literature if it is not given the proper chance to speak its own truth beneath the cataract or obscured judgement of the law or, as Azar Nafisi puts it in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, the “gaze of the blind censor” (Nafisi 25). Nafisi’s contribution to reading banned literature within an authoritarian state will be analysed in chapter two. The paradigm of the law lacks the linguistic and analytical tools to discern the lessons that satire and parody have for informed readers.

We find an evident flaw in the system of judgment as the court assumes that all readers would interpret the novel in the same way. To decide for a readership means that a minority decides for an entire community what is acceptable. The courts would need to assume that there is such a thing as a standard readership and a standard way of reading. This we know to be a fallacy as reading is a subjective act. Each reader reads, decodes, comprehends and then recodes literature according to his or her own subjective experiences and interpretations. Thus, the framework for deciding on an average readership, and what would be acceptable to them, is a flawed paradigm that the law uses to govern art. It should be noted that readers do not solipsise a text in the same way as Humbert solipsises Lolita. While reading a text, we are aware of certain assumptions we have, but are also unconscious of many which lurk in our subconscious and influence our readings of novels.

Davis’ article further explores an attempt to linguistically analyse the denotation of words within the novel to determine whether the theme of the novel is primarily salacious in nature.

Furthermore, the lawyer opposing the ban identifies the same problem which we have previously discussed, that ascertaining the “standard of the community” is a difficult task to undertake. P.

Gresson, an equity lawyer from Christchurch, argued in opposition of the novel’s ban. In his

arguments, he refers to the Australian precedent set by the banning of previously undesirable literature. Gresson argues “[...] some Australian judges have held that 'unduly emphasising matters of sex ' should be construed as dealing with matters of sex in a manner which offends against the standards of the community in which the book or article is published. I find it difficult to adopt so very free an interpretation” (Davis 771). His argument for the literary merit of the novel hinges on the meaning of the words within the novel and not the dominant theme:

[...] it is surely a primary principle of construction that plain words must be given their plain meaning [...] Moreover I should find myself in some difficulty if I adopted the 'standard of the community' test for I just don't know what the standard of the community is, nor how to ascertain it [...] Accordingly I prefer to adopt the plain language of the statute and to exercise my own judgment as to whether the book 'unduly emphasises matters of sex.' [...] I do not think the book in question does" (Davis 771).

Here Gresson highlights the concern that is inherent in the law's blunt way of judging. To look at the novel simply for semantic relevance outside of the context in which it is written would implicitly ignore the satire and parody that the novel should be celebrated for. Nabokov skilfully deploys a barrage of humorous barbs that, to the informed reader, add to the novel's profound meaning and literary merit. Moreover, Gresson makes a point about judging the novel by its treatment of the theme and not the theme itself. This aligns with Nabokov's assessment of why readers resist the novel: “[Gresson] did not think the book could be said ‘unduly’ to emphasise matters of sex any more than a book which was a study of the game of cricket, in the form of a novel, could be said ‘unduly’ to emphasise cricket” (Davis 771). His argument is based on *Lolita* not focussing on the act of sex in an obscene manner. Instead, the novel offers a discussion into aspects of sex that are a legitimate point of discussions and debates.

Gresson then highlights the flaw of surmising what the “standard of the community” would be (Davis 771). It is impossible for a single person to ascertain the opinion of an entire community. Furthermore, any attempt to ascertain a standard is to assume a universalised opinion or caricature

of readers and the way in which they read. Though Gresson's analysis of the novel makes some strong arguments for the free publication of the novel, it is still found wanting. Gresson commented that he personally "found the book so boring and tedious that nothing but the necessity of judging it would have induced him to read it to the end" (Davis 770-771). He appears to be falling into the category of the reader who feels cheated by Nabokov's writing technique. The disappointment of *Lolita* not conforming to generic ways of writing lewd novels could be what made Gresson feel this resistance to reading the novel in the end.

Problematically, Gresson reverts to the easiest solution to implement in a dilemma where neither choices are sufficient to decide on a judgment on high art. He reverts to analysing the "plain language" of the text, inferring that the text will be analysed for the words that are used and their literal meanings (Davis 771). The problem here is that Nabokov utilises intricate wordplay, satire, puns and parodies which can only be understood in accordance with their context of culture which is created within the fiction. So many of Nabokov's references point to various cultures outside the American culture that he recreates. The irony of the text is that the author needs to read these references on their own terms and thus makes these readings subjective, according to the author's interpretations of different cultures. Nabokov relies on the effects of extra-textual references to create meaning for the American culture he recreates. These cultural reference points are not as simple and subjective as they seem though, and will be explained in greater depth later when analysing Humbert's cultured and civilised persona. To reduce the novel to a set of literal words and semantic meanings ignores the tools of humour and extra-textuality, which is the pride of the author and the novel.

The judge's eventual decision was that a standard morality and way of reading does exist in a community and that the best judge of this is a jury. He went on to say that "when the distinction has to be drawn, I do not know that today there is any better tribunal than a jury to draw it" (Davis

771). Once again, a minority speaks for a majority and in so doing assumes that every reader would interpret the text in one particular way. On the potential fiction has to promote debates within society, the judge stated that “It would not be true to say that any publication dealing with sexual relations is obscene. The relations of the sexes are, of course, legitimate matters for discussion everywhere” (Davis 771). Fiction’s ability to stimulate discussions and debates within society is acknowledged here, yet this argument was not enough to discourage the ban on *Lolita*.

Davis provides an opinion on the annotation of a novel into mere semantic meanings as carried out by Gresson above. The judicial minimalism involved in breaking down a work of fiction into meaning outside of its context and culture shows more about the framework of the law and less about the work’s artistic merit:

It is not suggested that if North and Cleary JJ. had gone to the dictionary to determine the meaning of the disputed phrase their decision would have been any different. But at least such an approach would have emphasised the fact that matters of law—and whether a publication is indecent within the meaning of the Act is a matter of law—are for the courts and not for the community (Davis 774).

Davis acknowledges that even a literal translation from a dictionary is insufficient for analysing fiction, further emphasising the point that the law is insufficient for deliberating on works of art. The most important aspect of Davis’ analysis is that the law, when presiding over issues of banning, uses discourses that only make sense in the world outside of the text and not the world inside of the text, where circumstances are imagined. Much like Humbert's world only makes sense when told from his fictitious perspective, so too does the legal frameworks of the law in reality. To apply real-world legal criteria to fiction is a difficult task as there are vast differences between the two worlds. The law can only operate on the literal framework that many of its acts and laws are based upon. Applying legal frameworks to manage the distribution of art is not an effective way to determine the suitability of art for a community.

6) Defining the Taboos in *Lolita*

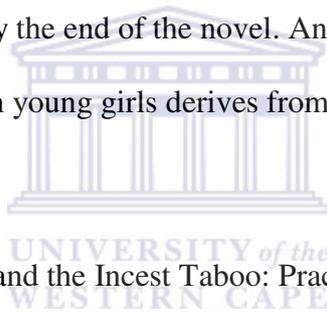
The taboos in the novel include murder, rape, incest and mental and physical abuse. The particular taboos I wish to focus on, however, revolve around the abuse of the child Lolita. This prioritises child sexual abuse, mental abuse and incest. *Lolita* is centrally about Humbert's subjective interpretations of Dolores Haze, the real child, who he recreates as Lolita, the metaphysically reconstructed girl he refers to as a nymphet. This solipsism allows Humbert a poetic licence that he believes mitigates his sexual crimes. Owing to the fact that Humbert is Lolita's father-figure, their sexual relationship is inappropriate in the sense of being immoral. The taboo of incest and the crime of statutory rape are alluded to but never explicitly described. In this novel, it becomes difficult to separate child sexual abuse from incest, as both have the common factor of sex with a more powerful adult.

It is only fair appraisal to acknowledge those who have pioneered theory on incest and taboos and, as rebellious as it may seem owing to Nabokov's famous contempt for psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud provides a definition of taboos in his work entitled *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics*. Freud states that "[...] the meaning of taboo branches off into two opposite directions. On the one hand it means to us sacred, consecrated: but on the other hand it means, uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, and unclean" (Freud 29). For *Lolita*, Freud's second definition of taboo is relevant. Freud differentiates taboos from religious and moral restrictions in the sense that, in religion, omnipotent figures of power compel individuals to abide by restrictions, while taboos do not:

[...] taboo restrictions...are not traced to a commandment of a god but really they themselves impose their own prohibitions; they are differentiated from moral prohibitions by failing to be included in a system which declares abstinences in general to be necessary and gives reasons for this necessity. The taboo prohibitions lack all justification and are of unknown origin. Though incomprehensible to us they are taken as a matter of course by those who are under their dominance (Freud 30).

What Freud captures in his observation is that taboos lack all justification because of their mysterious origins. It is through common, unwritten and unexplained acceptance by individuals, communities, or cultures that taboos find power. Moreover, the very taboo itself imposes its own forbiddance, perhaps due to the indulgence in the act or fetish itself. I will return to the discussion of neurotics from a more critical perspective in chapter three of this thesis. Claude Levi-Strauss agrees with this point in his study on familial relationships entitled *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. He observes that “there is no point in forbidding what would not happen if it were not forbidden” (Levi-Strauss 18). Levi-Strauss highlights a trait in human nature: that when one is forbidden from doing something, there is a curiosity and tendency to want to experience the forbidden. Thus, the very act of labelling something as taboo incites a curiosity to break the rules of abstaining from the act in order to experience it. In Humbert's case—the case of a European émigré who supposedly finds the American culture rather quaint—paedophilia and incest seem less queer to him but he is in a society in which they are illegal and taboo. For this scenario, Levi-Strauss makes another valuable observation on the cultural relevance of taboos. Levi-Strauss contends that a taboo such as incest may be “[...] a phenomenon which is completely foreign to animal life and which should be regarded as a function of social life. Society expressly forbids only that which society brings about” (Levi-Strauss 18). In this analysis, the very society that forbids a certain act does so only because it is a problematic occurrence from the perception of that particular society. The implication of this observation is that taboos reflect social characteristics in a localised manner as opposed to a universalised manner. Levi-Strauss then counters this observation by analysing anthropology and psychology’s tendency to define incest as a universal characteristic trait of humans: “[T]he prohibition of incest is no more than the social projection or reflection of natural feelings or tendencies, which can be entirely expanded by human nature” (Levi-Strauss 16). Culture thus plays an important role in defining what is taboo or not. What may be taboo in one culture may

be acceptable in another. This concept is made apparent by Humbert who mocks American culture for being in conflict with his own distorted, European perception of taboos. The condescending manner in which Humbert observes his newly adopted culture can be seen as a way of him mitigating his desires for an underage girl, who he comes to be responsible for as his own daughter. In this scenario, Humbert finds the sexual attraction to his new dependant, Lolita, a delectation. This suggested incest, Freud describes as being a result of infantile desires: “What we can add to the further appreciation of incest dread is the statement that it is a subtle infantile trait and is in striking agreement with the psychic life of the neurotic” (Freud 27). Freud’s definition fits a description of Humbert that suggests his state is neurotic, a point agreed upon in the novel as Humbert undergoes therapy on numerous occasions and is subject to fluctuating irrational emotions by the end of the novel. Another point admitted to by Humbert is that his fascination with young girls derives from the loss of his childhood love, Annabel Leigh.



In his article “Child Sexual Abuse and the Incest Taboo: Practical Problems and Theoretical Issues”, J. S. La Fontaine explains that incest and sexual abuse are not the same but are closely linked: “The significant unit in both cases is the household, within which adults, particularly men, exercise power over children. The incest taboo refers to the social restraint on self-interest which transforms this power into legitimate authority” (La Fontaine 1). Here the common domestic space links incest and child sexual abuse. The domain of the household is where both of these taboos may be broken. The paternal and patriarchal roles allow the father figure to exercise a form of power over the family unit. This not only legitimises power but also creates a situation where the father figure may exercise power without restraint. It should be noted that the one taboo does not necessarily assume the presence of the other. Humbert assumes the paternal role within the novel but he is not Lolita’s biological father. Thus, the incest is only a suggested taboo. Child sexual

abuse, however, is evident as Humbert not only desires Lolita sexually, but also acts upon his desires and consummates his lust for Lolita (Nabokov 151-152). For the novel *Lolita*, the domestic space becomes a convenient space and circumstance which allows Humbert to exercise this power over the young Lolita.

La Fontaine defines child sexual abuse more precisely by stating:

A child is sexually abused when another person, who is sexually mature, involves the child in sexual activities for the abuser's satisfaction or gratification. This might involve intercourse, touching, exposure of sexual organs or showing pornographic material. Other definitions may include remarks with sexual innuendo or substitute a difference in age between the people involved for the term sexually mature [...] but the essential features are the sexual exploitation of a child in an unequal relationship (La Fontaine 3).

This working definition for child sexual abuse accurately describes what occurs between Humbert and Lolita. Humbert is, in every respect, in a position of power, which underscores the child sexual abuse within the novel. Furthermore, the relationship is “unequal” in terms of age difference and intellectual and physical maturity (La Fontaine 3). Humbert thus has the opportunity to act on his desires to “sexually exploit” Lolita. He admits to this by stating at the end of the novel that he wilfully ignored Lolita to “[comfort his] own base self” (Nabokov 327).

Humbert’s deception becomes clear as he describes his first sexual encounter with Lolita. In the description of this incident, he places the initiation of sex on Lolita to avoid responsibility: “Frigid gentlewomen of the jury! [...] I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me” (Nabokov 149-150). This extract suggests an inversion of the paternal power, which effectively elicits sympathy for Humbert and constructs Lolita as an immoral seductress. The difference from La Fontaine leaves room for readers to question Humbert’s reliability as a character and narrator. The relationship between Humbert and Lolita is inherently “unequal” due to his paternal and patriarchal role as head of the family unit (La Fontaine 3).

The role of Quilty is also alluded to in La Fontaine's definition of child sexual abuse. We find that Quilty had wanted Lolita to participate in his pornographic films, but she refused and was hastily ejected from his ranch (Nabokov 314-316). Quilty's role in Lolita's sexual abuse is identified in La Fontaine's referral to: "exposure of sexual organs or showing of pornographic material" (La Fontaine 3). Though Quilty's role is expressed as an extreme form of lust for an underage girl as opposed to Humbert's more Romantic love for her, both desire Lolita sexually and expose her to sexually mature ways of thinking, acting and being. This evidences a link between Humbert and Quilty as paedophiles, implicating both characters in child sexual abuse.

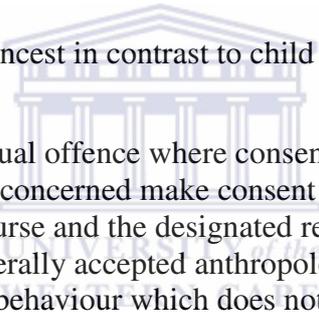
La Fontaine further delves into notions of the nymphet and child sexual abuse by describing transgression of socially determined sexual norms, through the description of sex acts with a minor under the age of thirteen: "If a girl is under 13, this is a separate and more serious crime which carries the possibility of a life sentence [in Great Britain]. The crime of rape is defined by lack of consent, it being necessary to prove that the victim did not consent" (La Fontaine 3). The case for Humbert raping Lolita is left up to the ethical reflection of the reader. Depending on the reader's worldviews and experiences, an argument can be made for rape. La Fontaine describes the rape issue as a "difficult matter on which there has been much public debate", and necessarily so as we can see the circumstances become convoluted and intricate, complicating the simplistic terms used to define sex acts with a minor as outlined by the law (La Fontaine 3).

A reflection on whether Lolita is raped or not is important, as many critics have argued that indeed this is the case. As we can see from La Fontaine's definition, rape is defined by law as the "lack of consent", which is nullified in the novel if Lolita initiates the first sexual encounter (La Fontaine 3). Even if Lolita had given consent, Humbert is still guilty of statutory rape. This, however, is still a debatable issue as the establishment of Humbert as a subjective character and narrator leads the reader to question his reliability. Throughout the novel, we find instances where Lolita is

coerced into having sex with Humbert in order to obtain what she desires. This reopens the debate as to whether Lolita is raped as she is compelled to have sex for the sake of earning freedoms which she is entitled to as a child, but Humbert keeps from her to indulge his own sexual desires. An example of this is presented in the scene where Humbert visits Lolita at Beardsley College, and takes advantage of the situation of being surrounded by underage girls. He recalls: "I sat beside Dolly just behind that neck and that hair, and unbuttoned my overcoat and for sixty-five cents plus the permission to participate in the school play, had Dolly put her inky, chalky, red-knuckled hand under the desk. Oh, stupid and reckless of me, no doubt, but after the torture I had been subjected to, I simply had to take advantage of a combination that I knew would never occur again" (Nabokov 224). Lolita is coerced into committing this sexual act so she could participate in her school's play. This not only affirms her status as a developing teenager, but also demonstrates the power differential between her and Humbert. In the sense of transactional sex with prostitutes, an argument for rape cannot be made. A trade of equal value is made between two consenting parties, both of whom are satisfied with exchanging their goods and services. However, in the case of Humbert and Lolita, there is a high degree of coercion and manipulation involved. When looking at whether Humbert rapes Lolita, the fact that he denies her freedoms until she abides by his sexual desires evidences rape. One instance of coercion is highlighted in Humbert's words: "[...] it would take hours of blandishment, threats and promises to make her lend me for a few seconds her brown limbs in the seclusion of the five-dollar room before undertaking anything she might prefer to my poor joy" (Nabokov 166). Another example of Humbert limiting Lolita's freedom is seen in the list of things forbidden to Lolita. Humbert's list includes two sections: "First of all the old ogre drew up a list under 'absolutely forbidden' and another under 'reluctantly allowed.' Absolutely forbidden were dates, single or double or triple – the next step was of course mass orgy" (Nabokov 210). This may seem legitimate concerns for a parent, however the list of things Humbert reluctantly allows always includes a self-serving interaction with some of Lolita's

“prettier girlfriends” and always while Humbert “waited in the car at a discreet location” (Nabokov 210). The most telling example is where Humbert frankly admits that he deprives Lolita of freedoms: “[...] what really angered her was my depriving her not of a specific satisfaction but of a general right. I was impinging, you see, on the conventional program, the stock pastimes, the ‘things that are done’, the routine of youth” (Nabokov 211). This is no freedom at all and Lolita is described as being “enraged” by the suggestion, and even describes Humbert as “a lousy crook and worse” (Nabokov 211). Lolita’s reaction indicates a clear displeasure towards her way of life under the tyranny of Humbert. Thus, we see that Humbert often proclaims one thing, but, through descriptions of Lolita’s reactions, undermines his story and impresses on the receptive reader that his recollections are fallacies.

La Fontaine then goes on to define incest in contrast to child sexual abuse as outlined by the law:



Incest, by contrast, is a sexual offence where consent is not an issue, for the relationships of the parties concerned make consent irrelevant [...] In law it is the combination of intercourse and the designated relationship which constitutes incest. The generally accepted anthropological definition follows the law in ignoring sexual behaviour which does not include intercourse (La Fontaine 3-4).

Social norms determine that sexual relations between direct family members related by blood are wrong and thus taboo. The law follows suit with this train of thinking, as made clear by the analysis of Davis that the precedence in the law for what is deemed acceptable in the eyes of the community should always be made by the community. For the novel, this implies that the sexual encounter between Humbert and Lolita is taboo as well. This could be why we find readers feeling a sense of disgust towards the suggested incest within the novel. Social and legal norms define sexual behaviour and thus society applies these norms to fiction. Further contention lies with the act of sex. The question about whether intercourse takes place is important, as this is the deciding factor in defining incest. According to British law, “[...] if intercourse does not take place, it is not incest [...]” (La Fontaine 3-4). In the novel, there is a clear argument for the sexual abuse of Lolita,

but not for incest as Humbert is not Lolita's biological father. An inequality of one taboo over the other is evidenced and further entrenched in the words: "general opinion would [...] rank sexual behaviour with a related child as different from, and more serious than, 'interfering' with an unrelated one" (La Fontaine 3-4). This definition reflects a sense of resistance that readers experience with the novel. Readers feel a sense of relief that Humbert is not Lolita's biological father, as this would make the sexual transgression in the novel more infuriating. At the same time, readers still feel a sense of disgust at the act of sexually abusing a minor. This conflict of emotions within the reader is reflected in the ambiguity of the law's definition of incest, and a clear link is then established between the world of the text and the world outside of the text.

The definition of family complicates the notion of incest further. La Fontaine defines the unit of family and gives a description relevant for the novel: "[...] the concept of 'the family' introduces further complexity into the meaning of incest [...] All domestic groups which contain children may be referred to as 'families' [...] In general opinion, step-relations are considered very similar to 'real' or 'blood' relations" (La Fontaine 5). This not only includes blood relatives, but relations who are not. The essential element is "children", which, by definition, infers an unequal relation of power, as children need care. In this instance, the abuse of power by a superordinate figure is a possibility and this is what transpires between Humbert and Lolita. La Fontaine's description of the stepfather's role being much the same as that of "blood relations" implies that even though Humbert may not be Lolita's biological father he is still guilty of incest (La Fontaine 5). The suggested incest in the novel then corroborates with the anthropological study on incest. The similarities between the world outside of the text and the world inside of the text is striking, further providing insights into reasons why the law struggles to separate a reality outside of fiction from the world within fiction.

An intriguing comment made by La Fontaine on the reasons why sexual abuse and incest are not spoken about is found in the factor of public opinion. La Fontaine's analyses sheds light on Humbert's insistence that his confession only be made public after Lolita's death: "In public opinion the offence also taints the wife and children of the offender; they may be ostracised or subject to informal pressures which are severe enough to make them move house" (La Fontaine 7). It is interesting to note how the psychological effects of sexual abuse and incest come to influence and inform the form of the novel in the world inside of the text. Nabokov, and by implication Humbert, may well have been aware of the reasons for the abused not making her circumstances public. As La Fontaine puts it, the abused may be "subject to further sexual harassment, once what has happened to them is known" (La Fontaine 7). Humbert's sensitivity towards, and awareness of, the impact of abuse disclosure leads the reader to feel sympathy for him as he is sensitive enough to consider the emotional well being of Lolita. Humbert insists that: "[he wishes] this memoir to be published only when Lolita is no longer alive" (Nabokov 352). However, we still cannot ignore the fact that Humbert has committed a heinous crime against a child, and his reason for showing this sensitivity may be self-serving as he is aware that he is writing for an audience. Despite Humbert showing sensitivity to Lolita's circumstances at the end of the novel, he is less than sympathetic to her emotions while sexually abusing her. Humbert distinctly, and consistently, ignores Lolita's cries, a sign of distress for any child: "I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires and her sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep" (Nabokov 199). The repetition of Lolita's cries highlights the deep trauma that she felt. Humbert's response to this was cold as he simply "feigned sleep", when Lolita most needed emotional care (Nabokov 199). This aloof reaction to Lolita's emotional well-

being indicates that Humbert did not truly care for Lolita and his credibility as a narrator, proclaiming innocence of paedophilia, is brought into question once more.

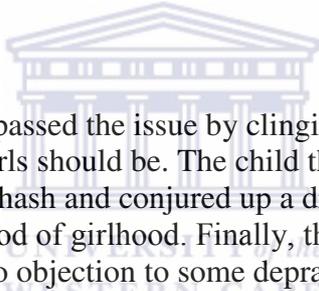
A link between the domestic space and the two taboos of incest and child sexual abuse is important. It not only differentiates the taboos but also shows a commonality between them:

[...] if incest and the sexual abuse of children are not two terms for the same phenomenon, they share an important characteristic [...] The overwhelming majority of children who are sexually abused suffer this mistreatment at home [...] Few are abused by total strangers (La Fontaine 9).

Calling into question what a domestic space is, is an important aspect for the novel because much time is spent on the road and not in a home setting. For *Lolita* it may be fair appraisal to argue that the domestic space is really an imagined “ethos” in the ancient Greek sense of the word where shelter or sanctuary is provided for members in common need (Conradie 2). Arguably, Humbert has a more self-serving desire for Lolita’s company, while Lolita has a more pressing need to stay with Humbert out of necessity for protection and care, as Humbert is her only parental figure. In both cases, however, the need or want to be together leads to the same result, a sexual relationship between the two. The sexual relationship between Humbert and Lolita could arguably be establishing an imagined domestic space that La Fontaine highlights as the “home” setting. The sexual relationship is thus the only factor that gives both Humbert and Lolita what they need and want, regardless of whether it is oppressive to the one party.

The notion that blood relatives are less likely to sexually abuse their children than stepfamily members is another aspect highlighted by La Fontaine, perhaps owing to the fact that it seems less incestuous if the child is not a blood relative: “As is now well-known, the majority of victims are sexually abused by a father or stepfather. There is some evidence that stepfathers are more likely to abuse the children in their care than fathers” (La Fontaine 9). This condition of child sexual abuse is congruous between the novel and the world outside of the text. La Fontaine’s research

entrenches what Nabokov portrays within the novel: that Humbert is not Lolita's biological father and this contributes to a more sympathetic view of Humbert from the reader. At the same time, Humbert's sexual abuse of a child leads the reader to abhor him. The reader forms an ambivalent opinion of Humbert, as he seems at once lost in a delusion of proposed love for Lolita, yet transgresses on central tenets of parenthood and culturally determined norms by sexually abusing Lolita. We could argue that Humbert is deceptive enough to purposefully construct his own character, and it would not be difficult to assume that he would construct for himself multiple personae depending on his situation, as we are constantly alerted to the fact that Humbert is aware of readers being his judge. We see this where Humbert debates with himself whether or not he should take advantage of Lolita's anesthetised state after drugging her. Humbert addresses readers directly:



[...] the moralist in me by-passed the issue by clinging to conventional notions of what twelve-year-old girls should be. The child therapist in me [...] regurgitated neo-Freudian hash and conjured up a dreaming and exaggerating Dolly in the "latency" period of girlhood. Finally, the sensualist in me (a great and insane monster) had no objection to some depravity in his prey [...] Human beings, attend [...] I should have known [...] that nothing but pain and horror would result from the expected rapture. Oh, winged gentlemen of the jury! (Nabokov 140-141).

By describing himself from various viewpoints, the "moralist", "child therapist" and the "sensualist", Humbert constructs for the reader, or his "jury", different personae (Nabokov 140-141). Early in the novel Humbert creates these personae in times of emotional distress. When Humbert finds out his first wife Valeria is leaving him for another man, he recalls: "[...] Humbert the Terrible deliberated with Humbert the small whether Humbert Humbert should kill her or her lover, or both, or neither" (Nabokov 30). The selection of personae when addressing Lolita is telling, as they are kind towards the sexual impulses of a paedophile. This may lead readers to feel sympathy for him and is deceptive as he is acutely aware that he is addressing readers who are judging his inappropriate sexual desires. Humbert achieves this by blatantly addressing them as

“winged gentlemen of the jury!”, flattering readers by elevating them to the level of divine judges and appealing to the reader’s sense of humanity at the same time (Nabokov 140-141).

La Fontaine goes further to describe how the family unit is not merely an organisational structure but it is also framed by a set of assumed and often unstated rules. The idea of parenthood comes with an assumed set of values and moral obligations towards each member. These obligations are assumed to be a given when one becomes a parent. Legal restrictions strengthen the assumed rules by binding them as illegal, for example incest or inbreeding. Child sexual abuse and incest within a family evidences a flouting of these parental maxims:

The idea of the family is the basis for household organisation but it is also a moral certainty about the world [...]it also imbues the resulting group with a natural inevitability. The relations between adults and children within it are accepted as deriving from their genetic relatedness [...] (La Fontaine 10-11).

La Fontaine states that there are certain moral rules that come with parent-child relationships within the family unit and refers to this as “natural inevitability”, relating more to the parental and child instincts that are inherent in blood relationships (La Fontaine 10-11). The relationship between ages, namely adult and child, stems from this “natural inevitability” as behavioural patterns are formed around age. By this he means that parents are expected to act in a certain way and children are expected to act in a certain way due to the age differences in the family unit. It is normally the parents who afford “Protectiveness and care for the welfare of offspring” (La Fontaine 10-11). In return, the role of the child is one of “dependence on and trust in the parents” (La Fontaine 10-11). *Lolita* deconstructs and flouts the rules and accepted tenets of the normative family roles. Humbert flouts these maxims by lusting after an underage girl who he assimilates into his life as his dependent, and Lolita flouts the maxim of normative family values by asserting herself, from Humbert’s accounts, in the capacity of his lover and equal at times.

La Fontaine makes clear his definition of the incest taboo and how it comes to be defined in relation to older models describing incest: “Certainly most work before and after Levi-Strauss identifies the incest taboo as demarcating a group which is contained within a common boundary. I am arguing that this boundary is a residential one, provided by the walls of the house that enclose a married couple and the offspring that will result from their socially approved union” (La Fontaine 11). In *Lolita*, the boundary extends beyond the homestead, causing readers to question the notion of what a home, sanctuary, or safe refuge is. It would be more fitting for the novel’s portrayal of incest and child sexual abuse to be framed within Levi-Strauss’ definition of being “within a common boundary”, as Humbert and Lolita are constantly on the move in most of the novel (La Fontaine 11). Furthermore, the idea of the “common boundary” extends further than a mere domestic space in which people physically live (La Fontaine 11). The boundary may refer to an emotional boundary or attachment that links the participants within the taboo relationship. To take this idea further, the relationship that occurs between abuser and the abused, one of dependence within an unequal and oppressive relationship, relevantly characterises the situation between Humbert and Lolita within the novel.

La Fontaine then addresses the tension experienced, through competition for Humbert's affection, between mother and daughter. This explores a deconstructed hegemonic family relationship between the three characters Humbert, Charlotte and Lolita, within the novel. The relationship occurs as a result of the sexual taboos of incest and child sexual abuse within the domestic space. The resultant disobedience from Lolita, and Charlotte’s reaction and treatment of her daughter, is reflected in La Fontaine’s analysis of the sexual relationships:

The inevitable emotion and associated behaviour of sexual relationships would undermine the authority of parents and prevent the respectful obedience of children. The co-operation of siblings would be threatened by competition and the 'vicarious authority' of older over younger would be destroyed in the same way as parental authority (La Fontaine 12).

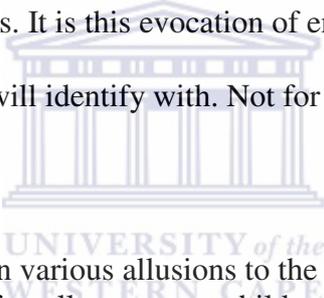
Lolita shows a clear rebellious streak within the novel, at first towards her mother and later towards Humbert. This is found in Humbert's portrayal of Lolita's lust for him, as well as his lust for her. It should be noted that this is still Humbert's interpretation of occurrences and thus unreliable. The resulting competition for Humbert's affection between Charlotte and Lolita serves to foreshadow Lolita's rebellious attitude within the novel. Later in the novel, when Humbert and Lolita travel alone, and Lolita becomes increasingly dependent on Humbert, we find that she displeases him, sometimes purposefully, in order to assert some form of agency within her own life. An example of this is seen in Lolita playfully chastising Humbert: "You revolting creature. I was a daisy-fresh girl, and look what you've done to me. I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me. Oh, you dirty old man" (Nabokov 159). Humbert, at this point, is unsure whether Lolita is playing with him, as he recalls her smiling at times. At the same time readers cannot ignore Humbert's observation that Lolita sits uncomfortably, accusing Humbert of having "torn something inside" her and then not speaking to him for the rest of the trip (Nabokov 159). Humbert becomes nervous at the thought of being exposed and the description of how Lolita addresses Humbert with a tone of over-familiarity, a tone that denotes that Lolita is in a position of power, subverting the parent-child hierarchy of power. La Fontaine describes this as "parental authority break[ing] down because of the equality which is inherent in the relationships of lovers" (La Fontaine 12). In this instance, the taboo sexual relationship between Humbert and Lolita acts as a catalyst and justification for Lolita's rebellious behaviour within the novel. Lolita no longer sees herself in the subordinate role of a child, but now assumes the role of Humbert's equal due to their sexual relationship. This particular reconstruction of Lolita appears to create a good argument for Humbert's innocence and should be looked at sceptically by the informed reader.

The novel once more finds commonalities with La Fontaine's analysis of the damage that sexual relations can do to children. Not only does this have a negative bearing on the child's emotional

development, but it may also take a physical toll on the child at a later stage: “Sexual relations with a child are [...] moreover clearly damaging to the child. In a few cases the damage is physical, sometimes to the extent that it requires surgical repair and, in the case of a girl, may result in her inability to bear children” (La Fontaine 13). In both instances of emotional and physical damage, we find that the novel portrays the effect that the violations of incest and child sexual abuse have on Lolita. Lolita’s emotional state, that of crying and being vulnerable, is highlighted a few times within the novel. Furthermore, at the end of the novel we find that she dies during childbirth. The implication of Humbert’s sexual abuse of Lolita is clear: the fact that Lolita dies during childbirth leads the reader to assume that damage has been inflicted on Lolita, as childbirth is a natural state of human existence. Humbert corrupts this natural order by transgressing socially acceptable sexual relationships, and morality, and thus damages Lolita, effectively subverting any hopes for a prosperous and happy future for her. Furthermore, Humbert's guilt within his confessions infers that he realises that he has contributed to Lolita’s inability to bear a child, indirectly admitting that he is at fault. For both of these reasons, readers develop resistance to Humbert’s confessions and tend to construct him as the “moral [leper]” that the foreword portrays him to be (Nabokov 3).

To conclude his argument, La Fontaine establishes how the taboo of incest and child sexual abuse is not merely a symbolic or abstract violation, but a tangible behavioural pattern. This behavioural pattern does not develop independently, but finds influence in an established context of culture: “Incest [with a child] is not merely a symbolic violation of kinship but the sexual abuse of children. It is behaviour which must be considered in a total social context” (La Fontaine 15). La Fontaine explains that the taboos of incest and child sexual abuse play a role as a symbol of a corrupted and perhaps even perverted form of relation between family and the extended definitions thereof, but it does not end there. The words “the sexual abuse of children” make clear that there is a physical and emotional scarring intrinsic to the abuse (La Fontaine 15). As

previously discussed by La Fontaine, many instances of abuse are swept under the rug to hide the shame of the family and protect the abused. The fact remains that taboos such as incest and child sexual abuse are real issues that need to be dealt with. A denial that these issues exist or that the novel inspires latent desires in human beings is a simplification of the issue which, as La Fontaine argues, changes it into a “symbolic violation” (La Fontaine 15). This could be what Nabokov means when he describes those readers who lost interest in the novel. Nabokov does not deny that the content of his fiction explores the urges of a paedophile (Nabokov 360). However, “aesthetic bliss”, the art of writing, takes precedence over simply conveying a moral about paedophilia (Nabokov 358). Thus, Nabokov does not write fiction for morality’s sake; instead, it is an evocation of feelings and emotions that connect readers to other readers who identify with the same emotions that the fiction elicits. It is this evocation of emotion in high art that Nabokov reprises and hopes that his readers will identify with. Not for a second does Nabokov assume that his readership is ignorant of this:



That my novel does contain various allusions to the physiological urges of a pervert is quite true. But after all we are not children, not illiterate juvenile delinquents, not English public school boys who after a night of homosexual romps have to endure the paradox of reading the Ancients in expurgated versions (Nabokov 360).

Nabokov focuses on a disconnect between the actions of “homosexual romps” by school boys, and what school boys read; the ancient texts. These texts were usually censored to remove undesirable allusions to homosexuality and paedophilia which, for the period in which the ancient texts were written, were normal occurrences. This is what Nabokov refers to as a “paradox” (Nabokov 360). This rationale alone, that the world outside of the text converses with the world inside of the text, should be reason enough for refuting bans on novels that deal with taboo issues. To believe that novels inspire latent desires in readers is to paint every reader with a single brush. This implies that every reader reads and interprets novels in a uniform and static manner. As we know, this is an untruth as many readers derive different ways of seeing a particular issue within a single novel.

This evidences that reading is a subjective activity, dependent on the reader's personal experience and rationalisation. In the same way, reading could be shaped by socially determined norms. In either case no two readers will read a novel in the exact same way.



Chapter two:

Paratexts and Authoritarian Responses to *Lolita*

Various critical essays were published on the proposition that *Lolita* was undesirable. Reasons for this particular reception range from the taboo topics that Nabokov used to the grotesque nature of Humbert's behaviour. The texts that have arisen as a response to the novel are what I refer to as "paratexts". These texts are annotations or explanations that clarify concepts within a novel or body of work. More precisely, I focus on responses that attempt to explain certain themes within the text, like taboos or objectification of women. Noticeably, critics have mused over the grotesque themes in the novel as opposed to the treatment of these themes. The more receptive critics have noticed the subtle morals that lie beneath the dominant themes of paedophilia, rape, murder and incest, to show how the novel proposes an alternative ethos. Readers often feel a certain amount of disgust when reading about taboo topics due to preconceived notions about ways of behaving in society. These preconceived notions cause readers to shun discussions about these taboo topics and come to define what this thesis refers to as resistance to the novel. The resistance, or negative reception of *Lolita*, by the public is almost always foreshadowed by a moral reading of the novel. Readers approach the novel with preconceived notions of morality and expect to find grotesque images and allusions to the rape of a young girl. The resistance to the novel comes when readers find that this is not the experience that they get from reading the novel, as discussed by Nabokov in chapter one. Humbert's deception, and the resulting sympathy for his circumstances, forces readers to interrogate their own notions of socially accepted ethics causing us to experience an unease toward the novel. Three levels of resistance are present here. In the first instance, readers have distaste for the novel based on preconceived notions of morality. The second, readers who read the novel are

frustrated and disappointed when not supplied with the grotesque images they expect. Thirdly, there is a reluctance to face taboos that the novel discusses. This chapter focuses on critical responses, commenting on the resistance to the novel. Nafisi's memoir proposes a feminist response to the novel before exploring the authoritarian response in the case of Nafisi and Tehran. Finally, the chapter concludes by assessing the South African context; more precisely, it focuses on the authoritarian rule of Apartheid under which *Lolita* was banned.

The global reception of *Lolita* is strongly influenced by socially determined norms, cultural practices and religious beliefs. Depending on geographical location and the moral compass that govern the people living within a given region, the novel could either be accepted for its artistic merit or frowned upon as a threat to the ethos of the cultural or religious group. In the case of a strongly Islamic state like Iran, the taboo of sexual deviance is unacceptable, even in fiction, and as a result it is banned by law from being read, annotated or taught.

Authors, like Azar Nafisi in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* have come to use *Lolita* as an allegorical story that reflects women's struggles under an oppressive totalitarian regime. The removal of female rights is an issue that the women within Nafisi's memoir struggle with. Through the analysis of "the Humbert" figure, likened to the political rule of Tehran's oppressive government, Nafisi's story interrogates the Islamic position on female rights and the women within the story are able to make sense of their circumstances. By doing this, Nafisi comments on the removal of the liminal voices in society. Feminist critics like Anika Susan Quayle and Elizabeth Patnoe make an argument similar to Nafisi's by highlighting one of the main crimes that is ignored within the novel, namely that Lolita's voice is distinctly written out of Humbert's recollections. Though the apparently dominant theme of the novel is sensationalist and is seen as undesirable, the subtle moral of whether "a self can exist apart from one's subjective interpretations of another" is highlighted by Quayle (Quayle 6). This converses with Nafisi's

discussion on the removal of female rights and voices in Tehran. In both Nafisi and Quayle's arguments, a strong case for more subtle and overlooked morals within *Lolita* is being made. These receptions lean towards a positive outlook of Nabokov's work as opposed to the negative reception it has received from a prudish moral reading of the novel.

Much the same as Nafisi's situation, *Lolita* was received negatively by the Apartheid regime in South Africa. A prudish and morally superior attitude towards taboo issues lead to its ban for a number of years. Preconceived notions, and a moral reading, about the taboo topics in *Lolita* became the dominant reason for its ban. Even after literary critics and publishers in South Africa requested a lift on the ban, citing the novel's artistic merit, sanctions were still placed on its distribution. The fact that those implementing the law so vehemently detested the novel, even after analysis from literary experts, raises questions about whether the law is an adequate gatekeeper for high art. The critique of high art should be determined by those who are trained to do so. This does not imply that high art is above the law, merely that it requires fair appraisal by qualified individuals before the law reduces high art to literal meanings, and by so doing, limiting the potential of high art to educate society.

1) Critical Essays Commenting on the Resistance to *Lolita*

Lolita's taboo topics have been the source of many arguments over the morals within the novel. While many critics choose to focus on the dominant themes that the sensationalism of the novel is renowned for, others like Quayle have taken a feminist approach to reading *Lolita* and highlighted subtle morals that are profound for the progress of women's rights. Quayle focuses on Humbert's unreliability as a cunning narrator and character, and shows how Humbert uses his omniscient presence to manipulate readers into feeling sympathy for him.

In one particular excerpt, Quayle describes how Humbert creates an incomparable beauty when he first describes the image of the nymph: "Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there

occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travellers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures [Humbert] propose[s] to designate as ‘nymphets’” (Nabokov 15). The connotation of this is that Lolita is fiendish or even evil. The reference to the word “creature” further indicates this dislocation from being human or, to a more telling degree, moral or good (Nabokov 15). Humbert subtly begins to construct Lolita as an evil entity. He further describes features of the nymphet such as the “slightly feline outline of a cheekbone, [and] the slenderness of a downy limb” which he identifies with his first sexual encounter and love, Annabel Leigh (Nabokov 16). Humbert uses these images to bolster his argument that Lolita was a construction and that his raping of an artistic expression of a real child is thus not criminal.

On first encountering Lolita, Humbert remarks on some similar features to Annabel Leigh: “It was the same child—the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair” (Nabokov 41-42). It appears that Humbert transposes the memory of Annabel Leigh onto Lolita. He even admits: “All I want to stress is that my discovery of [Lolita] was a fatal consequence of that “princedom by the sea” in my tortured past [...] Everything they shared made one of them” (Nabokov 42). The “princedom by the sea” is a reference to Humbert's sexual encounter with Annabel Leigh at a young age (Nabokov 42). What is most telling about this quotation is that Humbert amalgamates a memory of Annabel Leigh with a living character, Lolita. This portrays a recreated Lolita—an idealised figure with characteristics and behavioural patterns that are predetermined, without Humbert learning to know Dolores Haze, the real child. Effectively this solipsises Dolores and turns her into an object, almost a fetish whom Humbert imagines to be the nymphet. Thus, Humbert ignores Dolores, the real girl child with characteristics of her own, in order to create a distance between the real child and the child he rapes. Quayle’s use of the words “imagined into existence” becomes integral in

interpreting her reading of Humbert's perception of Lolita (Quayle 5). This makes Humbert's account of Lolita an idealised one that can only exist in his solipsistic world. Humbert's recollections set up his accounts of Lolita, and other characters, to be biased and unreliable. The idea that Humbert "imagines" Lolita is compounded by Quayle's reference to another critic, David Andrews, who describes Humbert as "look[ing] through [Lolita]", showing the reader that Humbert purposefully ignores Lolita's true characteristics in order to substitute them with those characteristics more fitting to his idea of the nymphet (Quayle 5). By doing this, Humbert not only erases a faithful representation of the "real" Lolita but also substitutes her with his own fictional creation, solipsising Dolores and discrediting his point of views as reliable at the same time. As Quayle so effectively states, what gets lost in all of Humbert's interpretations and reinterpretation of Lolita is "Dolores Haze", the real child nicknamed Lolita (Quayle 5).

Humbert's psychological state begins to show here. The allusions to all of the therapy Humbert went through in the storyline of the novel may lead readers to question his mental health. Indeed, another of Freud's observations on the neurotic seems to fit Humbert with regards to regression into an infantile state. The link between Humbert's childhood sexual desire and his adulthood sexual desire for a child is linked to chapter one's discussion on the neurotic and further touched on by Freud:

The neurotic [...] regularly presents to us a piece of psychic infantilism; he has either not been able to free himself from the childlike conditions of psychosexuality, or else he has returned to them (inhibited development and regression). Hence the incestuous fixations of the libido still play or again are playing the main role in his unconscious psychic life (Freud 27).

What Freud touches on is the fixation on the "incestuous" which Humbert appears to find a more poignant delectation in Lolita. It appears that the more forbidden the relationship becomes, the more pleasure Humbert derives from it. While it seems Lolita is amalgamated with Annabel Leigh, and Annabel is the initial reference for his sexual desire for Lolita, Humbert admits Lolita

“[...] was to eclipse her prototype [Annabel]” (Nabokov 42). It could be argued in terms of Freud’s theory of incest that Humbert's lust for Lolita is made more poignant by the proposed incest their relationship suggests. Uninhibited development and suggested incest are both prevalent in Humbert’s case. What is so fitting is that Lolita eclipsed Annabel Leigh in Humbert’s eyes. This does not suggest that Lolita came to replace Annabel, instead Humbert’s infantile desire was overshadowed by another desire later in his life, but the two desires remain intimately linked. Freud’s idea that the neurotic regresses into “psychic infantilism” is evidenced as Humbert is never able to let go of his unfulfilled desire for Annabel Leigh, and thus seeks to fulfil it with Lolita (Freud 27).

Lolita is then further described as dangerous. By characterising Lolita in this manner, Quayle alludes to the idea that Lolita is seen in a negative light by readers because of Humbert's recollections of her. This corroborates with the assessment that Humbert uses these words as a means to dehumanise Dolores Haze and commit her into the realms of the metaphysical. If we accept that Humbert's accounts are biased, subjective and unreliable, then Quayle has done an effective job as she calls for readers to interrogate whether the ominous description of Lolita can be trusted as a faithful or true account of her characteristics. By doing this, Quayle questions Humbert's reliability and forces readers to question their perceptions of Lolita because they are based solely on Humbert's construction of her. Patteson backs up Quayle’s argument by looking at the intricacies of Nabokov’s characters as both narrators and characters of their own stories. Patteson states that Nabokov’s characters: “[...are] from the outset [...] author[s] telling [their] story [...] The point of the device appears to be that authorship, like death, is just another “state of being” [...] “real” persons [do not] exist except as re-imagined...by the narrator” (Patteson 103). Patteson and Quayle appear to agree on the reliability of Humbert as a narrator. Humbert’s perceptions can only exist in a world of his own creation. This presents the reader with a

distorted world that can only exist in the subjective, partial constructs that make up the narrator's world. Humbert ultimately constructs his nymphet, and by implication, Lolita, as destructive to males who are seduced by her charms. In the process, he presents himself as Lolita's innocent victim.

Humbert's deception is then further analysed by Quayle when she looks at the role he plays as both character and narrator. From a narrator's perspective, Humbert has hindsight into his story and can reconstruct it accordingly to benefit his ends, convincing the reader, both his judge and jury, that he is innocent:

[...It is suggested] that the text does not preclude the possibility that Humbert is in fact an 'other-deceptive' narrator, who knowingly uses this story of his blindness to Lolita in order to present himself to the reader as cut off from reality, and thus unaware of the harm he is doing the child (Quayle 7).

In this argument, Quayle constructs Humbert as devious on differing levels. In his story, Humbert is engaged in actions that are seen by society as taboo, grotesque and sexually deviant. Humbert argues that his actions are justifiable as Lolita was not aware of what he thought and did within his desires for her. This is a flawed argument as Humbert's imposition, sexual as well as mental, on Dolores Haze as a young girl is inappropriate according to societal sexual norms regarding children and adults, and Humbert is aware of this. This not only robs the little girl of an independent existence, but also robs her of a child-like innocence that Humbert uses to his advantage to justify his sexual desires for her. The analyses that Humbert presents himself to the reader as innocent of a crime, or knowledge of a crime, by feigning blindness to the real Lolita further shows his deviousness and unreliability (Quayle 7). As a narrator who has hindsight into his actions, Humbert is able to use his position of power within fiction to elicit sympathy for himself and convince readers of his innocence. Humbert's claim that he was blinded by the charms of the nymphet, Lolita, whom he created to satisfy his desires, and to furthermore claim that he was seduced by her, makes him a very devious character indeed.

Ryan Wepler, in his article entitled “Nabokov’s Nomadic Humor: *Lolita*”, takes Quayle’s argument further to a deeper, linguistic analysis of Humbert's language use and storytelling. Wepler describes how Humbert’s language manipulation shows evidence of his deception by contending that:

In [...] patterns of wordplay [...] Humbert’s manipulation of language allows him to maintain [a] ‘sense of exteriority’ [...] His use of visual and phonetic patterns of words [...] construct[s] his own system of meaning [...] leaving him free to use his “tools” in a way that satisfies the autonomy of his consciousness (Wepler 86).

Wepler’s description exemplifies how Humbert uses language to remain aloof from his perverse actions. Humbert’s intricate wordplay and, more tellingly, the exact moments in the narrative that he decides to use these wordplays all hint at the deviousness of his story. An example can be found in the retelling of the first time Humbert has an orgasm against Lolita. He alludes to a phallic image when recounting “the hidden tumour of an unspeakable passion” (Nabokov 64). Humbert’s cunning is subtle here. He is acutely aware of the reader’s presence, as directly before his allusion to this phallic symbol, he asks the reader to “participate in the scene” and then describes his sexual arousal indirectly (Nabokov 62). The first indication that Humbert is deceptive is the terms in which he describes his arousal for Lolita. The words “tumour” and “passion” are gentler words that could otherwise have been referred to as his erection and lust (Nabokov 64). The second way in which Humbert is deceptive is in his description of his lust being “unspeakable” (Nabokov 64). Ironically, Humbert is writing to his audience, acutely aware of their presence. To speak about the “unspeakable” is an irony that evidences a purposeful undermining of the meaning of the word “unspeakable” (Nabokov 64). The unspeakable for Humbert is therefore not as taboo or unspeakable as he claims it to be, once more calling his credibility into question.

One of Humbert's clever deceptions is his biblical reference to Lolita as “apple sweet”, alluding to the Genesis story of Eve being the seductress and catalyst for Adam’s fall from grace (Nabokov 65). This is complimented by his description of himself as “helpless as Adam [...] in his apple orchard” (Nabokov 79), compared to Lolita who “had painted her lips and was holding in her hollowed hands a beautiful banal, Eden-red apple (Nabokov 63). By doing this, Humbert not only constructs Lolita as devious, but also shifts the blame for his actions. This is first done by Humbert looking at the physical attributes of the nymphet’s body as in our first discussion on the nymphet. In this extract, an ethereal property of the nymphet is described and attributed to Lolita. Thus, Humbert sexually reconstructs Dolores Haze in terms of her body and demeanour as a seductress. However, Humbert undermines any suggestions of purity and innocence through biblical references, as he makes lewd biblical references about Lolita. At one point in the novel we find Humbert studying a book called “*Know Your Own Daughter*” which infers the biblical connotation of “knowing” as being sexually intimate with someone (Nabokov 197). It is such ambiguous and inconsistent use of language and metaphor that act as subtle clues to the reader about Humbert's cunning and unreliable nature.

Quayle argues that Humbert's misrepresentations are conveniently, and strategically, emphasised in specific parts of the novel where Lolita does not conform to, or participate in, his fantasies of the perfect nymphet girl child:

[...] Far from being the product of an idealized imagining [...Humbert's] distortions present Lolita in an unfavorable [sic] light. As Humbert comes to see that Lolita will not willingly participate in the sexual activities he so desires [...] he begins to make comments such as the oft-quoted ‘Lolita, when she chose, could be a most exasperating brat’ (Quayle 15).

Quayle entrenches Humbert's cunning by his portrayal of Lolita in a manner that forces the receptive reader to read between the lines of his descriptions in order to gain a clearer picture of who she is. Quayle makes this clear in describing how “Humbert in some ways presents the

reader with a distorted representation of Lolita which the reader must look through in order to discern her true character” (Quayle 15). Humbert takes advantage of the fact that readers may believe his proclamations of innocence to the crimes of paedophilia and rape if he characterises Lolita in a particular way. This indicates a deviousness which works in Humbert's favour, and which he exploits, to aid in his cries of innocence. Quayle discusses this in her reference to how “Humbert comes to see that Lolita will not willingly participate in the sexual activities he so desires, and as she increasingly reacts to him with hostility, he begins to make comments which reflect Lolita in a very unflattering manner” (Quayle 15). Here Humbert completely reverses his idealised views of the perfect Lolita, the nymphet, who is the object of his desires. This is evidence of the power Humbert has in manipulating readers’ perceptions. Humbert is able to construct his story in any way he pleases, leaving the reader to discern whether his story is reliable.

Considering the regularity with which Humbert changes his portrayal of characters, we could argue that the only reliability in Humbert is his unreliability. Humbert's recollections of his feelings towards characters are inconsistent. Although he feigns absolute love for Lolita, we see breaks in his story where he describes her characteristics in unflattering terms, like the word “wench” which Humbert uses when describing how she was more interested in the paperboy than his own interference with her (Nabokov 60). At the same time, we find instances where Humbert defends Lolita’s character against Charlotte’s negative description of her characteristics. At one point in the novel, Humbert finds a quiz about parenting in a magazine in which Charlotte lists negative characteristics of Lolita. Condescendingly, Humbert mocks Charlotte’s descriptions of her own daughter by substituting positive characteristics that, according to him, Charlotte misses. Humbert comments: “[Charlotte] had ignored the thirty remaining adjectives, among which were cheerful, cooperative, energetic, and so forth”

(Nabokov 90). Likewise, Humbert abhors Charlotte and her ways as evidenced in his diary entries that she discovered. The entries recorded Humbert calling Charlotte “The Haze woman, the big bitch, the old cat, the obnoxious mamma” (Nabokov 107). Yet, conveniently, Humbert is able to identify with Charlotte’s exasperations with Lolita when Lolita refuses his sexual advances and consequently denies him sexual fulfilment; Humbert exclaims, “Charlotte, I began to understand you!” (Nabokov 167). Humbert’s vacillation between the descriptions of a character’s demeanours affects how readers should interpret the truth-value of his recollections.

One of the more telling signs that Humbert uses his power as narrator to convince readers of his innocence and Lolita's deviousness is by highlighting her resistance to his sexual advances, as if this is something abnormal. Examples of these are discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. Elsewhere, we find Lolita “scratch[es]” Humbert during sex (Nabokov 185) to which, an observant passer asks Humbert “Whose cat has scratched poor you?” (Nabokov 185). Very fittingly, at the end of this chapter, Lolita haughtily responds to Humbert who wants to take down the number plate of a car, by referencing scratching once more. After calling him a “dope” Lolita instructs him to “[...] scratch the number...on the side of the road” (Nabokov 187). Humbert proceeds to reflect within his mind: “With your little claws, Lolita” (Nabokov 187). The implication of Humbert's response is two-fold. Firstly, Humbert unwittingly acknowledges, through the close proximity of events, that Lolita scratched him, indicating resistance. The second is that Humbert attributes to Lolita a demonic quality by insinuating that she does not have human hands. We could take this further to argue that her haughty response to Humbert was seen as vicious and thus hurtful to him. The above arguments contribute to the portrayal of Lolita as being the deviant and malicious character. This stands in contrast to the sweet descriptions Humbert gives of Lolita before they first have sex.

More tellingly, Humbert's own paranoia about losing Lolita shows her resistance towards him as he describes how Lolita is “aloof to [their] sexual encounters”, and how “Lo” might “leave the dog” she petted in a hotel lobby “like she would leave [Humbert]” (Nabokov 186 and 134).

Humbert selectively retells his story in such a way that it seemingly gives Lolita the power to leave him. This is deceptive as Humbert threatens Lolita that if she reports him for rape, she will be orphaned, effectively coercing her to stay with him:

Well, you are luckier. You become the ward of the Department of Public Welfare—which I am afraid sounds a little bleak. A nice matron of the Miss Phalen type, but more rigid and not a drinking woman, will take away your lipstick and fancy clothes [...] while I stand gripping the bars, you, happy neglected child, will be given a choice of various dwelling places [...] the correctional school, the reformatory, the juvenile detention home...You will go there, Lolita—*my* Lolita [...] as the wayward girl you are [...] by rubbing all this in, I succeeded in terrorizing Lo (Nabokov 170).

Humbert is clearly the one with power. This is not only the case for his parental role as Lolita’s guardian but also in his emotional manipulation of her. He does not attempt to hide that fact that he knowingly coerces Lolita to comply with his desires by frightening her into acquiescence. Humbert’s proclamations that Lolita was most detestable, that she was the instigator, and seductress of his downfall is undermined when he admits to terrorising her in order to keep her compliant with his sexual desires.

Humbert then takes his portrayal of Lolita to a deeper level of immorality, one where he becomes the victim and Lolita the damaging figure. Quayle comments:

As the novel progresses, Humbert increasingly offers interpretations of Lolita’s actions as cruel, unjust, avaricious and immoral [...] In a similar vein, he prefaces a discussion of the evolution of a system whereby he paid Lolita in cash for her participation in sexual acts [...] (Quayle 15).

It is noteworthy that Lolita only acquires these qualities when she rejects Humbert's sexual advances (Quayle 15). Quayle highlights this in the example where Humbert remarks: “To think that between a Hamburger and a Humburger she would – invariably, with icy precision – plump

for the former. There is nothing more atrociously cruel than an adored child” (Nabokov 187). This quote indicates that Humbert looks on Lolita negatively when she rejects him. Humbert once again shows that his accounts of characters change according to his own desires and constantly fluctuating feelings. Quayle further discusses how Humbert had paid Lolita in cash for her participation in sexual acts, an occurrence that Humbert finds distasteful (Quayle 15). We see this in Humbert's comment: “I am now faced with the distasteful task of recording a definite drop in Lolita’s morals” (Nabokov 207). In this description, Lolita is no longer a child but elevated to the status of Humbert's equal. Humbert complains about Lolita’s moral descent as she now exchanges sexual favours for a weekly allowance, sexual favours that Humbert calls her “basic obligation” (Nabokov 206-207). In the first instance, to reconstruct a child as a sex worker, particularly in view of the fact that Humbert was her parental guardian, is immoral. Lolita becomes the victim of Humbert's abuse once more, as she is charged with the blame for his crime. Furthermore, the transformation of Lolita from nymphet to sex worker becomes a distasteful one for Humbert, as she loses the charm that is attributed to the nymphet, who does not enter into financial transactions with a sex-client. The “distasteful task” that Humbert is charged with may be a reflection on how this portrayal of Lolita would make him appear as well (Nabokov 206). If, indeed, Lolita is demoted to the position of sex-worker, then the drop in morals goes both ways. Humbert, entertaining this new persona of Lolita, is as immoral as she is. In one respect, the relationship between the sex-worker and sex-client is less unequal, as the relationship between the two parties is contractual, both buying and selling a commodity. For Humbert, this means that rape is not the crime that he commits against Lolita. In this instance, Humbert recording Lolita's drop in morals is a deceptive and cunning ploy that relieves him of liability for raping an underage girl.

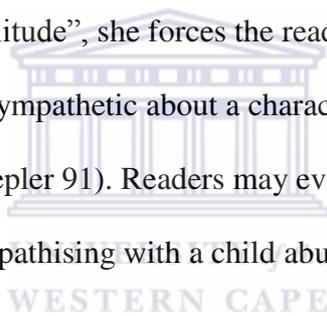
Of the distinction between the pure nymphet and the immoral sex worker, we are never sure what persona Lolita holds in Humbert's eyes, as it constantly fluctuates; however, it is clear that Humbert's reliability is brought into question. Humbert's hypocrisy is highlighted as well. Though Humbert feigns love for Lolita, the denigration of Lolita to sex-worker, as recorded in her "drop in morals", indicates a lack of love and furthermore a contradiction of his desires for the nymphet who corrupts older males (Nabokov 206). This observation aligns with what Wepler had previously discussed as Humbert "us[ing] his 'tools' [of language] in a way that satisfies the autonomy of his consciousness" (Wepler 86).

We could argue that the consistency of Humbert's denial of raping a child is in itself a psychological issue that needs to be addressed within the novel. If this is the case, then it opens up the possibility that Humbert was indeed a man in mental distress and that the entire story that is recollected may just have been a figment of his imagination or a story within a story. The layers of fiction certainly corroborate this idea. The novel is a fiction from the author Nabokov's mind. Humbert is the fictitious character whom Nabokov creates, and who in turn creates another fiction within his recollections and portrayals of characters and circumstances within the novel. Richard. F. Patteson refers to this fictionalisation within perception when analysing the Nabokovian narrator in the article "Nabokov's 'Transparent Things': Narration by the Mind's Eyewitness" by stating that "[...] each act of perception is a distortion of fictionalisation." (Patteson 102) It would not be a stretch of the imagination to deduce that Humbert, who experiences these taboo and sexually deviant feelings, has a mental condition that sets his daily life within a fiction abstracted from reality. From the foreword, we are given a portrait of Humbert framed within words from the fictional psychologist John Ray, Jr. (Nabokov 1-4). Throughout the novel we hear accounts of Humbert being treated in some form or the other for mental afflictions (Nabokov 34, 36, 246, 260). Furthermore, the traumas that Humbert

experiences, from the loss of Annabel Leigh to his previous wife in France, and then Charlotte in a brutal accident, may be enough of a clue to indicate that Humbert is indeed affected mentally. If we consider that Humbert was admitted to a mental asylum in Europe, and that he enjoyed playing games with his therapists in order to deceive them, we could argue that these are clues to his mental health. It appears that perception, at least for Humbert and his created characters, is a form of fictionalisation that the novel is bound up with. Endless, intricate loops are created using fiction which James Tweedie in his article “Lolita's Loose Ends: Nabokov and the Boundless Novel” describes as an “intricate and entangled narrative, avoiding the ends associated with [different] genres [which misdirect] any readerly desire for closure” (Tweedie 152). This further draws Humbert's recollections into disrepute and makes him both a character and narrator who cannot be relied upon for faithful portrayals of characters.

Although mental illness may be a cause for Humbert's desires, this does not mitigate the fact that he breaks the law by raping Lolita. Indeed, traumas at a young age may influence desires in later life. This in no way justifies any criminal acts that derive from an individual acting upon their desires and breaking the law. Humbert's previous traumas are an indication of his mental state, and thus speak more about his reliability as a character and narrator of his own fiction. This is clear in his proclamations that he found an “endless source of robust enjoyment trifling with the psychiatrists; cunningly leading them on; never letting them see you know all the tricks of the trade” (Nabokov 36). Humbert’s awareness of his mental afflictions and seeking help for it is one thing but to purposefully deceive psychiatrists and, further still, to act on his impulses in spite of recognising his problem is a premeditated crime. This indicates awareness of action by Humbert and magnifies the penalties for him acting on these paedophilic desires in the eyes of the law. This is yet another reason why *Lolita* has been a source of so much contention for readers.

Quayle goes on to argue why the novel is so socially contentious. She highlights the taboos that play a role within the novel and reminds readers about the true crime perpetrated within the novel: “*Lolita* is very much and very centrally a novel about pedophilia and child abuse. To see this, however, it is necessary to recognize that Humbert’s primary crime in the novel is [...] that he deliberately rapes Lolita” (Quayle 21). Humbert’s literary sophistications when engaging with his audience is what elicits sympathy from readers. What Humbert effectively does with his play on words is to create for the reader a space in which the reader is not only called to engage in his actions, but sympathise with him in the sense that we too experience his distorted and tainted emotions. Quayle brings reality firmly into focus when she strips away Humbert’s literary sophistication. She makes clear what Humbert’s crime is (Quayle 21). By removing what Wepler refers to as the “novelistic verisimilitude”, she forces the reader to face another truth, that the reader is complacent towards and sympathetic about a character who commits grotesque crimes against a child, albeit by proxy (Wepler 91). Readers may even feel a sense of disgust within themselves for identifying and sympathising with a child abuser and paedophile.

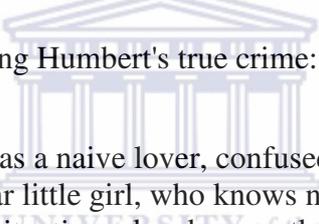


Constantin Cavafy, renowned for writing poems about taboos that lean towards homosexuality and sexual freedom, reflects an inclination to write about contentious topics in an attempt to encourage acceptance and tolerance within society. Robert Greig, on the act of reading Cavafy’s poetry, states: “[It’s understanding depends on accepting] ‘certain moral-metaphysical-aesthetic codes '[which]' is demanded, very subtly', through which reader’s 'submit to a critique of his normal standpoints, presumptions and responses'” (Greig 25). A similar point is made by Roger Field in an article entitled “Coming home, coming out: Achmat Dangor’s journeys through myth And Constantin Cavafy”. Field provides a valuable insight by explaining: “If [Greig] is correct, then part of what makes Cavafy’s work both attractive and difficult is the reader’s belated

recognition that she has questioned her own assumptions about what is good, true and beautiful” (Field 4).

Just as readers of *Lolita* feel a certain sympathy and discomfort towards Humbert, so too do the readers of Cavafy. Humbert's cunning use of language is what facilitates a sublime feeling within readers, a feeling of disgust but admiration for the lyrical beauty of his language. The acceptance of Humbert's crimes by readers due the aesthetic bliss of his language, as Field states, forces the reader “to submit to a critique of his normal standpoints, presumptions and responses” (Field 4). This, in some way, leads to feelings of guilt by readers for accepting and even sympathising with Humbert's position as a paedophile.

The critic, Nomi Tamir-Ghez in the article “The Art of Persuasion in Nabokov's *Lolita*” echoes the sentiments of Quayle when discussing Humbert's true crime:



[Humbert] depicts himself as a naive lover, confused [...] while [Lolita] is a corrupt, experienced, vulgar little girl, who knows no shame. Humbert might be faithfully reporting the situation when he says that ‘not a trace of modesty did I perceive in this beautiful hardly formed young girl, whom modern co-education, juvenile mores, the campfire racket and so forth had utterly and hopelessly depraved’ (135). We also have no reason to disbelieve him when he claims that he was not the one who deflowered Lolita [...] The point is that the above arguments have little to do with his culpability. They serve only to divert the reader's attention from Humbert's real crimes (Tamir-Ghez 76).

Humbert constantly tries various methods in order to feign some form of innocence, and lessen the harshness of his acts. To portray Lolita in a negative light is one strategy of achieving this, to effectively remove her voice from the story is another. Linguistic games hide and distort many accounts that may be construed and misconstrued by the reader due to the ambiguities these games create. Tweedie refers to how the comedy that Humbert uses assists in stressing the insignificance of the taboos that he wishes the readers to accept: “By reducing [death] to farce, and by making it occur so frequently in his narrative, [Humbert] stresses its inconsequentiality” (Tweedie 106). The same assessment can be made for Humbert's paedophilia. The constant repetition of how Lolita is

the one with a decline in morals and how Humbert is “not a scoundrel” serves to naturalise the reader into a state of complaisance to his crimes, where Humbert is the victim, and the real victim, Lolita, is the devious party (Nabokov 149). However, the simplest and most direct approach that Humbert utilises, as Quayle and Tamir-Ghez point out, is to divert the reader’s attention from his true crime of paedophilia and child abuse by simply denying its existence.

Elizabeth Patnoe in her article “Lolita Misrepresented, Lolita Reclaimed: Disclosing the Doubles” analyses Lolita's misrepresentation and makes clear, for the perceptive readers, subtle signs of abuse appear in Lolita’s resistance to Humbert's sexual advances. One of Humbert's many crimes, the one of solipsising characters, is shown to have a detrimental and even cruel effect when considering that Lolita's death is immortalised in discursivity:

Nabokov's Lola experiences great pain [...] But, as if it is not enough that Humbert repeatedly violates Lolita and that she dies in the novel, the world [inside of the text] repeatedly reincarnates her and, in the process, it doubles her by co-opting, fragmenting, and violating her: it kills her again and again (Patnoe 82).

Patnoe demonstrates that Humbert's crimes are not only limited to the physical, but also to the artistic. Lolita appears to have been uncooperative with Humbert's sexual advances as seen in her crying when she thinks Humbert is asleep, the scratches she leaves on his body or the hopelessly bewildered look on her face when she is alone. This shows us that Lolita refuses Humbert's advances, though this is not what Humbert first recalls for the reader. As previously argued by Quayle, Humbert sets Lolita up to be seductive with an “active if unrecognized sexuality” and an irresistible charm that lures adult males to their fall from grace (Quayle 9). These conflicting accounts of Lolita, one in which she is completely resistant to Humbert and the other where she is the seductress show us the extent to which Humbert is unreliable and furthermore draws into question the truth value of his accounts.

Humbert constantly alludes to situations and circumstances that undermine his portrayal of Lolita as the seductive nymphet. This leads readers to question his reliability as a narrator and character and may inadvertently lead readers to consider that everything he recalls is a lie. We readily accept that Lolita cries and scratches Humbert in resistance to his sexual advances and accept this as evidence of her resistance towards him. The question then arises; why do we readily accept these recollections of Humbert as truth and reject his claims about not having raped an underage girl? If the answer lies in the fact that Lolita's resistance to Humbert conforms to current research and perspectives on child abuse and paedophilia, then this argument is flawed, as these discourses are also discursive constructs. Further reflections on this issue converse with what Field had discussed about Cavafy's poetry. Readers may feel shocked at "the [...] belated recognition that she has questioned her own assumptions about what is good, true and beautiful" (Field 4). To feel sympathy for a paedophile may not be a natural feeling for a reader as it goes against social and ethical norms constructed by society. To accept Lolita's resistance to Humbert as truth conforms to a socially accepted notion of what is acceptable in the case of child abuse and paedophilia. Readers may feel more inclined to accept Lolita's resistance to Humbert as a truth, in an attempt to ease a guilt that derives from feeling sympathy for a "moral [leper]" (Nabokov 3).

Patnoe reveals that Humbert's story about Lolita abuses her as she not only encounters distress within her life with Humbert, but is also doomed to stay trapped in this life of abuse as she is immortalised in writing (Patnoe 82). Although Humbert proclaims love for Lolita, his distorted and biased recollections, "violate" her repeatedly (Patnoe 82). This reveals that Humbert, being a professor of literature and fully aware of literature's longevity, ignores the effects that recording his crimes would have on Lolita in order to feign his innocence with readers. An issue of contention, however, with Tweedie's argument is that Lolita exists "nowhere beyond the text" (Tweedie 169). Humbert alludes to a point that contradicts Tweedie's viewpoint in the words:

“[...] every limit presupposes something beyond it” (Nabokov 323). Though Humbert attempts to create a human form using words, the very words he creates presupposes that a real world referent does exist. Thus, Lolita does exist, but outside of Humbert's solipsistic world. It would be more accurate to say that Dolores Haze existed apart from Humbert's Lolita. In the case of *Lolita*, imagination does not take place in a vacuum; it certainly has a real-world referent. *Lolita* discusses paedophilia in a fictionalised world, but this does not make the issue of paedophilia in the world outside of the text a fiction as well. To say that Lolita exists only as a “subject and object somewhere in Humbert's world” is to imply that people like the women in Nafisi's story are mere subjects and objects and do not exist either (Tweedie 169). It would be more fitting of Tweedie to say that indeed Humbert had created a human being through words by depicting the emotions and reactions of an abused girl who exists outside of his solipsistic world. Significantly, when speaking about the genesis of the novel, Nabokov states: “The first little throb of *Lolita* [...was...] prompted by a newspaper story about an ape [...] who [...] produced the first drawing charcoaled by an animal [...of] the poor creature's cage” (Nabokov 353). Here the ape draws the boundaries of the world it sees, much like Humbert does with Lolita. Although the creature and Humbert can only draw what they see, this does not mean that nothing exists beyond this. In fact, as Humbert stated above, it “presupposes” that something beyond it does indeed exist. (Nabokov 323) This has been an argument that has been made in literature from many sources. Some poets have even represented this in their discourses. Maya Angelou in her poem *Caged Bird* as quoted in *The Completed Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* reflects:

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune can be heard

on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom (l 15-22).

Angelou expresses the idea that we may create stories and emotions from things that we do not directly see or have knowledge of, but what we still feel that we understand. This connects with Nabokov's notion of "aesthetic bliss" connecting readers through art (Nabokov 358). This is, arguably, what Humbert does when committing Lolita into discursivity—he describes who he feels Lolita is. What is so fitting is that both Angelou and Humbert use poetic language to describe a world from their particular view. Both Nabokov and Angelou promote freedom. The marked difference between Angelou and Humbert is that Angelou uses poetic language to promote freedom while Humbert uses it to limit freedom. Humbert's malice is what sets the two solipsistic worlds apart.

The notion of creating worlds is not limited to Humbert and Angelou's portrayal of the mind in artistic terms alone. Nabokov is invariably implicated and present in this formulation as the author of fiction. Alfred Appel conveys Nabokov's intention in *The Annotated Lolita*: "It is as if a painter said: look, here I'm going to show you not the painting of a landscape, but the painting of different ways of painting a certain landscape, and I trust their harmonious fusion will disclose the landscape as I intended you to see it" (Appel *The Annotated Lolita* xvii). Nabokov uses the art of writing with its poetic freedoms to discuss taboo topics so that the discussion reflects on morality without being instructive about morality. This is one of the reasons that fiction should not be banned as undesirable when portraying grotesque or taboo issues. The deconstruction of conventional morality allows readers the freedom to reflect on these moralities and decide whether they are appropriate for society.

2) *Lolita* As Artistic Expression and Cultural Phenomenon

Humbert himself constantly undermines his own credibility; he commits Lolita into discursivity and effectively violates her repeatedly through re-readings; he attempts to artistically recreate Lolita into an almost poetic form as a magical nymph and he constructs Lolita using sophisticated and beautiful language, which even Nabokov acknowledges as “aesthetic bliss” (Nabokov 358). *Lolita*, being a novel expectant of carrying a moral, and Humbert's artistic expression of Lolita, is sullied when Humbert admits that sex is an accessory to art. After Lolita's disappearance, Humbert adopts Rita, a young woman of age, as a sexual companion. About sex, Humbert muses: “It is not the artistic aptitudes that are secondary sexual characters as some shams and shamans have said; it is the other way around: sex is but the ancilla of art” (Nabokov 295). Humbert's proclamation that Lolita was “safely solipsised” (Nabokov 66) and that what he had “madly possessed” was but his “own creation—another fanciful Lolita” with no “will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own” indicates that he had indeed metamorphosed Lolita into a work of art (Nabokov 68). Humbert then uses this as evidence that he is not a paedophile, yet he recognises that his idea of art and sex are closely linked. This is an acknowledgment that Humbert had indeed violated Lolita sexually and that he is aware that he is guilty of being a sex-offender, even though he proclaims that his artistry exempts him from paedophilia. There appears to be a break in Humbert's consciousness here, where he allows the reader to glimpse his true character, perhaps unconsciously.

Culturally speaking, Lolita has developed into a name that is synonymous with the promiscuous behaviour of girls at the start of adolescence, derived from the controversy that was sparked by the novel. This interpretation of *Lolita* has led to the sexualisation of young girls who show any sexual awareness within their preadolescent or adolescent development. According to Patnoe:

In 1966, The Random House Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language defined 'Lolita' as 'a girl's given name, form of Charlotte or Delores. Also Loleta.' By 1992, The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language offers a very different definition for 'Lolita': 'A seductive adolescent girl. [After Lolita, the heroine of *Lolita*, a novel by Vladimir Nabokov]' (Patnoe 82).

Nabokov's fictitious accounts of a paedophile who creates various layers of fictions of his own within the novel, comes to determine a new meaning for a name. Tweedie notes that "*Lolita* is one of the few modern novels...to tackle pop culture and strip-mall America, the products of Hollywood and suburbia, with a semblance of 'dirty realism'" (Tweedie 154). This "dirty realism", as Tweedie refers to it, taints the image of Lolita, which comes with a misreading of the little girl as a seductress (Tweedie 154). The fact that Lolita is identified with sexual deviance and anxiety is evidence that readers and non-readers alike have accepted a moralistic reading of *Lolita*, and also an anxiety about male and female sexuality. Accepting this perspective of Lolita once more evidences that the reader displays an inclination to excusing the perpetrator of child sexual abuse by blaming the victim. Subtle morals of the novel have been lost due to its overpowering taboo themes. Like Quayle, Patnoe argues that the true crimes of the novel lie in the molestation and abuse of a little girl:

Why isn't the definition of 'Lolita' 'a molested adolescent girl' instead of a 'seductive' one? The answer seems relatively clear, but its consequences are complex [...] The text itself promotes misreadings of Lolita because [...] Humbert's skillful rhetoric and Nabokov's narrative technique make it difficult to locate both Humbert's unreliability and Nabokov's moral position (Patnoe 83).

Indeed, Nabokov admits in the afterword of the novel that "[i]t is childish to study a work of fiction in order to gain information about [...] the author", effectively denouncing his role as a teacher of morality through his fiction (Nabokov 360). Regardless of Nabokov's position on the relationship between his fiction and morality, I believe that the major crimes that double up as major themes come to obscure the subtle moral, which carries a powerful message and lesson for readers. The very act of choosing not to address morality is a moral decision. Therefore, whether

or not Nabokov acknowledges it, *Lolita* is deeply concerned with morality. What obscures the reader's judgement is the narrative technique that Nabokov uses and Humbert so skilfully exercises. This causes readers to accept that the novel merely recalls incidents of sexual deviance. As previously discussed, committing Lolita's misrepresented story into discursivity, a more subtle and vital moral emerges: that a self may exist apart from another's subjective interpretation of them (Quayle 6). Tweedie makes a similar argument when he observes, "Humbert's main source of anxiety is the realisation that Lolita maintains an identity outside his self-contained realm" (Tweedie 161). This moral is lost to many readers.

Patnoe once more takes a feminist stance when analysing how the misreading of the novel has come to stigmatise female sexuality. It has lead readers on a misdirected path to associate the word "Lolita", and by implication the girl child, with abnormal sexual awareness for her age. The "Lolita discourse" likewise affects male sexuality by accepting a reading of the novel that entrenches a chauvinistic perspective on female sexuality by being complacent about Humbert's actions and misrepresentations. For Patnoe, readers are involved in the perpetuation of the cultural narrative of *Lolita* in three ways. The "extratextual" readers are outside of the text looking in and consequently judging characters and circumstances. The "intertextual" readers accept Humbert's way of seeing the world; this includes the "narratives" or stories and 'images' that Humbert constructs (Patnoe 84). Thirdly, readers are involved "intratextually" as they bring with them a wider cultural influence and collective social knowledge of taboos that they apply to the text while reading it (Patnoe 84). The readers' involvement in the validation of male sexuality and the chastising of female sexuality is one of the factors that lead to a negative social discourse forming around the novel. These notions are socially determined, and derive more from the intratextuality that readers bring to the novel. It is the preconceived notions and socially determined meaning related to our communal ethos that we bring to a reading of the novel that

often overshadows the subtle morals and, as a result, the dominant themes of child sexual abuse and paedophilia become the most salient part of reading the novel.

An insightful point that Patnoe brings across is that the novel is not simply judged on an arbitrary emotion towards paedophilia and abuse. The novel holds relevance for those readers who have experienced abuse from figures like Humbert, much as Lolita does. On confronting a critic's dismissal of the novel and its taboo themes as being "just a book", Patnoe considers why the novel is not simply a book: "For many people [the novel] represents some aspect of their reality, what has happened to them or their loved ones, or what they fear might happen" (Patnoe 86). Patnoe's point agrees with the previous assessment of the real-world referent of Nabokov and Humbert's fictions as discussed in poetic language. In this interpretation, the novel evokes some form of real-world referent for readers who are affected by abuse. While some read the novel for its literary merit and outstanding form, others identify with the experience of abuse within the novel. This shapes the way readers think about and interpret the novel. A glance at the reception of *Lolita* by the women in Nafisi's story evidences this. They could make sense of their oppression by assessing their experiences in Tehran in accordance with Humbert's oppression of Lolita. Readers who feel sympathy for the Humbert character tend to interpret the novel for its aesthetic bliss, as Humbert offers the reader a fairground of literature. However, those who identify with Lolita's plight often note that Lolita's voice is distinctly missing from the text, a strategy used by abusers to cover up their abuse.

Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a psychologist serving on the Human Rights Violations Committee during the Truth and Reconciliations Commission trials in South Africa after Apartheid, explores the paradox of language. In her book entitled *A Human Being Died That Night*, Gobodo-Madikizela includes a chapter titled "A Language of Trauma" where she reflects on the language used during the trials:

[...] here lies the paradox. Language communicates. At the same time, it distances us from the traumatic event as it was experienced, limiting our participation in the act of remembering. We cannot fully understand what victims went through, in part because the impact of the traumatic event cannot be adequately captured in words. So what function does a victim's testimony serve if it only creates a gulf between language and experience? [...] It is a story that will always be true to the victim, for the victim is exposed to the images of the trauma through memory (Gobodo-Madikizela 85-86).

It is significant that Lolita's voice is written out of the text. Because she has no voice—essentially she has no story or truth to tell. This is another way of making a fiction out of trauma and, for Humbert, lessens the severity of his actions. Lolita becomes a non-entity in Humbert's fiction—to be manipulated at his will—distorting what truly transpired between paedophile and victim and removing truth from a victim's suffering.

There is no better example of Humbert's acknowledgement of this crime than at the very end of the novel. Realising the crimes that he has committed, and now faced with the task on reflecting on his deeds and pleading innocence to readers, Humbert makes an interesting remark about concord. He states: “[...] I knew the hopelessly poignant thing was not the absence of Lolita from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord” (Nabokov 351). The implication of this statement is that the physical absence of Lolita from Humbert's side was not concerning to him, as he realises that he never truly had the relationship with Lolita that he imagined. Instead, this imagined relationship can only exist in the confines of his solipsistic world. What most concerns Humbert is the absence of the voice that comes with that “concord” which suggests that Lolita's story, the interpretation of the real girl child Dolores Haze, will not corroborate with Humbert's account. This is one of the strongest arguments for Humbert's unreliability that is made within the novel. On apologies from abusers, Gobodo-Madikizela makes an insightful observation that makes one reflect on Humbert's apology for his crimes at the end of the novel: “When criminal offenders, even of the most egregious kind, show contrition and apologize, they are, quintessentially, *acting as human beings*” (Gobodo-Madikizela 127). Humbert's deceptiveness

makes an appearance once more here. The receptive reader is called to judge for themselves whether Humbert's apology is sincere, or another subterfuge to lessen the severity of his crimes by humanising himself to readers.

The humour of the novel may also play a role in the reception and resistance that it receives. Ilsa J. Bick, in her article “That Hurts!: Humor and Sadomasochism in *Lolita*” highlights why readers may find joking about taboo topics inappropriate:

Whether something is funny [...] is highly subjective. Joking is of the historical moment as much as it is a function of the interplay between the jokester, listener/spectator, and victim [...] A joke told to one person may not be funny to another, and, conversely, jokes may be lost on a particular audience simply because the barbs are too pointed, too close, or too far ‘above’ the audience members’ heads (Bick 3).

Humour thus plays an important part in the reader’s resistance towards the novel. Humbert's cavalier manner of dealing with crimes and taboos that society deems abhorrent may lead readers to put the novel down before experiencing the author’s reprised aesthetic. Nabokov's strategy behind writing a novel with such sensationalist, taboo themes may be a plan to get readers to face issues they would rather shy away from. To create a character as arrogant as Humbert in his deception of friends, family and psychologists alike allows the author to open up debates and discussions that cross cultural taboo boundaries. Tweedie expands on this and discusses how “[m]erely cracking such a scandalous book cedes immense liberties to the author who then spirits us into a world where the principal character violates fundamental taboos, criminal laws, and social mores with more evident glee than disgust” (Tweedie 150). Humbert comes across as “gleeful” in his crimes against Lolita. By constructing Humbert as a cunning and devious yet learned and artistic paedophile, Nabokov creates intrigue. The sensationalism in the novel acts as a means of drawing in readers who, if well read, will come to find that the novel does more than merely recount abuse of a child, but discusses psychological, emotional and physical factors involved in the experience of abuse.

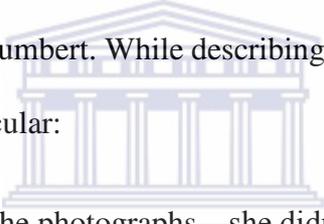
3) Authoritarian Responses to *Lolita*: The Tehran Case

Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2008) looks into reading controversial novels under an authoritarian government which rules according to moral standards as outlined by Islamic religion and law. In this memoir, we encounter the view that the more liberal, Westernised novel has the potential to corrupt readers. The authoritarian government in Tehran frowns upon the taboo topics raised in *Lolita* and considers them immoral resulting in the banning of many books addressing similar contentious issues. The main characters in Nafisi's memoir need to meet in secret in order to discuss their views on various banned novels and, by implication, inadvertently express their views on the rule of an authoritarian government. The subtle morals within *Lolita* become allegories of the social and political life in Tehran for Nafisi's reading group. The removal of the female voice in *Lolita* and similar novels not only generates debates but also teaches the women about coping with their situation in Tehran. At the same time, Nafisi's memoir exemplifies how the discussion of taboo topics in fiction can result in positive discussions and debates, which serve to educate and enlighten readers.

Nafisi's outlook on banned fiction gives readers a sense of what censors do not want people to read or know. While censors and lawmakers ban novels for reasons ranging from morality to politics, they assume that fiction itself enacts a transgression against the moral sensibility of readers. This is particularly true for novels that discuss taboo issues. Nafisi makes this point clear early in the memoir where she warns readers to "[...] not under any circumstances, belittle a work of fiction by trying to turn it into a carbon copy of real life; what we search for in the fiction is not so much reality but the epiphany of truth" (Nafisi 3). This statement is relevant as it addresses why a work of fiction should not be banned. Discursivity, as Nafisi puts it, is not a verbatim copy of true life. It is, instead, a recollection of one person's subjectivity. Censors in South Africa and Tehran have treated fiction as if it transcends the pages and commits crimes in the world outside of the text. This is evident in the banning of *Lolita* in different places around

the world, particularly in Tehran in Nafisi's case. By definition, fiction is a recreation and not a faithful reproduction of reality, but it could be based on a reality. This, however, seems to be an idea that is found wanting by censors and lawmakers who pass judgement on high art, often without the necessary training in symbolism, metaphor, rhetoric and literary criticism in general. From the perspective of Nafisi, a professor of literature, what we search for in fiction is truth. (Nafisi 3) This truth is not laid out clearly for the reader to find, it is often a search that draws on all of the skills that a literary critic utilises and which the authoritarian censors often lack.

Nafisi, through recollections of her experiences within the reading club in Tehran, notes similarities between *Lolita* and the life that her group lived. These similarities are not obvious, but for the receptive reader one can find allegorical links between life under an authoritarian rule and life under the rule of *Lolita's* Humbert. While describing some of the students in her book club, Nafisi recalls one girl in particular:



[...] Nassrin. She is not in the photographs—she didn't make it to the end. Yet my tale would be incomplete without those who could not or did not remain with us. Their absences persist, like an acute pain that seems to have no physical source (Nafisi 5).

For Nafisi, Tehran was much like Humbert. What is not shown or said is as telling as what is shown or said. Like Nassrin, *Lolita* is an absent figure as Humbert strategically removes her voice, much like the voice of Muslim women in Tehran. We see evidence of this in Nafisi's description of Tehran: "[...] its absences were more real than its presences." (Nafisi 5) The removal of one's voice, whether it be *Lolita* or the ladies of Tehran, is a form of oppression. We could infer that women of Tehran are experiencing the effects of abuse, much like *Lolita* felt from her patriarchal tyrant, Humbert.

Drawing on allegorical links between the novel *Lolita* and life in a theocratic state, Nafisi uses Humbert's words to highlight how the state of Iran is similar to the oppressive force of Humbert's world:

[...] to steal the words from Humbert, the poet/criminal of *Lolita*, I need you, the reader, to imagine us, for we won't really exist if you don't. Against the tyranny of time and politics, imagine us the way we sometimes didn't dare to imagine ourselves: in our most private and secret moments, in the most extraordinarily ordinary instances of life, listening to music, falling in love, walking down the shady streets or reading *Lolita* in Tehran. And then imagine us again with all this confiscated, driven underground, taken away from us (Nafisi 6).

Much like the circumstances in *Lolita*, the oppression Nafisi feels in Iran can only be experienced through the imagination and participation of the reader. Without this imagination, Nafisi confirms that the stories of oppression will not be real as they do not exist as oppression from the state's perspective. The central and significant point of this links back to Nafisi's previous belief that "what we search for in the fiction is not so much reality but the epiphany of truth" (Nafisi 3). The state of Iran has the power to ignore the voices of women by removing their rights. Women are forced to live according to a patriarchal construction of how they ought to behave. Their behaviour, characteristics, demeanour and daily life are subjugated and constructed for them. Arguably, a fiction is created about how women should behave according to the interpretations of an Islamic government. This is very similar to Humbert's removal of *Lolita's* voice and his subjective reconstruction of her behaviour, characteristics and demeanour. Nafisi aims to force readers to look deeper into what is both a form of fiction as well as biography, and to learn not from literal tales, but from the morals and lessons that the form of the novel-biography has to offer. This has striking implications for the high art of Nabokov's *Lolita*, as readers are forced to find a more subtle moral. On the surface, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a story about an abusive and oppressive state, but it is more about what the individuals within the book discover about themselves within this oppressive state.

When writing on censorship in Iran, Nafisi draws on a useful anecdote of a blind censor in Tehran:

The chief film censor in Iran, up until 1994, was blind. Well, nearly blind. Before that, he was the censor for theatre. One of my playwright friends once described how he would sit in the theatre wearing thick glasses that seemed to hide more than they revealed. An assistant who sat by him would explain the action onstage, and he would dictate the parts that needed to be cut. After 1994, this censor became the head of the new television channel. There, he perfected his methods and demanded that the scriptwriters give him their scripts on audiotape; they were forbidden to make them attractive or dramatize them in any way. He then made his judgements about the script based on the tapes. More interesting, however, is the fact that his successor, who was not blind—not physically, that is—nonetheless followed the same system.

Our world under the Mullah's rule was shaped by the colorless lenses of the blind censor. Not just our reality but also our fiction had taken on this curious coloration in a world where the censor was the poet's rival in rearranging and reshaping reality, where we simultaneously invented ourselves and were figments of someone else's imagination (Nafisi 24-25).

Nafisi takes issue with our present that is determined by outdated, traditional ways of doing things. Old discourses inform the ways of the new, and by so doing often become unworkable and impractical. This was the circumstance in Tehran, where old ways were clung to, even in times where progress had been made and new laws and rights in the Western world liberated people from oppressive and ineffectual laws. A parallel can be seen in Humbert's lamenting for, and Tehran's clinging to, the ways of the old world. Humbert speaks about the "lamented end of the ancient world" where sexual relations with children were acceptable (Nabokov 140). Likewise, Nafisi's censors clung to old methods of censoring, hindering the progress of society. This is the comment that both novels make. The banning of art, particularly novels that deal with sensitive taboo issues, goes against the grain of a progressive society. Adaptation to ever-evolving circumstances in society demands that ways of speaking about, and seeing, the world change. In Nafisi's story about the blind censor, readers who approach *Lolita* with a sense of moral superiority, too, act as a blind censor who "was the poet's rival in rearranging and reshaping reality" (Nafisi 24-25). Each reader who resists the novel's taboo issues acts as a blind

editor who, much like Humbert, “rearranges and reshapes reality” into “figments of [the reader’s] imagination” (Nafisi 24-25).

When referring to the women in her reading group, Nafisi describes how the oppressive regime in Tehran was similar to the oppression Humbert exercises over the characters within his story: “Although they came from very different backgrounds, the regime that ruled them had tried to make their personal identities and histories irrelevant. They were never free from the regime’s definition of them as Muslim women” (Nafisi 28). The Tehran regime, much like Humbert, trivialises and makes impotent the very identity of their female citizens. This common trait is identified in Humbert where he trivialises emotion with Charlotte and instances of abuse with Lolita (Quayle 15). Humbert's narrative style gives him the power to tell his story and with this, he effectively removes the voices of Charlotte and Lolita and gives the readers his subjective recollections of events. It is because of this solipsism that Humbert enacts Nafisi's comment that the reading group were “never free from the regime’s definition of them” (Nafisi 28). Humbert saliently portrays solipsism when he describes Lolita in photographic terms: “If I close my eyes I see but an immobilised fraction of her, a cinematographic still, a sudden smooth nether loveliness” (Nabokov 47). Later in the novel, after having his first orgasm against Lolita, we find Humbert describing her in the same photographic terms: “Thus I had delicately constructed my ignoble, ardent, sinful dream; and still Lolita was safe—and I was safe. What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another fanciful Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own” (Nabokov 69). The implication of this photographic solipsising is the reduction of the real girl within the story to an object, much like a picture captured in the imagination, which Humbert can possess. This objectifies Lolita, an abuse in its own right. To Humbert's mind, he does not sexually abuse a child, he acts on his desires with an idealised version of the real child. This

rationale supposedly mitigates his desires and frees him from being branded as a paedophile in his mind.

Lolita's identity is thus only seen and revealed to the reader through the minds-eye of her oppressor. In Nafisi's novel, Lolita is observed as only having identity due to her association with her oppressor, Humbert:

Lolita's image is forever associated in the minds of her readers with that of the jailer. Lolita on her own has no meaning; she can only come to life through her prison bars [...] And more and more I thought of that butterfly; what linked [the reading group] so closely was this perverse intimacy of victim and jailer (Nafisi 37).

Humbert's strategy of removing Lolita's voice means that without him the reader will not know Lolita's identity. Nafisi then refers to Lolita as only being alive through her bars, a concept that we previously discussed in Humbert and Maya Angelou's ideas of artistic expressions. Wepler elaborates on this concept of Lolita only existing as a result of Humbert's presence by assessing Humbert's use of humour: "Humbert's...use of humor fulfills[sic] the promise of nomadism by creating a personal system of meaning outside of pre-constructed forms of signification. In this way, Humbert's humour does not serve to destroy identity, but rather to establish and cultivate it" (Wepler 87). The specific identity that Wepler explores is one created in the subjective mind of the observer, Humbert. Wepler refers to the term "autonomy of consciousness" which is an interesting point. It allows autocratic powers such as Humbert and the Iranian censors of the time the power to destroy someone's identity by replacing it with another. This could apply to a character, a novel or the novel as a character. In the same way, the Iranian state had predetermined the role of women. The authoritarian regime in Tehran came to define the identities of the women in the reading group, as they had no right to define themselves, and became products of the regime's moral interpretations of how a female should behave. As Humbert's recollections are biased and subjective, it is up to the reader to interpret Humbert's

recollections on differing levels in order to ascertain who Lolita is. Firstly, the reader is called to understand that Humbert is a man with many traumas and psychological problems. Humbert is inconsistent in his recollections of events and characters within his story, and is unreliable as he is the narrator and character of his own story, which has the sole purpose of justifying his crimes of paedophilia, rape and murder.

Nafisi addresses the issue of how the reading group reads their fiction, and how this allowed the women freedom to assess their circumstances in Tehran:

There was a certain innocence with which we read these books; we read them apart from our own histories and expectations [...] Curiously, the novels we escaped into led us finally to question and prod our own realities, about which we felt so helplessly speechless (Nafisi 38-39).

Nafisi confirms her statement that what we read in fiction is more of a truth and not necessarily reality (Nafisi 3). The reading of fiction, for the women in Tehran, leads the group to assess their living conditions under the totalitarian rule of the Tehran government. The morals within Nabokov's *Lolita* assisted in their interpretation and understanding of their own reality as they experienced the same oppression as Lolita did by having their voices removed. What is more telling is that they read the books “apart from [their] own histories and expectations” which contradicts how Patnoe describes readers’ involvement in reading as “intratextual” (Patnoe 84). Here we find that the reading group did not approach the novel with preconceived notions of morality and was thus free to interpret the novel unburdened by the yoke of oppressive moral discourses. This makes it easier to relate the novel to current life and cultures. The irony is that the women read their novels fully aware of their oppression. This surely alludes to an idea that they have a preconceived notion of morality. It is, however, true that they read their novels in spite of the fact that they are aware of their oppression. The novels allowed for escapism into fiction (Nafisi 38-39). The flouting of the Tehran laws about reading banned classics allows the women to break free from their constraints. In those moments of discussing the novels, the

women were no longer identified as oppressed women in Tehran, but rather free moral agents who had opinions and worldviews that did not conform to the worldviews of the totalitarian rule in Tehran.

Nafisi recalls a point of epiphany for one of the girls that made them consider how the censors and readers are similar to Humbert in their approach to reading the novel:

Manna, who seemed engrossed by a passage in the book raised her head. 'It's strange,' she said, 'but some critics seem to treat the text the same way Humbert treats *Lolita*: they only see themselves and what they want to see.' She turned to me and continued: 'I mean, the censors, or some of our politicized critics, don't they do the same thing, cutting up books and re-creating them in their in their own image? (Nafisi 50).

Here, Manna's observation of censors, readers and critics is relevant to *Lolita* in the sense that their interpretations are subjective and thus biased. They apply their own cultural interpretations and old discourses to the novel. As Manna so rightly points out, this is a form of "cutting up books and re-creating them in their in their own image" much like Humbert does with the story of *Lolita* (Nafisi 50). This point is relevant to the state of the women in Tehran as Nafisi later reflects: "We were all victims of the arbitrary nature of a totalitarian regime that constantly intruded into the most private corners of our lives and imposed its most relentless fiction on us" (Nafisi 67). Once again, we are confronted with another form of abuse and oppression which evidences a link between the state of Tehran and Humbert. Both were imposing a subjective view that was highly intrusive on their victims and attempting to justify this by downplaying the harsh reality that it is abuse.

Making allusions to another of Nabokov's novels, *An Invitation to a Beheading*, Nafisi describes how oppression, both from Tehran and Humbert, becomes a brutal crime against their victims:

"The worst crime committed by totalitarian mind-sets is that they force their citizens, including their victims, to become complicit in their crimes. Dancing with your jailer, participating in your

own execution, that is an act of utmost brutality” (Nafisi 76). Nafisi describes here a situation where the oppressed are central participants of their oppressor’s power. It is perverse for an oppressor to impose their power onto their victims, but what is more perverse is to have the victim participate in the abuse of the oppressor. Humbert does this with Lolita, especially during the times of their travels through Midwest America. At the point where Lolita resists Humbert and he elicits sex from her by paying her and allowing her certain freedoms that are rightly hers to begin with, Humbert embraces the role of tyrant completely (Nabokov 207, 211, 224). Here Humbert forces Lolita, as Nafisi puts it, “to become complicit in [his] crimes”, only in so far as Lolita is allowed freedoms for her participation in his sexual whims, making her complicit in the many sexual encounters they have (Nafisi 76).

While it is clear that the participation of the victim is a brutal form of abuse, another key point to keep in mind is that it is essential for the victim to participate in the crimes of the abuser in order for the abuser to have any form of power over them. Nafisi highlights a solution to this near the end of the “Lolita” chapter of her book: “The only way to leave the circle, to stop dancing with the jailer, is to find a way to preserve one’s individuality, that unique quality which evades description but differentiates one human being from the other” (Nafisi 77). The reflections on the morals that are present in *Lolita* leads Nafisi to the realisation that the only way to break free from totalitarian oppression, such as the Tehran regime and Humbert's solipsism, is to find some form of individuality to protest the tyranny. Lolita attempts to do this physically by escaping from Humbert's custody in the novel: “Through the casement on the stairs I saw a small impetuous ghost slip through the shrubs; a silvery dot in the dark—hub of a bicycle wheel—moved, shivered, and she was gone” (Nabokov 234). Here Lolita physically attempts to run away from Humbert, but fails to do so as, ultimately, she is dependent on him and he eventually finds her. Tweedie advances this argument by suggesting that Lolita creates fictions of her own in

order to save herself from Humbert's solipsism. This effectively allows Lolita to escape Humbert mentally as her physical escape was unsuccessful. Following the incident where Lolita escapes Humbert on her bicycle, Humbert eventually finds her and interrogates her about her behaviour:

When Humbert interrogates Lolita after a suspicious disappearance, she explains away her absence with a mirroring of her own: she was speaking with a friend also named 'Dolly.' Humbert responds wistfully, recognising that his solipsistic world no longer contains Lolita, who has begun to construct and embody her own fictions. Lolita's conversation with an invented 'Dolly' exhausts his line of questioning and marks the boundary of his solipsistic realm (Tweedie 161).

The reading group attempts to do this by flouting the Tehran regime's will through the analysis of banned novels. The escape into fiction is a way for the oppressed females, Lolita and those in Nafisi's story, to reclaim some form of autonomy within the fictions created about them. In the same way, Nabokov's fiction flouts the maxims of socially determined taboos in order to create some individuality as a novel in the world outside of the text. This flouting of maxims makes the novel different from conservative classics and stimulates debates around the taboo issues. These three examples highlight the more subtle moral of *Lolita* that censors, the law and many critical readers miss but Quayle reminds us of: that a self may exist apart from another person's subjective interpretations (Quayle 6).

4) Authoritarian Responses to *Lolita*: The South African, Apartheid Case

A cursory glance at the history of Apartheid and the censors of the Publication Board in South Africa will show that art was heavily judged in terms of morality. There were many struggles that authors would need to overcome, chief among them being an infringement on Apartheid ideologies. In an article entitled "The Taint of the Censor: J. M. Coetzee and the Making of '*In the Heart of the Country*'", Hermann Wittenberg writes about the struggles that authors of high art had and how they came under scrutiny for addressing taboo topics that crossed racial and sexual barriers relating to inter-racial relationships. Wittenberg notes how authors "would...have

needed to contend with the repressive political climate of the post-Soweto period in which the state stamped its authority on any form of dissent, and, conversely, the liberation movements' call for an intensified resistance" (Wittenberg 134). Wittenberg goes on to describe the dual struggle within art under the Apartheid regime. While the Apartheid government sought to censor novels that went against the grain of its inequitable laws, freedom organisations and movements sought to have these novels publicised.

The resulting tensions between the two ideologies in South Africa often lead to menacing and violent protests and, as a result, much anxiety for authors. Wittenberg describes how "pressures impinged on...writing...in the form of repressive state censorship" (Wittenberg 134). The tense atmosphere of oppression from the South African government, and the response of disapprobation from freedom movements, created an atmosphere ill conducive to the celebration of taboo topics in art. The censors thus had negative views about literature that promoted discussions on taboo topics and that could potentially corrupt the morality of the state.

Wittenberg further describes how novels in Apartheid were "written during the years of the opaque and arbitrary censorship bureaucracy under Judge Lammie Snyman who chaired the Publication Control Board into the late 1970s" (Wittenberg 136). The Snyman administration, under which *Lolita* was banned, is described as prudish in contrast to "a more moderate and reformist Publications Control Board under the chairmanship of Prof. J. van Rooyen [who] took control [and] sought to bring a measure of rational certainty and scientific rigour to the process" of censorship after the Snyman administration (Wittenberg 136-137). The Snyman administration is portrayed negatively, opting for censorship in accordance with Apartheid ideas of morality as opposed to the literary merit of novels. The ideology of pseudo-morality that the government imposed as a subterfuge for pushing political agendas determined what literature society was allowed to read. This resulted in censorship of any art that would go against

Apartheid ideologies, inextricably entangling art and state ideologies. Searching through documents gathered from the National Archives of South Africa on the banning of *Lolita* yielded interesting observations and reasons for the novels' ban.

The following assessments are made based on the documents provided in the National Archives of South Africa between 1982 to 1989. During this period, appeals were made by Tafelberg Publishers to have the ban on *Lolita* lifted in South Africa. Many sources have previously marked 1982 as the date that the ban was lifted; however, we find that the novels distribution was still heavily controlled (Doyle <http://www.ala.org>). The sales of *Lolita* were non-existent as publishing and distribution of the novel in South Africa did not allow bookshops to freely attain stock and sell the novel. Effectively, the ban was still set in place. Tafelberg Publishers suggested an alternative sanction be placed on the novel's distribution so that it would not be freely available to younger readers. In this way, the sales of the novel would improve as book shops would be allowed to sell it to adult readers. This was suggested in order to keep in line with the Publications Act of 1962 that feared that the novel would be seen as "indecent", "obscene" or possibly would corrupt the "morals" of readers (*Government Gazette 1974 62-63*).

During the appeals, the professional opinion of a professor of Literature, Professor C. W. Mostert, from the University of the Free-State, was sought to provide motivation for the novel's publication. An attempt at conducting interviews with Professor Mostert was made, but unfortunately could not come to fruition as news of his passing made this impossible. It is still fortunate that actual transcriptions from Professor Mostert, both handwritten and typed, were found in the National Archives of South Africa's repositories. These documents record Mostert's reflections in consideration of *Lolita* being deemed undesirable to the public. Although Mostert provided weak justifications against the novel being undesirable, the ban on *Lolita* was lifted and the novel was allowed to be freely published and distributed.

On 15 of November 1962, the Publications Board of South Africa found *Lolita* to be undesirable literature under section 47(2) of the act, and consequently banned the novel for possession and distribution in South Africa. On the 22 November 1982, the Directorate of Publications, in conjunction with Tafelberg Publishers, appealed against the decision to have sanctions placed on *Lolita* under section 15 of the Publications Act, stipulating that an alternative sanction be placed on the distribution and sales of the novel to ensure that it would not be made freely available to younger readers. The relevant section of the Publications act under which *Lolita* was banned is found under sections 2 (a) and (b):

(2) For the purposes of this Act any publication or object, film, public entertainment or intended public entertainment shall be deemed to be undesirable if it or any part of it-

(a) is indecent or obscene or is offensive or harmful to public morals;

(b) is blasphemous or is offensive to the religious convictions or feelings of any section of the inhabitants of the Republic (*Government Gazette* 1974 62-63).

By this definition, the novel is subjected to a moral reading. The themes of paedophilia, abuse, rape and murder were the determining factors of the ban on *Lolita*. This leads us to question who determined that the novel was undesirable and whether they had the relevant literary qualifications to make this decision. The ban on *Lolita* was made based on the novel being “indecent”, “obscene”, or “harmful to public morals”, pointing to what Nabokov refers in the afterword of *Lolita* as the novel being judged “on the theme itself” (Nabokov 257). This infers an acceptance of Humbert as a paedophile and the crimes that he committed relating to child sexual abuse. It appears that the subtle moral of the novel was ignored. The ban on the novel could not have been implemented if it had been considered in light of Quayle’s argument about the subtle moral of “a self existing apart from Humbert's subjective reconstructions” (Quayle 6). This moral, accepted by the critic who understands Nabokov’s intent in writing *Lolita*, highlights a criticism against oppression and the removal of a character’s voice. This is a positive lesson for

society and, if anything, does not offend the sensibility of the “inhabitants of the Republic”, but stimulates critical thinking and debates around these taboo issues (*Government Gazette 1974* 62-63). This reading that both Quayle and Patnoe agree upon, is what Nabokov refers to as a critique of “the treatment of the theme” as opposed to the South African Publications Board judging the taboo themes itself (Nabokov 357).

During the prohibition of the novel, publishers and readers alike had identified that the novel was not undesirable as deemed by the censors and appealed against the ban. To determine public opinion and provide the insight of a professional literary critic, Tafelberg Publishers sought Professor C. W. Mostert, a South African academic as previously mentioned, to show whether *Lolita* could be deemed undesirable. Mostert’s analysis in the preamble to the appeal against the novel’s ban came to be one of the central arguments later in the court proceedings:

In spite of its themes/topic the novel is NOT salacious. It is the pathetic, even tender, story of a middle-aged man totally in love with a teenager who exploits his deep love for her. The inability of the ‘father-lover’ to cope evokes compassion because he is ensnared beyond redemption.

The only objection is that the girl is about 14 years old, but physically and emotionally she is mature in the pejorative sense. The novel does not contain a single vulgar word and there are no explicit descriptions of sex (e.g. page 58 & 115). It is an unusual love story, evoking compassion and an impressive ‘tour de force’ in English literature. In judging a book the theme itself cannot be objectionable. In this publication it is handled in such a way that it would not give offence to the reasonable reader (Mostert 7-10).

Despite his conclusions that the novel “is NOT [sic] salacious” Mostert furnishes reasons that are found wanting (Mostert 7-10). One problem is that *Lolita* is attributed with the seductress image once more and Humbert remains blameless. This links to Patnoe’s feminist perspective on the cultural effect of the novel and how *Lolita* comes to be punished for any show of female sexuality. This notion is further compounded by Mostert’s observation that “[...] the ‘father-lover’... is ensnared beyond redemption” (Mostert 7-10). In this annotation, Mostert is sympathetic towards Humbert. The use of the term “father-lover” is far more conservative than

“paedophile”, “molester” or “abuser” (Mostert 7-10). It is apparent that Mostert treats Humbert with a certain tenderness that is undeserved when considering Humbert’s deviousness as both character and narrator who tries to prove his innocence of child abuse. Mostert goes further to suggest that Lolita is “physically and emotionally [...] mature in the pejorative sense”, (Mostert 7-10) which, as Quayle and Patnoe suggests, misses the main point and crime within the novel; that a little girl was raped (Quayle 21).

The central point of Mostert’s analysis hinges on judging a novel by its dominant theme: “In judging a book the theme itself cannot be objectionable. In this publication it is handled in such a way that it would not give offence to the reasonable reader” (Mostert 7-10). The novel alludes to sexual circumstances and crimes, but owing to the novel’s nature, being rooted in fiction and discursivity, it cannot be deemed as undesirable as it does not explicitly describe these actions to offend the sensibility of the reasonable reader. What is interesting about Mostert’s analysis is that it is weak in the sense that it advances a fiction-reality argument yet still defends the protagonist, Humbert. It could be claimed that Mostert’s literary reading condones child abuse by excusing Humbert for his crimes. This assertion cannot be made, as even Humbert recognises he is a sex offender in the words:

Ladies and gentleman of the jury, the majority of sex offenders that hanker for some throbbing [...] relations with a girl-child, are innocuous, inadequate, passive, timid strangers...We are not sex fiends! We are unhappy, mild dog-eyed gentlemen, sufficiently well integrated to control our urge in the presence of adults, but ready to give years and years of life for one chance to touch a nymphet (Nabokov 98).

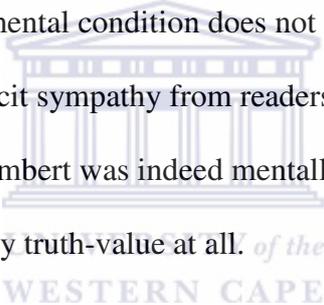
The telling statement made by Humbert is at the end of the novel where he confesses: “It was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita’s state of mind while comforting my own base self”, further establishes Humbert’s identity as a “sex fiend” (Nabokov 327). In both instances, Humbert admits to sexually abusing Lolita. Any “reasonable reader” would consider this along with the many dubious subterfuges and horrific acts of coercion that Humbert uses to fulfil his

lust for *Lolita*. This leads to the question about whether Mostert's definition of the "reasonable reader" would accept child abuse and still blame the victim (Mostert 7-10). A stronger literary observation would advance the fiction-reality argument and push this in order to show how the novel undermines the argument that the reasonable reader would accept child abuse and put the blame for the abuse on the victim. In the process of advancing the fiction-reality argument, the more rigorous critique would show Humbert's unreliability and deviousness as a character and narrator, much like Quayle and Patnoe have shown him to be.

Tafelberg Publishers had then received an option to publish the novel in South Africa provided the ban was lifted. After much struggling and letters back and forth to ascertain dates for an appeal, one was procured on 14 November 1982. The Applicant, Tafelberg Publishers in conjunction with E.G. Malan, appealed to have the sanctions on the novel lifted as it was still deemed undesirable. Malan agreed with the ruling that the novel was undesirable but requested that an alternative sanction still be imposed so that the novel would not be made freely available to younger readers. This endorsed Mostert's reading of *Lolita*. Some general remarks from E.G. Malan argued that *Lolita* was published freely in first world countries such as Britain and the USA as it was found to be not undesirable. As a contingency measure to ensure younger readers were not freely allowed to purchase the novel, E. G. Malan requested that the Appeals Board impose sanctions on the novel's sales. The request was made as follows:

1. Wherefore Appellant respectfully requests the hon [sic] Appeal Board –
 - (a) to confirm that the novel "Lolita" by Vladimir Nabokov is not undesirable within the meaning of section 47 (2) of the act; but
 - (b) to consider by virtue of section 13(6) (A) to impose such conditions in regard to its distribution which would not make it freely available or accessible to young persons (Mostert 7-10).

Alarmingly, some of the reasons that E.G. Malan furnishes the Appeals Board with against *Lolita's* ban conforms to Mostert's analysis, making Humbert the victim and Lolita the devious character. In one excerpt under "General Comments", Malan argues, "There are no explicit descriptions of the sexual intercourse between Humbert and Lolita. He was an unbalanced person who had been in an asylum in Europe. On p 281 he said, writing in jail, that he would, if he were to be his own judge, have given himself thirty-five years for rape" (Mostert 7-10). This reading allows Humbert's subjective recollection of events to mitigate his crimes against Lolita. Simply because there are no "explicit" descriptions of sex between Humbert and Lolita in the novel, it does not mean that sexual crimes had not taken place. As previously discussed, Lolita resists Humbert's sexual advances by scratching him and plotting to run away from him. Furthermore, Humbert's proposed mental condition does not mitigate his crime as a paedophile and rapist, as it may be a ploy to elicit sympathy from readers. It may also be a reflection on the reliability of Humbert's story. If Humbert was indeed mentally afflicted, then readers are called to question whether his story has any truth-value at all.



Another dubious observation that Malan makes is Charlotte's reaction to finding Humbert's secret desires in his diary: "Humbert's secret diary (Chapter 11) was explicit enough for his wife to reject him when she discovered it" (Mostert 7-10). Malan goes on to describe various inappropriate allusions Humbert makes to Lolita's body and goes on to cite that "On p 54-58 he reaches his first orgasm with her while her legs are lying across his lap. (It is quite conceivable that Lolita know [sic] what was happening, as she was, even at that age, no longer as innocent as she appeared to be- cf. P 115)" (Mostert 7-10). The final remark condones Humbert's behaviour on the basis that Lolita is sexually advanced and mature for her age. Malan goes so far as to strip Lolita's innocence from her, conforming to a reading that sympathises with Humbert's position as victim to the wily charms of the nymphet.

Evidence further corroborating the above position by Malan is provided in his notes:

“Lolita persuades him [Humbert] to kiss her (p 104) and her reaction is more than perfunctory. She is not merely flippant when she says ‘Well, you haven’t kissed me yet, have you?’ (p 104) and ‘Say, wouldn’t Mother be absolutely mad if she found out we were lovers?’ (p 105). ‘Fact, I’ve been revoltingly unfaithful to you’ (p 104). ‘I am absolutely filthy in thought, word and deed’ (p 106). ‘The word is incest’ – said Lo’ (9 111) – and all this before their first night in bed together. This scene (chapter 29) is at times very sensuous. On pages 125 and 126 Lolita relates how she had already lost her virginity at children’s camp some time previously. That morning she and Humphrey [sic] had ‘strenuous intercourse’ three times (p 129)” (Mostert 7-10).

What Malan ignores in his analysis is that these are still Humbert's subjective recollections.

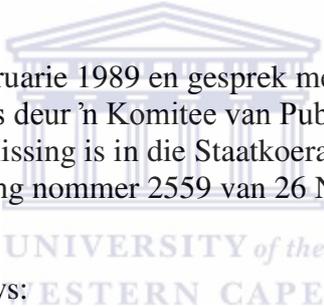
Malan embraces Humbert's position as victim and exemplifies how a misreading of the novel violates *Lolita* repeatedly. By accepting Humbert's position, Malan inadvertently becomes a “Humbert-like” figure, creating an untruth about an untruth and suggesting this to the Appeals Board. This is yet another loop of fiction prevalent in Nabokov's writing as summarised in Tweedie’s article.

The final remark made by Malan could arguably be one of most concern as it directly links the world within the text to the world outside of the text. Malan sums up his general remarks and concludes: “[The novel] may even evoke perverse ideas which are latent in even the most innocent person” (Mostert 7-10). This argument implicates all readers as susceptible to moral corruption due to the novel’s addressing of taboo issues and implies universalising ways of reading. In classic Humbertian fashion, Malan writes out the individual consciousness of the reader, implicating him as a Humbert-figure in his analysis of readers.

It is unfortunate that in the South African case of *Lolita* being banned, the opinion of only one professional was sought on the literary merit of the novel. Even though Mostert’s analysis argues against the undesirability of the novel, it is still a weak analysis that advances the fiction-reality argument but condones Humbert's abuse of *Lolita*. Still, Mostert’s analysis was sufficient to act

as justification for the distribution of the novel in South Africa. We find that a moral reading was the central reason for the novel being banned in South Africa. In more than one instance the fact that the novel merely alludes to, yet does not explicitly describe, sexual acts became a central argument for the banning. Much like Wittenberg has described in his article about the Apartheid censors, this harsh treatment on the taboo theme itself, and not “the treatment of the theme”, evidences a prudish attitude (Nabokov 357). Nevertheless, Mostert’s weak argument against the ban of *Lolita* was accepted by the court, and an amendment was made for the sake of sales and distribution of the novel.

On 3 April 1989, in a letter to the Tafelberg Publishers, the Director of Publications officially declared that *Lolita* was not undesirable:



U brief 1191A van 17 Februarie 1989 en gesprek met Mev. Lor verwys. Die publikasie LOLITA [sic] is deur ’n Komitee van Publikasies op hersiening nie-ongewens bevind. Die beslissing is in die Staatkoerant nommer 8458, Goewermentkenningsgeving nommer 2559 van 26 November 1982 aangekondig (Mostert 1).

Translated, the letter reads as follows:

Your letter 1191A from 17 February 1989 and talks with Mrs. Lor refers. The publication LOLITA [sic] is found to be not undesirable by a Committee of Publications review. The decision is published in the Government Gazette number 8458, Government notice number 2559 from 26 November 1982 (Mostert 1).

The Appeals Board had overturned the ban on *Lolita* and allowed the novel to be published in South Africa. Distribution, however, was restricted to adults only. It is still concerning that the decision was made on the basis of a weak analysis by Mostert and Malan who, as previously discussed, accepts Humbert's rape of a girl and further blames the victim for the crime. The implication of this is that the literary merit of the novel, namely the deconstruction of socially accepted morals to propose alternative morals within the novel, was missed in the decision to remove sanctions on *Lolita*. The prudish decision to ban the novel due to Apartheid ideologies

on morality is still a lingering issue that had not been resolved. Ironically, the very issue of questioning socially accepted ethos, which *Lolita* does, was overlooked in the motivation for the novel being deemed not undesirable for public sales and distribution. The very basis for the novel's sanctions to be removed is made on an argument which blames the victim of rape for the crime and condones the behaviour of a child abuser and paedophile.



Chapter three:

Humbert: An Analysis of Deception

Humbert is portrayed as a character who elicits sympathy from readers through his lamenting tale of a feigned, misdirected love. Humbert proclaims that he loves Lolita and does not abuse her and, to the detriment of the abused Lolita, many readers find themselves sympathising with Humbert's misguided affections. This alludes to the question about how Humbert is able to elicit empathic feelings from readers. Though readers abhor the notion of child sexual abuse, and often hate the perpetrators themselves, they feel a certain tenderness towards Humbert's character. Humbert uses a range of linguistic tools that he employs with great finesse and cunning in order to induce a state of moral confusion within readers. In the first instance, Humbert is a character with an agenda as evidenced in his repetitive allusions to the invisible audience he addresses. He is, furthermore, an omniscient narrator while also being a character within his own story. This leaves room for the possibility of deviousness within his tale of love gone wrong. Humbert further utilises the strategy of requesting readers to participate in his constructed emotions. Constructed emotions in this instance are the emotions that Humbert presents the reader with, in the hope that these proposed emotions elicit sympathy from readers. These strategies make it easy for the well-educated Humbert to weave a tale that takes readers on a journey, sympathetic to his goal of proving that he did not commit child sexual abuse.

1) Humbert's Unreliability: Deception

Many critics and readers alike have noted a certain uneasiness that comes with reading *Lolita*. While the dominating topic of paedophilia and other abuses against children may well play a major role in this, another factor, that of feeling sympathy for Humbert, contributes greatly to the internal ethical conflict readers feel towards the novel's narrator and antihero. Humbert's skilful

play on language should lead readers to question the credibility of the main character. Alfred Appel J.R. in his article “‘*Lolita*’: The Springboard of Parody” aptly puts the author’s skilful wordplay into perspective: “Nabokov has placed [...] crooked reflectors everywhere in his fiction: Doubles [sic], parodies and self-parodies...works within works [...] and language games” (Appel “‘*Lolita*’: The Springboard of Parody” 206). In Appel’s description, Nabokov does not merely use simple puns and ambiguities to induce a sense of moral turmoil within readers. Wordplay, for Nabokov, goes deeper—into the very functional grammar of words itself. Manipulation of fundamental and elementary functions of language creates a sense of confusion that the reader is unknowingly registering. This causes readers to feel a sense of unease with the novel without fully comprehending the exact reason. Appel’s analysis describes how Nabokov manipulates “auditory, morphological, and alphabetical” constituents of language which are concerned with language in the most minute of details. The sentence is thus broken down and manipulated in terms of the phonetic aspects of linguistics, the morphemes that constitute these words and, even more minutely, the very letters which make up words (Appel “‘*Lolita*’: The Springboard of Parody” 206). A look at one of Humbert’s diary entries will demonstrate an example of such wordplay: “*Monday. Delectatio morosa.* I spend my doleful days in dumps and dolors. We (mother Haze, Dolores and I) were to go to Our Glass Lake this afternoon, and bathe, and bask; but a nacreous morn degenerated at noon into rain, and Lo made a scene” (Nabokov 46). There is a deliberate juxtaposition between “Dolores” and “dolors” here. The word “dolors” is most frequently identified and associated with the American, culturally relative spelling of the word, which is pain or grief. The British or Canadian form of the word dolors is spelled as dolours. This imbues the word with a context of culture (Nabokov 46). The absence of a single letter and the presence of a lower casing at the start of the word “dolors” serve to attach a meaning and emotion to Lolita’s real name Dolores, with the implication of imbuing her real name and character with the connotation of heartache and grief through the collocation of the

words (Nabokov 46). Thus, reading *Lolita* is not just a mental exercise in understanding words and their meanings, but the basic linguistic devices which morphemes, words, clauses, phrases, and clause complexes are comprised of. So, too, are the subtle manipulations and morals hidden deep within the basic functions of the novel's most minute linguistic devices.

The novel also contains allusions to various foreign language wordplays, which the reader, if not well read or diligent enough to research, will miss. Often, these wordplays are not easy to identify as they require vast knowledge of readings and foreign, mostly French and Spanish, languages to understand. An example that Appel discusses is: "Lolita's given name, Dolores Haze, [which] fittingly juxtaposes the Spanish sorrow with the German rabbit, and haze is an apt metaphor for her illusory and ephemeral charms" (Appel "'Lolita': The Springboard of Parody" 207). Appel provides an example of how Nabokov, and by implication, Humbert, exploits foreign languages to play on the very name of *Lolita*. This has the implication of altering the identity of the girl child and attributes meaning and metaphor to her that can only be picked up by well-read and educated readers. Evoking the image of a rabbit comes with its own sexual connotations—one of being overly sexually active—imbuing Lolita with the characteristic of being highly sexualised for her age. Readers may easily gloss over Lolita's name as merely being a typical all-American name but Nabokov exploits readers' ethnocentric readings and uses this to Humbert's advantage by playing on this as a form of linguistic game, which structures a specific reaction to the way certain readers receive and understand the novel. It may be argued that the less receptive reader or critic who is not aware of the German or Spanish puns cannot be disarmed by the pun's wit. This would leave the uneducated reader or critic with their virtue intact and without "impairing [their] morals" as Humbert reflects after having his first orgasm against Lolita (Nabokov 68). Nabokov appears to make a comment about ignorance here: if a reader deliberately ignores something that they do not understand, then they too assume the role

of Humbert who knowingly ignores Lolita's resistance towards him in order to “comfort [...his] own base self” (Nabokov 327). Arguably, the educated reader who understands Humbert's puns would be more susceptible to becoming complacent about Humbert's abuse, being more inclined to accept his recollections due to the charms of his language. However, such a position would assume that educated readers are ignorant to the fact that Humbert is manipulative. Humbert's use of rhetoric, puns, constant play on words and ever-shifting personas should ideally bring his recollections into disrepute. This implies that knowledge of the intricacies of Humbert's words is an advantage for the educated reader and critic who would more readily understand the subtle morals the novel presents and embrace Nabokov's position on aesthetic bliss.

Evidence that Lolita is not seen as a real girl, but an idealised construction of Humbert's mind is a strong argument for solipsism and deception within the novel. Even though Humbert feigns love for Lolita, he blatantly admits to committing Lolita to the realms of his imagined world. This we see when Humbert describes how Lolita “had entered [his] world, umber and black Humber-land”, playing on the *Alice in Wonderland* fantasy tale by Lewis Carroll (Nabokov 187). The use of the word “umber” is significant as it evokes the image of a deep and dark colour, suggesting that Humbert's character is dark and ominous (Nabokov 187). An interesting observation is that the natural brown earth pigmentation of the colour umber may evoke an image of a dirty or mud-stained landscape that could be associated with Humbert's world as dirty or sullied. This interpretation lends credence to Humbert's self-awareness that his desires are less than honourable and that the scenarios he retells are constructions of his mind. Appel suggests that: “By ‘solipsizing’ Lolita, Humbert condemns her to the solitary confinement of his obsessional shadowland” (Appel “‘Lolita’: The Springboard of Parody” 207). To solipsise infers a removal of the attributes of one person in order to reconstruct the individual according to the perceptions and preferences of one's own mind. Humbert achieves this by recollecting Lolita's

story, as well as her reactions and behaviour, on her behalf. This indicates the unreliability of Humbert's recollections. Solipsism, for Humbert at least, acts as a safe refuge that defends his position as a victim to Lolita's charms. At the same time, Humbert's solipsism distorts any truth-value of what Lolita may have felt while under his tyrannical supervision.

Another noteworthy point concerning Humbert's deception is how Lolita is constantly in a state of change in Humbert's mind. Very rarely do we find an account of Lolita's characteristics or personality that is consistent with other parts of the novel. By the end of the novel, we find that Humbert comes to a realisation that indeed Lolita, as he perceives her, was merely a construction of his mind. After witnessing a look of complete despair and surrender on Lolita's face, Humbert recalls that it took everything in him to not give up his selfish sexual desires and allow Lolita to find solace in the real world. Humbert recalls that he had to restrain himself from “sacrificing [his] jealousy to whatever pleasure Lolita might [...] derive from mixing with [...] children in an outside world that was more real to her” (Nabokov 323). Humbert acknowledges that Lolita exists in his world, which is a world that is unreal to Dolores Haze, the real girl child. Appel analyses this by looking at the butterfly metaphor within the novel:

Just as the nymph undergoes a metamorphosis in becoming the butterfly, so everything in Lolita is constantly in the process of metamorphosis...These ‘metamorphoses’ enable Humbert to transform a ‘crime’ into a redeeming work of art (Appel “*Lolita*: The Springboard of Parody” 209).

Appel discusses the layers of fiction and how the novel, much like *Lolita*, is in a constant state of change from “a set of ‘notes’ being compiled by an imprisoned man during a fifty-six day period for possible use at his trial, emerging as a book after his death, and then only after it has passed through yet another stage, the nominal ‘editorship’ of John Ray, Jr” (Appel “*Lolita*: The Springboard of Parody” 209). The various editing stages—first from notes by a distressed Humbert seeking some form of understanding of his self-proclaimed innocence into a book of the accounts of his misconduct— are indications of the unreliability of his accounts. Rendering

actions into discourse requires interpretation, which is in itself an altering of the original occurrence. This is further distorted by the motives that the author has for writing the account. For Humbert, this fiction is edited by a psychologist with clear moral judgements of his own, which further distorts the storyline. In essence, the account of Lolita and the abuses she incurs are lost in a convoluted telling and retelling of a fiction that is guided by the motives of each author or editor who interprets and reinterprets an already distorted story. This is something the reader should take into account while acknowledging that the book that they hold is a novel, and a fiction, created by Nabokov—a form of solipsism in its own right. Humbert's solipsism as a fiction in its own right is discussed by Appel when he identifies that “[a]s Lolita turns from a girl into a woman, so Humbert's lust becomes love, his sense of a ‘safely solipsized’ Lolita...now replaced by his awareness that she was his own creation with ‘no will, no consciousness-indeed, no life of her own’ [...] that he did not know her [...] and that their sexual intimacy only isolated him more completely from the helpless girl” (Appel “‘*Lolita*’: The Springboard of Parody” 209). An argument could be made that Humbert sees that Lolita exists as an independent entity—apart from his interpretation of her—and the risk of losing his creation has led to lust turning into love for an independent human being; if only to maintain the sexual relationship between them. Humbert now sees, holistically, that Lolita is a being with a will, consciousness and life of her own. The risk of losing his ultimate sexual fantasy may be the reason that Humbert’s feelings change. If Humbert is to accept Lolita as an independent entity outside of his solipsistic world, then he can no longer lust after her as his fantasy would be deconstructed. Instead, Humbert would have to accept Lolita as a person with characteristics and flaws independent of his influence and mental constructions. Appel’s excerpt demonstrates Quayle’s subtle moral in the novel. The realisation at the end of the novel, that Humbert was unaware of the true Lolita, is an indication that all of his proclamations of innocence and love were a mere subterfuge hiding his lust and rape of an underage girl. This realisation was made even before Humbert had lost Lolita

to Quilty and Dick by the end of the novel. While still in Humbert's "care", Lolita made an insightful observation on the human condition of death: "You know, what's so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own", (Nabokov 324) said Lolita, to which Humbert noted to himself "[...] I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind" (Nabokov 324). Humbert appears to have a break in consciousness and reveals a world outside of his solipsistic world, indicating that his narrative throughout the novel is untrustworthy.

Humbert's use of language reflects a central issue within the novel, that of understanding a character before making any judgements on their subjective recollections. The puns in the novel play an important role in the interpretation of a character's opinion and need proper understanding in order for the novel to live up to its true genius as a work of fiction: "Not only do the puns afford pleasure [...] but they are also thematically appropriate. The puns underline a central problem in *Lolita* [which is Humbert's] abuse of Lolita. Any full sense of *Lolita* depends on our understanding the function of Humbert's verbal vaudeville, his unique voice and idiom" (Appel "'Lolita': The Springboard of Parody" 210-211). It is important to note here that Appel describes how readers "have been more put off by Humbert's use of language than by his abuse of Lolita" (Appel "'Lolita': The Springboard of Parody" 210-211). The intricate use of language, clever play on words, allusions to a wide selection of readings and glimpses of foreign languages and phrases holding a plethora of meanings and interpretations are clever ways for Nabokov to create a character who is acutely aware of his power as an intellectual. Humbert's ability to use his intellectual prestige as a well-read academic to create in the reader a state of confusion and misreading makes it hard for the reader to comprehend Humbert's recollections and, perhaps for fear of being deemed incompetent in the basic functions of reading and comprehension, readers submit to the absolute power of the narrator's will.

Appel alludes to Humbert's use of puns in a self-serving way, which further evidences the latter's lack of credibility: "Even Humbert's worst puns distract him from his anguish and guilt, and help stay the heart trouble and the incipient madness [...] which would make it impossible to write the narrative now at hand" (Appel "'Lolita': The Springboard of Parody" 212). Appel suggests that if Humbert had not used his puns and humour as a coping mechanism to tell his tale, it would be impossible for him to remain aloof from his abuse of a child. Humbert, throughout the novel, has proven his unreliability and as the novel progresses, we find that the reader is called upon to look at the novel, saturated with these puns, as a confession evidencing Humbert's inability to deal with his crimes. On its own, and for the pseudo-psychologist, this could indicate a psychological need to deal with the crimes which he has perpetrated, and, by implication, elicit sympathy from the reader.

Nabokov's intricate use of language, his skill in playing with words and use of elaborate plots within wordplays, gives readers the chance to comprehend *Lolita* as a work of fiction that should not be taken as seriously as it has been by censors. Parody is a fundamental function of language for the novel: "Nabokov has laid into the parodic design of *Lolita* an elaborate system of involutions which [...] helps to [...] demonstrat[e] that everything is being manipulated, all is a fiction, thus parodying the reader's desire for verisimilitude" (Appel "'Lolita': The Springboard of Parody" 216). Nabokov sets up the novel as a complex work that utilises manipulation to demonstrate the idea, as previously stated by Nafisi, that readers should read for "the epiphany of truth" (Nafisi 3). For Nafisi, reality is that world which exists outside of the text—independent from fictions within a novel. The parodying of the "reader's desire for verisimilitude" is an essential component in realising that the novel is merely a work of fiction, as it is another of the subtle morals that the novel offers to the reader who is receptive enough to comprehend this. It is important to note that Wepler's idea of "novelistic verisimilitude" as described in chapter two is

slightly different. Verisimilitude in this instance is defined as a semblance or appearance of truth, even in a weak attempt at satire of generic genres of writing. Humbert's wordplay is essential to the novel as it provides the reader with an important moral that the novel offers: searching for reality in fiction is an act of futility.

An example from the novel that demonstrates how verisimilitude assists the reader to come to a realisation about Humbert's deception is found in his parodying of murder. After receiving a letter from the absconded and now pregnant Lolita, Humbert fantasises about murdering her after she rejects running away with him to, instead, stay with her husband Dick: "[...] 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" (Nabokov 320). Humbert directly addresses the reader in a condescending way by implying that the reader would assume he does a "fool" thing when such a thing would never occur to him (Nabokov 320). Appel analyses this, stating that "...[by] creating a reality which is a fiction, but a fiction that is able to mock the reader, the author has demonstrated the fiction of 'reality,' and the reader who accepts these implications may even have experienced a change in consciousness" (Appel "'Lolita': The Springboard of Parody" 218). The allusion to Humbert's thought processes is important, as they are in itself a reality for Humbert; however, these occur only in his mind, which makes them a fiction as Humbert is a fictitious character. This sets Humbert's fantasy in the realms of a verisimilitude of reality—essentially a fiction. At the same time, Humbert's consciousness seems to leap from the confines of his mind and refers to the reader, indicating his acute awareness that he is being judged for his ideas. Nabokov firmly entrenches the subtle moral of the novel here by implicating the reader within the scheme of the novel. As Humbert mocks the reader, we find that the receptive reader will come to the realisation that Humbert's recollections are fiction as he is acutely aware of the reader's presence once more. This is when the reader may incur a "change in consciousness" as

the reader realises that the novel and all of Humbert's stories are recollections of a biased and subjective mind (Appel "*Lolita*': The Springboard of Parody" 218). The subtle moral of the novel is taught as a lesson to the reader; that fiction is not a similitude of reality, but a portrayal of a form of truth. Many other critics have recognised clear indications, which Nabokov constantly makes apparent to the reader, that the novel is merely a fiction. This is made clear where Humbert blatantly proclaims: "Darling, this is only a game!" (Nabokov 19). Humbert seemingly alludes to instances where he reminds readers that he does things in levity, but we cannot ignore Nabokov's role as the author of the novel as he also plays games with the reader. Nabokov does not treat his readers as ignorant and attempts to indicate that the novel is merely a game—a fiction in which lessons are taught through playing with literature's linguistic structure—about the human condition and is not merely a salacious story to evoke the latent desires of potential paedophiles and abusers.

On the subject of the novel being a salacious account of a paedophile's exploits, Appel analyses how the novel is, in fact, not this at all. When describing the novel, Appel uses the word "bravura" to denote a great skill in creating the novel but also great daring. The novel uses sexual matters as a draw card but never delivers on this promise (Appel "*Lolita*': The Springboard of Parody" 221). This appears to be one of the objectives of the novel: to deconstruct readers' preconceived notions of morality. The novel thus uses a subterfuge to make an ethical point. As Appel analyses, Humbert "draw[s] the reader into the vortex of the parody" by constantly requesting that the reader participate in his fiction by "[i]magin[ing Humbert] : I shall not exist if you do not imagine me." (p. 131)" (Appel "*Lolita*': The Springboard of Parody" 221). Likewise, Humbert also states that he is "not concerned with so-called 'sex' at all", which is equally telling (Appel "*Lolita*': The Springboard of Parody" 221). The use of the word "so-called" calls into question the interpretation of the word "sex" (Appel "*Lolita*': The

Springboard of Parody” 221). Nabokov seems very much concerned with sex, but in a different way than readers would expect. For Appel, Nabokov is more concerned with the “reader's expectations rather than Humbert's machinations” (Appel “*Lolita*: The Springboard of Parody” 221). This could be why readers feel a dissatisfaction and uneasiness with the novel, because they have not read what they expected to read. As Nabokov states in the afterword: “in pornographic novels, action has to be limited to the copulation of clichés. Style, structure, imagery should never distract the reader from his tepid lust [...] which the reader must know [...] exist in order not to feel cheated” (Nabokov 313). Nabokov’s own encounters with his readership show that readers often approach *Lolita* with a preconceived ethical idea of what the novel ought to be. For a brief instance, the reader’s expectations are fulfilled by the dominant theme of paedophilia, but on another level, the novel lets the ethical perceptions of the receptive reader down as it deconstructs preconceived notions of morality to teach subtle morals. For both the crude as well as receptive reader, *Lolita* appears to disappoint preconceived expectations. While teaching readers a lesson on attempting to find reality within fiction as opposed to a form of truth, the novel also teaches readers that Humbert's solipsistic, and fictional, reconstruction of another human being is a crime in itself.

Humbert's recollections about his desire and sexual encounters with Lolita frame an imagined love that exists between the two characters which may lead the reader to assume that he and Lolita are equals when, in actuality, they are not. This deception is so subtly achieved, that readers would be forgiven if it were overlooked. Quayle analyses extracts from the novel that call the reader to reconsider how Humbert frames his sexual encounters. Often the instances that Humbert recalls are far more telling than first thought. Lolita's reaction during Humbert’s physical exertions against her body is one such telling incident. When reaching his first orgasm by rubbing against Lolita’s body, Humbert notes “a sudden shrill note in her voice”, how she

“wiggled and squirmed”, and most notably that her “cheeks [were] aflame” (Nabokov 67). Though Humbert solipsises Lolita and frames it in sympathetic and artistic terms, Lolita's physical reactions provided through Humbert's recollections indicate a discomfort with Humbert's actions. Quayle argues that in such scenes: “Humbert’s assurances that Lolita was unaffected by his behavior are belied” (Quayle 5). Another similar incident occurs when Humbert inappropriately ogles another girl child with “nymphic” qualities: “The pale child noticed my gaze...and being ridiculously self-conscious, lost countenance completely, rolling her eyes and putting the back of her hand to her cheek, and pulling at the hem of her skirt” (Nabokov 142-143). The girl’s reaction, similar to Lolita's, unabatedly expresses disgust at Humbert merely looking at her in an inappropriate manner and she goes so far as to seek conversation with her mother in an attempt to find safety in a potentially threatening situation. Quayle suggests that Humbert is “unaware of the implications” that his recollections of his sexual acts reveal to the reader (Quayle 5). While Humbert attempts to justify his perversion by claiming Lolita was unaware of the pleasure he derives from masturbating against her, her actions tell a different story. Lolita's physical reactions to Humbert's inappropriate behaviour appear to evidence a break in consciousness, giving readers a glimpse of two worlds, Humbert's solipsistic world and the world outside of his solipsistic constructs (Nabokov 67). This physical reaction by Lolita is stimulated by something that discomforts her. For Humbert to notice this, yet still feign that Lolita is unaware of his “Delectatio morosa” indicates a form of deception (Nabokov 46). Quayle notes that these scenes are “...also cited as evidence of the way in which the novel encourages the reader to discover the ‘truth’ about Lolita and the events concerning her by reading through the gaps in Humbert’s narrative” (Quayle 5). It is at this point that readers who are aware of Humbert's deception may track his unreliability as a narrator. As Quayle rightly points out, we discover far more about the “true” Lolita through her reactions as opposed to

Humbert's recollections. The silenced voice of Lolita, as reflected by her actions, thus becomes as telling as what Humbert retells readers.

Quayle analyses, through the description of recent research into morals in *Lolita*, how Humbert shows his deception to the reader:

The more recent critics who have attended to the 'morals' of *Lolita* have tended to argue that the work does indeed have a moral foundation [...] this relates not to pedophilia *per se*, but to allowing oneself to remain ignorant to the realities and separate existences of other human beings, and specifically to reducing other people to one's 'artistic' vision of them (Quayle 6).

Throughout the novel, Humbert alludes to Lolita being an expression of his mind. We find this in his idea that Lolita is solipsised during his sexual encounters and also his photographic descriptions of her. Near the end of the novel, Humbert realises, or he feigns the epiphany, that indeed Lolita was a person who existed apart from his poetic interpretation of her in: "I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind" (Nabokov 324). This is referred to by Quayle as reducing others to a subjective construction outside of a reality of their own (Quayle 6). Here Humbert is seen as deceptive since, being the narrator of his own story; he has hindsight into his actions which is clearly exemplified near the end of the novel where he makes an outright admission of this. Humbert addresses Lolita directly: "And there were times when I knew how you felt" (Nabokov 324). Humbert feigning love in an attempt to justify his paedophiliac and abusive crimes is thus a cunning deception that he is guilty of.

Another example of Humbert's deception is found in the comparison between his first childhood love, Annabel Leigh, and Lolita. Quayle discusses how an assessment of Humbert's psychological projection of Annabel Leigh onto Lolita is a suspicious one, as Humbert confesses that he enjoys deceiving people:

The idea that [...] Humbert truly views Lolita as a second Annabel, is [...] highly suspect [...] Humbert himself opens up the possibility that this is merely

a false and empty justification for his actions [...] Furthermore, at several points Humbert directly poses the question of whether the idea of Lolita-as-Annabel is not perhaps derived from Freudian theory, as opposed to explained by it (Quayle 8).

Humbert's references to a possible psychological projection of Annabel Leigh onto Lolita may be a lie as his position as narrator and retrospective author positions him to easily manipulate the reader. Furthermore, his words when first seeing and sexually describing Lolita's body entrenches his position as manipulative narrator: "I have no illusions, however. My judges will regard this as a piece of mummery on the part of a madman with a gross liking for the *fruit vert*" (Nabokov 42). Humbert's addressing the reader alludes to the fact that he is always acutely aware that the reader is judging him for his actions. As for Humbert's pleasure in deceiving, we find that Quayle addresses this issue by making clear how Humbert "enjoys, and has a history of, tricking and manipulating psychotherapists...and is well aware of and amused by the fact that the Lolita-as-Annabel explanation, if true, would be a psychiatrist's dream" (Quayle 8). This belies Humbert's previous references to Lolita and Annabel Leigh where he tries to amalgamate the two characters: "[...] Annabel Haze, alias Dolores Lee, alias Loleeta" (Nabokov 189). Such indications should ideally entrench the reader's lack of confidence in Humbert's justifications for his abusive actions towards Lolita. Quayle finds further evidence to substantiate why Humbert is deceptive in order to justify his actions to the reader:

It seems far more likely that the idea of Lolita as a seductress and enchantress, and Humbert as an innocent victim, is a misrepresentation intended only to justify his behavior in the reader's eyes. This argument is given more weight by the fact that...after this first sexual encounter with Lolita, Humbert rarely refers to the concept of the nymphet again (Quayle 9).

Humbert is portrayed as deceptive not in terms of what he recalls to readers willingly, but rather in what his recollections imply. What is most telling is that Humbert abandons the idea of the nymphet only after his sexual encounter implying that he abandons a justification for his abuse after he has fulfilled his true desire. Humbert's deception is also apparent in an example where

he notes Lolita's positive characteristics in contrast to Charlotte's negative perceptions of her own daughter. Quayle then shows how it is not merely a disagreement Humbert has with Charlotte's perceptions, but also a feeling of anger towards her point of view on Lolita. Humbert notes how Charlotte had perceived Lolita:

Charlotte Haze, née Becker, had underlined the following epithets, ten out of forty, under "Your Child's Personality": aggressive, boisterous, critical, distrustful, impatient, irritable, inquisitive, listless, negativistic (underlined twice) and obstinate. She had ignored the thirty remaining adjectives, among which were cheerful, co-operative, energetic, and so forth. It was really maddening (Nabokov 90).

This extract recognises some attributes of Lolita that appear to be reflective of the real girl child. Quayle argues that this is seen through a reflection on her "character and psychological qualities, the feelings, moods, tastes, prejudices and humor" (Quayle 10-11). Many critics have argued that Humbert either blatantly ignores the real girl Dolores or he only recognises her when she goes against his perfect idea of the nymphet. It may be the case that these two perceptions cannot be set as polar opposites but are instead two halves of a whole that makes up Humbert's personality. Quayle makes the point that even though critics have come to take polar opposite perceptions of Humbert, it is the case that "some of Lolita's personal qualities are not only acknowledged by Humbert, but are viewed positively by him and are presented as an element of her appeal" (Quayle 10-11). Quayle also notes how the attributes that Humbert recalls "ring true as accurately reflecting the 'real' child, Dolores Haze, as she is revealed to the reader in scenes where her behavior and other attributes are presented in a relatively unmediated fashion" (Quayle 10-11). Yet another break in Humbert's recollections is apparent, one of Lolita as the seductress, and another as more of a recollection of the qualities suited to a child. It becomes clear that Lolita as a child figure is not so far from Humbert's comprehension as he leads readers to believe, once more indicating that Humbert's power as narrator leads him to be deceptive towards his own self-serving ends.

A rather telling, and more so worrying, factor that Quayle analyses is the recognition of Humbert as both character and narrator of his own story in terms of ethics. Quayle looks into Humbert's aloof response to his damaging actions on Lolita's life as his story progresses and he achieves a supposed state of enlightenment regarding Lolita's development:

Some critics [...] argue [...] that [Humbert's] heightened awareness of, and attentiveness to [Lolita's] 'true self' is increasingly reflected in Humbert's narrative [...] In fact, this idea of the moral development of Humbert-the-narrator is an illuminating one in that as the text progresses [...] Humbert does allow his narrative to dwell more sensitively and at least ostensibly more regretfully, on the detrimental effect that his past actions had on Lolita (Quayle 13-14).

Previous examples of Humbert not knowing Lolita's "mind" (Nabokov 324) or even his depriving her of a "general right" to be a child, (Nabokov 211) corroborate Quayle's argument. In this analysis, Humbert is portrayed as distinctly lacking sensitivity towards his damaging actions on Lolita's life while abusing her, indicating an unwillingness to acknowledge the detrimental effects his actions had on Lolita or, more worryingly, a lack of regret for such actions. What makes this behaviour heinous is that Humbert is aware of Lolita's true feelings, yet blatantly ignores them until he has satisfied his perverse sexual desires. It is only late in the story, upon reflections when rewriting his story, that Humbert recognises that he knew Lolita had not felt the way that he portrayed her to feel. The implication of this analysis is that Humbert does not regret his abusive actions, but rather tells his story in an attempt to justify his actions as a paedophile and abuser.

Quayle's final observation sums up Humbert's role as a deceptive character and narrator well by alluding to one of the more subtle morals within the novel: "[...] I would suggest that the novel draws attention to the fact that high culture, like low culture, can be implicated in the reduction of human beings to the sexualized, objectified, physical appearance" (Quayle 23). Quayle suggest in her conclusion that the act of writing itself is an abuse by Humbert. The committing of

his deception and abuses of Lolita into discursivity traps Lolita in a perpetual state of abuse that is relived each time a reader reads Humbert Humbert's story. Furthermore, the fact that Humbert's so-called confession is committed through high art in the form of a novel implicates the novel, as a form of discursivity, in this crime as well. This corroborates the subtle moral of the novel that a self may exist apart from our objective perceptions. As we read and reread Humbert's confessions, we are forced to participate in the crime of rehashing Lolita's abuses. The repetition of abuse and the release readers find in rehashing the experience is inextricably linked through language, as this is the only way for readers to grasp the subtle morals in the novel. This is an issue that Nabokov is deeply concerned with as indicated by the story-line of another of his novels, *An Invitation to a Beheading*. By implicating the reader in this crime, Nabokov teaches the reader a moral lesson on the dangers of solipsising others. Here, the high art form of the novel comes to do more than merely entertain. *Lolita* educates readers through an intricate system of deceptions that call for readers to become active participants. This can be in the form of readers becoming complacent about Humbert's deceptions or realising that we are to assume the role of detective in order to realise an alternative to the popular perception that the novel is merely salacious.

2) Humbert's Request for Reader's Participation in Abuse

Humbert's role as both narrator and character of his own story provides him with a power that is absolute when recollecting his exploits. However, this power is only potent in the realms of his subjective world. Thus, the reader is ensnared by Humbert's creative rhetoric and misleading language games, and falls under the spell of his compelling story. It is, however, the reader who is more receptive to the inconsistencies within Humbert's story who is able to break out of his created, subjective world. The receptive reader gains an alternative insight into the mind of a narrator whose ulterior motives in feigning love for an underage girl whom he abuses are seen for what they are; a purposeful deception to elicit sympathy.

Critics have carefully studied the layers of fiction that operate in *Lolita*. The most perceptive look at the character-narrator combination and reflect on the implications this fictional doubling has on the novel as a fiction. Inevitably, we find the various layers of fiction to be a distortion of a distortion as it is retold through various different perceptions from the author, to the narrator to the character. The notion of truth is thus a question which is pertinent within the novel. Pattenon reflects on this idea:

[Nabokov's] books employ a narrator who is at once omniscient and a character within the story he tells [...] Since every account must be subjective and partial, there can be no such thing as omniscience except in a created fictional world; on the other hand, everything witnessed and reported by the Nabokovian narrator is equally "true" within the boundaries of that world (Pattenon 102).

What Pattenon points to is that omniscience can only exist in a fictional world created by the narrator. The central argument is that in *Lolita*, Humbert's recollections are the perceptions of occurrences that happen according to his mind's understanding. Thus, all recollections that Humbert makes known to the reader are only partial truths as they are subjective. This is the key to Humbert's omniscience as it is only in his solipsistic world that he has the power and mandate to create a story, which may serve his ends of eliciting sympathy from the reader. This underlies the entire point of fiction; it is not a recollection of true life but rather a partial and subjective interpretation of it. From this perspective, Humbert's recollections cannot be seen as truthful to real world occurrences of paedophilia, as they are partial and subjective recollections of an already fictionalised story. This makes the notion of seeking "truth" in fiction, and consequently the banning thereof, a ridiculous endeavour. It should be noted that within the realms of the created fiction of Humbert's recollections, what he perceives to be a "truth" becomes something very real for him. This corroborates strongly with linguist Alessandro Portelli's observation of truth in oral histories. Portelli states that "[s]ubjectivity is as much the business of history as the more visible 'facts'. What the informant believes is indeed a historical fact (that is, the fact that

he or she believes it) just as much as what 'really' happened” (Portelli 100). From this perception, the novel as a fictional form is unique in that it uses fiction in order to provide the reader with insights into a truth about reality. Portelli entrenches this idea by stating that “[t]he first thing that makes oral history different... is that it tells us less about events as such than about their meaning” (Portelli 99). Here Portelli describes how oral histories, much like Humbert's own discursive history he recollects, tells us more about significance than fact. We find, once more, Nafisi’s reference to what readers search for in fiction being “not so much reality but the epiphany of truth” (Nafisi 3). Fiction is both relevant as it provides us with an insight and understanding of a truth, but is useless as a truthful, carbon copy reflection of reality. Quayle similarly argues for the truth-value of the character’ and narrators’ subjective viewpoint in the words: “[...] narrators may deliberately lie [...] The truth may be difficult to ascertain, but it does exist. There is a correct version, even if it does not appear within the novel” (Quayle 106-107). Quayle argues that the notion of truth within the novel does indeed exist but in differing forms. For Quayle, there are versions of a story that are truthful to fact even though they are not clearly written for readers to discover within the novel. Her second observation relates to Portelli and Nafisi as she makes clear that “when there exists no such correct version, the entire nature of the story changes. The narrator's account is as ‘true’ as any other. If all truth is subjective (or fictional), the eye witness narrator assumes necessarily the role of author, and the author knows everything about his fictional world” (Quayle 106-107). The construction of a story, whether intentional or through unreflective subjective perception, becomes a truth which the narrator recollects as it becomes the only narrative that exists in discursivity. Pattenon addresses this issue in another analysis made by Nabokov in *Transparent Things*:

In *Transparent Things* Nabokov admits more explicitly than ever before that too intense a preoccupation with the past can be aesthetically dangerous. What is really dead, after all, is the past. Only the present, the process of perception itself ...is truly alive (Pattenon 108).

The past, or actual occurrence that represents the truthful account of a story, cannot exist within a novel as the novel denotes a retelling and reinterpretation of such events. This is the very same argument that can be made for disciplines such as history that record events as “truthful”. The implication of this is that such truths are no longer in existence. Humbert's recollections become a truth unto themselves as they become the only story that is in existence. The event of recollecting a story and committing it into discursivity is thus immortalised as a fact or truth that is truthful to the moment of its recollection. As a result, Humbert's narrative becomes Humbert's truth in his present state of being author of his own story. It should be noted, however, that if a factual narrative does indeed exist, Humbert's subjective recollections are still a distortion of the truth, albeit a truth in his mind.

A particular notion, that we as readers become blind to certain changes, is essential in interpreting our misunderstanding of this complex novel. We are blinded to what we regard as insignificant changes, a factor that Nabokov is fully aware of and often exploits. This is what happens when we ignore Humbert's increasing awareness of Lolita's emotions, needs and wants. This awareness by Humbert indicates a self-realisation and growth of a character from a morbid psychological state of paedophilia to an acceptance that his mental state and actions are unacceptable. Yet, we would sooner disregard these qualities in an attempt to disassociate ourselves from sympathising with a paedophile. This indicates that we as readers often take the literary environment for granted as the dominant themes and discourses focus our thoughts so intensely that we ignore subtle changes in the themes and literary landscape.

Readers can be forgiven for ignoring certain subtle changes in the literary landscape as, partly, this reaction is ingrained within our psyche. The mind receives so much information at once that exclusion is a coping mechanism that helps it to process essential information. The mind chooses what is important based on the context of situation that occurs within the literature, thus making

the dominant and grotesque themes within the novel the most salient features that draw our attention. We are predisposed to do this and this makes us more receptive to reading about the taboos that the novel offers us, particularly for Nabokov's complex, intricate and witty use of language.

Subconsciously, readers make Humbert's redeeming factors irrelevant because our moral response to paedophilia, one that is socially constructed and in turn determines our membership of society as "normal", is to resist the taboo at all costs. If readers accept Humbert's taboo perceptions, then this aligns them with the stigma of being sexually depraved and social deviants. Our resistance to the taboos in the novel is thus a normal human response. The disgust we feel about Humbert's perception of paedophilia allows us as readers to gauge our own moral compass within society as a whole. This is a basic instinct of self-preservation that aligns with our primordial instinct to belong to a group and be protected within a community by subscribing to the dominant ethos of the group as defined by Conradie in the ancient Greek sense of the word "ethos" (Conradie 2). This distraction to our perception, that of dominant themes and discourses, makes us dismiss small changes in the narrative. This may even cause our minds to disregard anomalous changes that seem out of place within the literary landscape. Readers have a limited attention capacity and things that divide our attention make this worse.

Readers' instincts to resist socially determined taboos are so ingrained in the psyche that we would sooner identify Humbert as a paedophile and dismiss the novel as grotesque, than acknowledge possible ethical reflections, debates and discussions that could arise from the taboo themes. We may think that we should not be blinded to the subtle morals of the novel, as these are readily available for readers to access within the plain text of the book. However, the complication comes into play not only within the handicap inherent in the human condition of resisting taboos, but also the interpretation of symbols, images, aesthetic bliss and the linguistic

proWess of the novel. This makes Nabokov's art even more difficult to appreciate. When the mind is occupied by a dominant theme, our perceptions are significantly reduced, limiting our ability to be receptive to subtle morals. This furthermore limits our ability to learn from subtle nuances and morals in the novel.

The narrative strategy of the novel, namely the first person narration, examines the reader's mental interaction with perception and attention. The fact that we are only privy to Humbert's perception drains the reader's already limited attention. We become so preoccupied with Humbert's perception, particularly focused on taboo themes of paedophilia, rape and child sexual abuse, because our minds care more about information that it cannot predict. Thus, Lolita's silence in the novel, particularly the distinct lack of her perspective, serves to highlight Humbert's perverse perceptions and desires so intensely. If both the perceptions of the victimiser and victim were present, we would be able to determine more easily whether Lolita was predatory or whether she was as innocent as we may have thought. In the first person narration, readers are forced to fill in the gaps within a narrative already saturated with the recollections of a paedophile who indulges his delectation. It is not difficult for readers to fill the gaps in the narrative with images and symbols that are paedophilic in nature. This may lead readers to recoil from the novel in disgust as we are incriminated in the taboo acts present in the novel. This implicates the reader as an accessory to Humbert's crimes and because of this resistance to the novel inherent in our own perceptions and disgust about the taboos, the reading of the novel becomes a laborious and taxing task as it forces us to confront our own perceptions about our morality.

Facing sudden changes in a literary landscape may also cause the mind to perceive and adapt to the new information in different ways. If we begin to lose track of the plot, misinterpret key events and generally lag behind in comprehending the novel, older information dominates our

way of perceiving until the newer information can catch up and be processed. Thus, associated or learned ethics are difficult for readers to set aside, causing further resistance to new ways of seeing the world. Within *Lolita*, there are many instances of alternatives to a socially accepted ethos being presented, but no morality is more difficult to overcome than our learned ethics that are socially accepted within our communities and cultures. What we consider taboos today in the novel would be more socially acceptable in a time when sexual relations with children was an accepted custom. This would allow readers to identify with Humbert's perceptions more readily whereas today human rights have developed to the extent of intensely focusing on the rights of children for their own protection.

Imagery plays a major role in readers' perception of the novel. Although the novel intensely focuses on words, the imagery that the mind creates about the paedophilic acts, could come to determine readers' perceptions of the novel. Images that do not stand out in terms of sexual deviance tend to make readers less resistant as they are less threatening to our morality. As soon as images go against the grain of our morality they tend to stand out more, and thus particular focus is placed on them. The type of imagery itself is important as the implied impurity of images associated with the taboos in the novel could arguably be the underlying reason why readers approach the novel with a preconceived notion of what to expect. The confusion occurs when the novel focuses less on glamorising paedophilia with lewd images and focuses instead on aesthetically pleasing language. This change in perception is difficult for the reader to comprehend, as discussed previously, and the reader may still hold on to the preconceived notion of morality with which they approached the novel. It could be suggested that the implied threat of immoral imagery would cause readers to go beyond ordinary disgust and resistance to the novel, perhaps even so far as to ban the novel for its potential to corrupt the socially accepted ethos that we are so conditioned to abide by. What this indicates is that our perception of

morality, what we believe we should accept, outweighs any redeeming qualities and subtle morals within the novel, effectively closing the novel off to educating readers.

Perception is essentially a fundamental cognitive action. When we are made to believe something is taboo, we will constantly search for these elements in order to ensure that our expectations are met or, as Nabokov put it, “[...] in order not to feel cheated” (Nabokov 356). The fundamental reason for reading a book in which the dominant theme is taboo, is to gain an experience of that taboo. Yet, our learned morality is so strong that we resist the novel and its themes as soon as we read about them. This internal paradox is what makes the novel so sublime, as it at once appeases our sense of curiosity and challenges our moral instincts. Essentially, preconception comes to taint our experience of reading *Lolita*. If we perceive the novel as one thing, we will actively seek out means to ensure our expectations are met. It is easy, then, to see how lawyers could focus on the dominant taboo themes to the exclusion of the redeeming, more subtle themes in the novel. This effectively turns *Lolita* into a vile work celebrating the abuses that a paedophile forces onto his victim.

Humbert's perceived reaction to his paedophilia also comes to determine readers' perceptions of the novel as Humbert displays, both verbally and non-verbally, his purposeful deception of the reader. Readers constantly perceive the literary world and subconsciously filter information as they read. How characters behave, address each other, situations and gestures are based on our mind's perception of the character. Thus, not only words but also bodily actions reveal characters' true feelings. Humbert's intense focus on the physical body, and his morbid obsession with girl children's bodies, indicates to the reader his true emotions, which once more challenges our learned morality. Simply discussing a situation is yet another form of communication that is interesting. Humbert's need to tell his story reveals an interesting psychological need to rid himself of a burden. Humbert often, and in detail, makes descriptions of his time with Lolita,

detailing in minute intricacies his exploits, exploitation, trips, trials and manipulation of her. This need to talk, coupled with the constant allusions to his judging reader, indicates guilt and anxiety. What is interesting to note is that people who are comfortable and at ease find little need to excessively explain their circumstances through verbal communication. This further indicates Humbert's anxiety and need to unburden himself of guilt to his judge, the reader, making Humbert's pleas of innocence deceptive. For Humbert as a character, the mind reveals information about itself through non-verbal communication that the body indicates. Humbert's sickly, distressed, feverish and manic actions at the end of the novel indicates how brain-sickly he truly was, providing readers with subtle hints about his mental state. Human beings develop to react to the world systematically. Parts of the mind reacts subconsciously without any high levels of thought, revealing much more of Humbert's true desires through his actions. What Humbert says is what he wants readers to know, but what he does not say, or rather, how he acts, is equally if not so more telling about his true desires. Fiction is, by very nature, a construction of an imagined world. The argument for Humbert's perceptions as truthful essentially becomes a moot point, as this "truth" is already set in a form that frames the text as fantasy. This calls the reader to maintain a critical eye on Humbert's narrative.

Further reflecting on Humbert as an omniscient narrator, Patteson analyses the idea of perception within the novel. Patteson makes the observation that:

[Humbert] is from the outset an author telling his character's story. But he is, as well, a deceased author calling his protagonist [...] to join him beyond the grave. The point of the device appears to be that authorship, like death, is just another 'state of being' [...] another level of awareness [...] To perceive, in short, is to invent (Patteson 103).

The notion of "authorship" as representing something other than itself within the novel, something more than the mere authority to state subjectively what ought to be within a story is discussed (Patteson 103). Humbert is acutely aware of his power to retell his story according to

his own perceptions as discussed in various differing examples throughout this thesis. For Pattenon, authorship is another level of fictionalisation, as nobody can exist apart from Humbert's created world as exemplified through Humbert's voice being the only distinct one in the novel, while Lolita's voice is written out. This demonstrates the absolute power of the subjective author, calling for readers to analyse Humbert's recollections and to consider whether his accounts of things can be perceived as truthful or whether he is being deceptive.

Arguments for Humbert's deception vary from critic to critic as we find many critics preoccupied themselves with the inner workings of Humbert's subconscious. The implication of this is to analyse fiction with the notion that truth can somehow be discovered by analysing a fictional character's world created by a character already in a fiction. Though it is true that in anthropological studies of human beings, where subjectivity becomes a point that can be considered a truth, we should not put out of our minds the layers of fiction that are at play in Nabokov's novels. Not only do we find a character, Humbert, who is deceptive in order to meet his own ends, we find a narrator who attempts to deceive readers in order to elicit sympathy for his criminal conviction. A fictional editor such as John Ray Jnr., who has clear moral judgements on the character and narrator of Humbert alike, increasingly distorts this fiction. This fiction is then even further distorted as the recollections are framed in the genre of fiction itself. At every level the reader is constantly reminded to question the validity of *Lolita* as a truth. If the analysis is to focus on whether the novel can be considered to be truthful to reality then, no, the novel is not a form of truth. However, if we are to consider that the novel may be truthful to an insight into a human condition, the subjectivity of people, then yes, the novel becomes a reflection of this form of truth.

Chapter four:

Lolita and Nabokov: Taboo Topics in fiction

1) The Taboos in Fiction: *Lolita*'s Paedophilia, Incest and Rape

A novel such as *Lolita*, with its controversial approach to sensitive social topics like paedophilia, incest, rape and murder, undoubtedly sparks discussions of human ethics and morality. Owing to the novel's engagement with these potentially sensationalist themes, Nabokov's fictions have often been analysed in terms of ethics and morality and it has been a recent trend to focus on the author's moral position and reasoning for creating such controversial high art as discussed in his idea of "aesthetic bliss" (Nabokov 358). Ascertaining Nabokov's moral position on taboo topics is a particularly difficult task, as it appears that this particular high art fiction, laden with his exceptionally crafted rhetoric and linguistic prowess, obscures latent readings of his views on taboos. Literary devices, and what Nabokov deems as aesthetic bliss, weave a convoluted tale, easily losing readers in a maze of potential verisimilitudes and subterfuges. This makes the novel itself an art form that is as deceptive as Nabokov's cunning character Humbert.

A close analysis of Nabokov's afterword to *Lolita*, and a glance through some of his interviews where he discusses his notions on fiction and reality, quickly puts into perspective the role he sees fiction playing in the world. Nabokov indicates in his afterword that he believes there are certain inconsistent treatments of one taboo over another. In the case of a raped and abused child, this leads readers to be particularly sensitive towards these taboos before engaging with the actual art form. This type of reading obscures the reader's views of the actual intention of the novel: to deconstruct hegemonic morality and propose more subtle, nuanced views of canonised worldviews and morality.

We could argue that banning literature, or placing sanctions on controversial discourses limits the ability of literature to stimulate social debates around sensitive taboo issues. The result is that fiction is seen as no more than a means of entertainment that should have no business instigating a change of consciousness for readers. There appears to be a noteworthy yet often ignored truth that the world of the text may link to the world outside of the text. By limiting high art's potential to debate taboos, it seems that the law trivialises high art's ability to engage taboos that occur in the world outside of the text. Fiction's ability or freedom to transform static views on taboos allows for alternative perceptions on issues that prudish worldviews have imposed on various communities. This creates room for debates and discussions within the consciousness of the reader. By implication, the changing worldviews of individual readers affect the way they engage their communities, and thus, a possible shift in communal worldviews and ethics is possible.

Banning is an outdated, prudish form of action against fiction and, in today's context where information is so readily available on the internet, placing sanctions on high art is an equally controversial way of expressing displeasure or embarrassment towards taboo topics. The need for and want of easy access to information has led to the education of communities through an information boom that has seen a marked desire to discuss contentious issues within society. This does not guarantee that the contentious issues are important or that the quality of the discussion is high, but highlights the desire to discuss these issues. Furthermore, the easy sharing and distribution of opinions and sources have further generated an interest in discussing taboos. The emergence of the internet makes it easier for the discussion of taboo topics, particularly in light of the relative anonymity it offers to individuals. Indeed this also has the negative implication of easily disseminating child pornography. It could be suggested that modern day paedophiles—the Humbert's of the technological era—benefit from the internet's information boom as well. Easy

access to information thus works both ways, being a potential benefit and danger at the same time—a sordid-boon.

The unabated expressions of desires, opinions, morals and ethics causes communities to become inquisitive about taboo issues and encourages expression with the hope of finding mutual interests, ideas, worldviews and general approval. The banning of high art is illegitimate in the sense that taboo topics are legitimate sources of concern and discussions for any community. High art holds the potential to provide new insights into taboo topics in society. This potential for art to educate, however, is not limited to high art alone, as “popular art” also plays a role in discussing sensitive issues. The distinguishing factors that should govern the desirability of art should be whether it encroaches on basic human rights through the themes they discuss and the manner in which these discussions are treated within the art. It should be made clear that at no point does this thesis attempt to exempt high art from governance while sanctioning other forms of art. The treatment of human rights that are present in the discussions that high art generates is what essentially needs to be governed. The point of interest is thus less the art of fiction itself, and more the way it affects those readers and communities that it discusses.

As previously mentioned, incest and child sexual abuse are closely related, particularly, in the domestic space. However, the two taboos are still distinctly different. In the case of Humbert, what complicates the taboo of incest is that he is not Lolita's biological father. A superficial judgement of this circumstance would have us branding Humbert as a paedophile. This is not so easily achieved, because Humbert becomes Lolita’s adoptive father. Thus, Humbert acquires paternal rights and responsibilities; this fact may contribute to the resistance and disgust readers feel toward Humbert's sexual transgressions. La Fontaine describes how adoption laws in Britain came to redefine incest law by including adoptive parents:

In 1928 when adoption was made a legal process adoptive relations were specifically and legally added to the range of relations covered by the Incest Act. In 1984 the Criminal Law Revision Committee proposed to add an offence 'analogous to incest' which would cover sexual relations between step-parents and step-children. Household members who are not close kin in formal terms are assimilated to that status as members of a 'family' (La Fontaine 5).

Chronologically speaking, we can see a clear trend of laws being adapted as adoption of children become more common. This corroborates Humbert's ideas that sexual relations between children and adults are only offensive due to a socially determined meaning attributed to the act. Most notably in the context of Humbert's sexual relations with Lolita, he is deemed sexually perverse by society, although at times he claims a Romantic-styled love for the innocent nymphet through his poetic language. The reprise of childhood innocence and purity is essential as it supports Humbert's perception of Lolita and undercuts it. The support for the idea constructs Lolita as the pure nymphet with ethereal, magical properties. Humbert then undermines this when he defiles the purity of the nymphet by raping Lolita. Not only is she sullied by sexual abuse, but also her innocence and purity is forcibly removed. This ambiguity is evident in Humbert's rhetoric where, as Jonathan Culler in *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* outlines how the use of “specific ‘tropes’... ‘turn’ or alter the meaning of words” (Culler 71). More specifically it is Humbert's use of “personification [...] metaphor [...] miscellaneous ‘figures’ of indirection which arrange words to achieve special effect [...] alliteration [...] apostrophe [...] and assonance” that so easily deceive readers and misdirect their attention from his abuse (Culler 71). It appears that Humbert latches on to the Romantic as a way of justifying his sexual desires for Lolita. He goes so far as to describe ancient times when lust for young children was acceptable in some communities. Humbert laments these lost times when it was the norm for adults and children to have sexual relations:

We are not surrounded in our enlightened era by little slave flowers that can be casually plucked between business and bath as they use to be in the days of the Romans; and we do not, as dignified Orientals did in still more luxurious

times, use tiny entertainers fore and aft between the mutton and the rose sherbet. The whole point is that the old link between the adult world and the child world has been completely severed nowadays by new customs and new laws (Nabokov 140).

Humbert laments a time when sexual relations with children were acceptable, imbuing them with a sense of innocence and decadence by referring to the “entertainment” that children provided (Nabokov 140). Here we find a contrast between ideologies at different times and places. Social norms have evolved to the extent that sexual relations between children and adults have been categorised into a hierarchy of offences ranging from adults who are not related to children, to adoptive parents engaging in sexual acts with children, to consanguine adults and children. For Humbert, this is a particularly difficult situation as he falls into the first two categories. He is a stranger to Lolita when he achieves his first orgasm against her, which makes his crime sexual abuse of a minor. Humbert then goes on to have sexual relations with her after he becomes her adoptive father, making his crime statutory rape and, in the case of taboos, incest.

For Humbert, the position of adoptive father is preferable as he refutes the idea of being a perverse stranger. Not only does he constantly attempt to refute that he is a mere stranger trying to have his way with Lolita, he also justifies his sexual desires by consigning them to the realms of the poetic. By doing this, Humbert uses high art and Romantic ideas to elicit sympathy. Evidence of this can be seen in Humbert's descriptions of the night before he has penetrative sex with Lolita. Initially Humbert had drugged Lolita, and while she is in a drugged stupor, he describes his reactions while observing her: “If I dwell at some length on the tremors and gropings of that distant night, it is because I insist upon proving that I am, and never was, and never could have been, a brutal scoundrel. The gentle and dreamy regions through which I crept were the patrimonies of poets—*not* crimes prowling ground.” (Nabokov 149) Humbert's actions clearly indicate a fervent and lusty wish to fulfil his sexual desires. It is important at this point to differentiate between “tremors” and “gropings” as this may indicate further deception. Humbert describes his tremors at

moments when ejaculation is imminent. This reflects his body's reactions to the fulfilment of his sexual desires. Humbert also tends to associate his tremors with feelings of love and, by implication, hints that his ejaculations are not associated with deviance. He then refers to himself as a naive and inept lover when groping Lolita. The implication of this is that his word choices of "tremors" and "gropings" suggests that he is not a deviant sexual offender, and his acts of paedophilia are made inconsequential by his timid description of his deviant sexual acts (Nabokov 149). Humbert suggests that he is only a sexual offender because of Lolita's allure as a nymphet. Humbert blames Lolita for his crimes, as she is responsible for making him commit the acts associated with a paedophile. This line of argument is supported when Humbert refers to his cognitive reflections of his actions. They assume an almost impotent character who is sensitive in the words "gentle and dreamy regions through which I crept" (Nabokov 149). There appears to be a split in Humbert's consciousness pointing the reader towards possible deception on his part. As if to distract attention from the actual crimes of child sexual abuse and incest, Humbert refers once more to an era where paedophilia was acceptable. This outright proclamation that his desires are poetic in nature and not criminal shows up Humbert as a deceptive narrator, as he would rather be seen as a misunderstood poet than a criminal attempting to slake his lust at the expense of a child.

La Fontaine further discusses how the public prefers to see child sexual abusers as strangers, as opposed to the familial domestic figure: "People will admit that children may be sexually assaulted but prefer the stereotype of the dirty old man who lurks near playgrounds and schools. Parents may warn their children against accepting sweets from strangers or getting into their cars, but refuse to believe that even other parents abuse their children" (La Fontaine 10). Even though people prefer to see strangers as offenders, we find that it is often the people closest to children who are able to sexually groom them. The reader will note that Humbert's lust for young girls would always punctuate his narrative, even at the displeasure of Lolita. Humbert would: "[...] park

at a strategic point [...] in the car, to watch the children leave school—always a pretty sight. This sort of thing soon began to bore [his] so easily bored Lolita, and, having a childish lack of sympathy for other people's whims, she would insult [his] desire to have her caress [him...]" (Nabokov 181). Humbert the paedophile makes a distinct appearance here and disregards the artistic and innocent love he feigned for Lolita who becomes a mere means to his sexual ends. This comes to exemplify Humbert's artistic ideas of Lolita, and makes his pleas for innocence of child sexual abuse less believable.

What makes Humbert's relationship with Lolita more unusual is that he not only has the role of stranger and then parent, but he assumes the formal and informal role of educator. La Fontaine describes how the role of a teacher is categorised with regard to the taboo of child sexual abuse: "A teacher who seduces a pupil may lose his job. The label sexual harassment is nowadays attached to sexual advances made by those whose role, and the power it entails, gives them an opportunity to force their attentions on women against their wishes" (La Fontaine 6). La Fontaine demonstrates that social taboos surrounding child sexual abuses are inherently hierarchical. As society becomes more intricate, so too do the categories of sexual engagements between children and adults. The various categories and sub-categories that come with titles define the actions in various ways. For the sexual abuse between the teacher and student, La Fontaine describes it as "sexual harassment" that is associated with the assertion of authority over a subordinate (La Fontaine 6). This behaviour seems to be far less threatening than the image of a stranger or parent sexually abusing a child. Little wonder that the lines between parent-child incest, paedophilia and rape may be blurred. The commonality of assertion of power, usually the male over the female, is where child sexual abuse is identified most saliently. The unequal treatment comes with the labels that we attach to the various sub-categories of child sexual abuse such as the father-daughter relationship or the teacher-pupil relationship. La Fontaine describes how the phrase "sexual

harassment” and incest find parallels: “the phrase emphasises the disapproval of men who use their position to exploit subordinates under their authority. The parallel with father/ daughter incest is obvious” (La Fontaine 6). Essentially, the focus is on male power that is forced on the subordinate female. It becomes easier to see how Humbert can lead the reader to feel sympathetic towards his lust for children. The various masks Humbert assumes, that of parent, teacher, lover and, at times, Lolita’s subordinate when he portrays himself as helpless to her charms, allows a space for readers to feel sympathy for him in various circumstances. This sympathy is once more rooted in the power he asserts over Lolita. Effectively, these masks appeal to a wider demographic of reader who may be teachers, parents and lovers who can identify with the distorted emotions that Humbert skilfully and deceptively deploys to persuade readers of his innocence. The various roles and masks he assumes to justify his lust for nymphets indirectly and even subliminally plays on readers’ unequal treatment of the various sub categories of child sexual abuse through misdirecting and misrepresenting the emotions that these super ordinate figures have for their subordinates. The complexity that incest presents within families, and the link it has with child sexual abuse, is not confined to Humbert’s case. Humbert's complex role as stranger, stepfather, guardian, educator and lover exemplifies what anthropological studies of the incest taboo have missed. They seem to identify incest and the sexual abuse of children from an idealised notion of the family unit. La Fontaine elaborates on this: “[...] clinicians, like anthropologists, use an ideal of the family rather than considering the multiplex relationships within a domestic unit which is a political, legal and economic subsystem of the wider society, but is treated as though the folk model of a natural unit were the reality” (La Fontaine 14). Here an elaboration on the complexities of the domestic unit explains that it is a microcosm of various subsystems and cognitive frameworks of society (La Fontaine 14). By this definition, an ideal for incest and child sexual abuse is set which ignores the “emotional relations” that are involved in the domestic unit (La Fontaine 14). The implication of this, for La Fontaine, is that “the folk model of a natural unit”

will become the reality as opposed to an independent construction of the family unit, as no two family units are the same (La Fontaine 14). Considering that humans are ever-changing and evolving beings, it is impossible to set an ideal structure to the definition of the incest taboo in child sexual relations. The complexities and often shifting roles of the patriarchal figure of the domestic unit, such as Humbert's multifaceted role in Lolita's life, makes the unequal treatment of one taboo over the other a difficult task to navigate for readers. The conflict arises because Humbert assumes various different roles at various times in the novel and readers are not able to fix a particular label on him. This leads to a fluctuation of opinions regarding Humbert's character, who plays the chameleon figure ever so skilfully by shifting his rhetoric and linguistically manipulating readers. The only constant we find is that there is no doubt that Humbert commits the brutal crime of raping Lolita, and this may very well be the reason that the primary emotions readers feel towards the novel is disgust and resistance. Interestingly, for some readers, sexual harassment or sex between a teacher and pupil is less serious than paternal or adoptive incest. This may be due to the moral tenet of parenting and protection of children being broken. Whatever the case may be, a clearly unequal treatment of one taboo over the other is evident. This draws a line between the taboos, even though they share the common feature of an exercise of power over a subordinate.

Humbert's fundamental transgression is, as Quayle puts it, “deliberately rap[ing] Lolita” (Quayle 21). According to law, this defines Humbert as a child molester. Being found guilty of child molestation, and being branded with this stigma has detrimental effects on the accused. Regardless of the molester's perspective or the severity and subcategory the sexual abuse falls under, one's personal safety may be placed in jeopardy, as recounted by La Fontaine: “The greatest social opprobrium is reserved for [...] 'child molesters'. Those who are imprisoned for sexual offences against children risk serious harm from other prisoners if their offence becomes known” (La

Fontaine 6). Humbert's deception, the fact that he refutes all notions of the criminal regarding his affections for Lolita, may very well stem from his instinct for self-preservation. It is a very real risk that Humbert takes to divulge his recollections and reinterpretations of his sexual transgressions. Regardless of how Humbert considers his crime of child molestation, the modern Westernised culture in which the crime has occurred does not tolerate such behaviour. As a result, Humbert faces harm at the hands of those with power over him: fellow criminals. If Humbert is caught for his crimes, the only true power he has is to recreate his story. In writing at least, Humbert has the ability to exact some form of change for himself and his criminal activity by rationalising it as art. Though not completely effective in saving Humbert from the hostility, he takes the initiative to recreate his story in an attempt at self-preservation. In some ways, Humbert's story elicits sympathy from those who may read it and, if only for himself, may rationalise his crime to reduce its social repercussions.

La Fontaine's definition of the incest taboo describes how anthropologists come to define it and where they fall short. Sexual acts between adults and children seem to be about more than just the act of sex itself, but a lust for power. Anthropologists have come to define incest taboos and marriage prohibitions in terms of sexual relationships between family members, without acknowledging that within the incest taboo and marriage prohibitions, children are affected: "In stressing the distinction between incest taboos and marriage prohibitions...anthropologists have failed to realise the implications of that very aspect of incest which is singled out as universal: its connexion with the family" (La Fontaine 8). By definition, the family includes any children that may be present. This analysis has focused on the parent-child incest taboo, but has ignored the aspect of incest between brothers, sisters and cousins. What is missing from the analysis of incest in the Western world is that it may occur between members of the family who are of equal status, like brother and sister. Humbert portrays Lolita, at times conveniently for his sexual desires, as

his equal. An example can be found in the way Humbert reports on how Lolita speaks to him after having sex: “[...] Lo treated me to one of those furious harangues of hers where entreaty and insult, self-assertion and double talk, vicious vulgarity and childish despair, were interwoven in exasperating semblance of logic which prompted a semblance of explanation from me” (Nabokov 193). There is a deconstruction of the parent-child relationship and Lolita is reported as having a haughty attitude, usually reserved for members of the family who hold equal status. She speaks to Humbert in a manner that is unbecoming of a child to a parent, indicating that Lolita saw Humbert as the alternative in the incest taboo, a lover of relatively equal status who is a family member. We see this where Lolita deliberates about sharing a bed with Humbert for the first time: “‘The word is incest,’ said Lo...” (Nabokov 135). Incest thus can be redefined as it should acknowledge the family and by implication the child, but should also look at the power dynamic at play. It is essential to analyse the role that each member of the family assumes. The boundaries of parent-child relationships are blurred in Humbert's narrative, making his position—as parent or stranger, teacher or lover—hard to ascertain. Incest is thus a taboo and an abuse that is committed on children who are defined by age and not proposed maturity. Very often Lolita is portrayed as being sexually aware and mature for her age. This does not exonerate a paedophile of his or her crime. Even if the offender does not consider the child as sexually immature, in law, age determines that sex with a minor is still a crime. Incest between members of the family with equal power may affect the child by proxy, but it is still, nevertheless, an abuse of a sexual nature as a child is exposed to sexually deviant behaviour. Child sexual abuse and incest includes exposure to sexual relationships between adults and children, whether the children are directly involved in sexual acts or exposed to sexually deviant behaviour. What should be acknowledged are the possible hierarchies of power at play within the incest taboo. Humbert, at times, asserts the role of parent when Lolita goes against his sexual desires. This highlights an aspect of the incest taboo, for Humbert assumes the role of Lolita's equal when she

complies with his sexual desires. This alters the way readers perceive the incest taboo and calls Humbert's reliability into question again.

When focusing more specifically on girl children, La Fontaine stresses how the "reconstituted family" puts girls at greater risk of incest with regard to sexual abuse:

[...] living in what has come to be called a reconstituted family puts girls more at risk generally [...] Among my cases are a few in which a man abused his step-daughters and it later became known that he had abused his daughters by a previous marriage (La Fontaine 10).

It appears that Humbert's previous emotional loss informs his feelings for Lolita and his sexual abuse. This speaks volumes for Humbert's case as we find a link between a childhood trauma, the loss of Annabel Leigh, and his assertion of sexual power over Lolita. It appears, and Humbert himself confesses, that he tries to regain some feeling, through sexual exploits, that he missed with Annabel. On first encountering Lolita, Humbert states how:

[...] the vacuum of my soul managed to suck in every detail of her bright beauty, and these I checked against the features of my dead bride [...] All I want to stress is that my discovery of [Lolita] was a fatal consequence of that "princedom by the sea" in my tortured past [...] Everything they shared made one of them (Nabokov 42).

There always appears to be a reference to an ideal feeling that Humbert had while with Annabel Leigh. He appears to be forever chasing an elusive feeling and only finds this obsession satisfied when meeting Lolita. Humbert acknowledges that his desire for Lolita stems from what occurred at the "princedom by the sea" in his past (Nabokov 42). This entrenches the idea that he seeks in Lolita a feeling that he missed when he could not consummate his relationship with the young Annabel. Humbert appears stuck within the childhood trauma that made him seek in other young girls that same feeling. This is why Humbert describes the similarities that Annabel and Lolita shared as an amalgamation of two different times but one emotion: "Everything they shared made one of them" (Nabokov 42). The receptive reader will question whether Humbert is being devious

here. Humbert conveniently omits that he is an adult who has the self-knowledge that he is compelled to repair a shattered childhood relationship. In order to do this, however, Humbert needs to satisfy his sexual desires, which he can only achieve through sex with underage girls. Furthermore, Humbert is an adult who cannot control his urges, indicating that he lacks the control of a responsible and ethical adult. We can reflect on this and consider whether Humbert may be both trying to fix a broken childhood relationship while still being an uncontrollable sexual offender. Where he pleads for his innocence, this may be more easily achieved with a psychologist but not according to the law. Even if we accept this appeal to psychology for innocence, he is a devious character indeed, as we know that he has contempt for psychology.

When reflecting on Humbert and Lolita's relationship, we find that at first she had no objections to staying with him. She even goes so far as to stay with him despite the unreasonable sanctions he places on her social growth and activities. La Fontaine explains that “[...] common knowledge of a guilty secret may...serve to band the domestic group together against the world. Victims are reluctant to reveal their abuse and the ethic of non-interference in the domestic affairs of others is so strong that neighbours, friends or other kin may do nothing” (La Fontaine 14). Very often, the victim is made to believe that he or she is a participant in the crime that is being perpetrated against them. This is what occurs between Humbert and Lolita. What is more significant is how the reader comes to feel the same way after reading the novel, as if Humbert does not only offend against Lolita, but the readers themselves. Lolita comes to maintain their “guilty secret” and through Humbert’s coercion, this brings them together in a corrupted and perverted union and incestuous relationship (La Fontaine 14). In the case of Lolita’s friends and neighbours, the latter also come to ignore any signs of foul play by Humbert to maintain a culture, ethic or, better yet, ethos of autonomy that our modern society holds dear (La Fontaine 14). The reference to an “ethic of non-interference” is an interesting notion as it comes to implicate the reader in

Humbert's abuse (La Fontaine 14). We as readers find that we comply with the notion of silence, even though we realise that the novel is a fiction. Perhaps it is not so much the fiction that the novel portrays that affects the reader as much as the real-world referent that this particular transgression points towards. Readers may find the notion that we ignore, and thus become complicit in, abuses a difficult truth to confront. What is worse is that readers are implicated in this crime when simply taking on the passive role of continuing to read. Humbert, and by implication Nabokov, effectively puts into practice the very ethic that we most abhor in ourselves.

Adolescent freedoms are a modern phenomenon and when they are limited this may not necessarily indicate child sexual abuse. However, the manner in which Humbert uses these freedoms to control Lolita is indicative of a sexual offender coercing sexual acts from his victim. Humbert hinders Lolita's development by denying her friends and dates at a certain stage in the novel. Humbert prefers that Lolita should stay with him in an isolated unit. After denying Lolita any associations with boys, parties or outings, Humbert observes:

Lo was enraged by all this—called me a lousy crook and worse—and I would probably have lost my temper had I not soon discovered, to my sweetest relief, that what really angered her was my depriving her not of a specific satisfaction but of a general right. I was impinging, you see, on the conventional program, the stock pastimes, the “things that are done,” the routine of youth (Nabokov 211).

Here Humbert acknowledges that he is indeed impeding the normal growth of a teenager for his own selfish gains. The fact that Humbert finds “sweetest relief” in the idea that Lolita was not interested in a “specific satisfaction” indicates that it was merely Humbert's fear of being deprived of the object of his sexual desire that lead him to be so strict with Lolita (Nabokov 211). What is more telling, and even more worrying, is that his relief is rooted in the fact that he was merely “depriving her [...] of a general right” (Nabokov 211). This indicates that Humbert would rather deprive Lolita of her right to grow as a normal child would, than give up his selfish desire to have

his way with her. La Fontaine discusses how anthropologists have defined the phenomenon of isolating family members who are involved in the incest taboo within child sexual abuse: “The households in my case histories often included fathers or stepfathers who would not allow their children to go out or who discouraged them from making friends, but this seemed to be in order to prevent the knowledge of sexual abuse spreading outside the house as much as to retain their sexual services at home” (La Fontaine 14-15). Lolita's desire to participate in normal teenage engagements indicates healthy growth as a teenager. Humbert restricts this growth by denying her the affiliation that she would need to grow within this sphere. As La Fontaine discusses, Humbert uses the tactic of isolation to prevent outsiders from finding out about the taboo relationship and to maintain the sexual acts that come with the relationship (La Fontaine 14-15). This leads Lolita to rebel against him as seen in their fights that erupt after she secretly goes out to meet with friends and seeks approval from other male figures such as Claire Quilty. For Lolita, this means that she seeks other means of approval and validation. This manifests in a rebellion towards the end of the novel. There we find that Humbert fears that he and Lolita are being followed. Indeed, we find out at the end of the novel that this is the case, as Lolita colludes with Quilty to escape Humbert's tyranny. After being admitted to hospital with a dangerous cold that threatens Lolita's health, Quilty checks her out of the hospital posing as her uncle, much to Humbert's despair. Lolita finds Claire Quilty to be a suitable reprieve from Humbert:

A bright voice informed that yes, everything was fine, my daughter had checked out the day before, around two, her uncle, Mr. Gustave, had called for her with a cocker spaniel pup and a smile for everyone, and a black Caddy Lack, and had paid Dolly's bill in cash, and told them to tell me not to worry, and keep warm, they were at grandpa's ranch as agreed (Nabokov 280).

In this extract, Lolita escapes with Claire Quilty to an unknown destination. Humbert is livid at the loss of the object of his desire and frantically makes towards the hospital, by car and in a drunken state, to find out where Lolita might be. His struggles see him restrained by medical

staff and almost fighting with a doctor. The sight of a police officer and his possible arrest lead Humbert to deceive the medical staff by pretending to come out of his delirious haze:

[...] in the sudden silence I became aware of a policeman in the hallway [...] and meekly I signed the very symbolic receipt, thus surrendering my Lolita to all those apes...One simple and stark thought stood out and this was: "Freedom for the moment is everything." One false move- and I might have been made to explain a life of crime. So I simulated a coming out of a daze (Nabokov 281).

Humbert overtly proclaims that he is deceptive in order to maintain his secret of child sexual abuse and rape. The most telling part of the extract is that for Humbert "Freedom for the moment is everything" (Nabokov 281). This is his main aim in deceiving everybody within the hospital, for he escapes the consequences of actions others would clearly see as immoral and unlawful. A moral stance becomes evident in this telling line, that Humbert is not blind to the crime he commits against Lolita and indeed he knows society will view his treatment of Lolita as abuse. La Fontaine describes how isolation within the incest relationship operates within the domestic unit, and furthermore discusses the attempt at overcoming this boundary set by the abusive parent in order to establish outside ties:

The victims are often isolated, usually by their feelings of shame but many of them do make friends and marry. Often it is with the help of these friends [...] that victims are encouraged to reveal what has happened to them. Victims of sexual abuse may find difficulty playing adult familial roles but it does not seem that incest or its household analogue, sexual abuse, prevents them from trying (La Fontaine 15).

Lolita enacts this role, as La Fontaine describes, by escaping with Quilty and eventually making other friends. Lolita marries and attempts to live a normal life despite the traumas that she has encountered at the hands of Humbert and Quilty's sexual violations. Even though Lolita appears to have developed into a fairly well adjusted adult, we find that she is doomed. Not only does she miscarry the baby that she has with her husband, but also the foreword informs us that Lolita, "Mrs. Richard. F. Schiller' died in childbed, giving birth to her stillborn girl, on Christmas Day

1952” (Nabokov 2). The implication is that only in death can Lolita find release from Humbert. Lolita, now committed to discursivity, relives her encounters and traumas, effectively entrapping her in Humbert’s subjectivity. Lolita is forever trapped within the confines of the incest taboo and child sexual abuse as the memoir is published only on the condition that she is no longer alive. This effectively erases Lolita's voice and the only existing account of occurrences is from the subjective view of the perpetrator himself, Humbert Humbert.

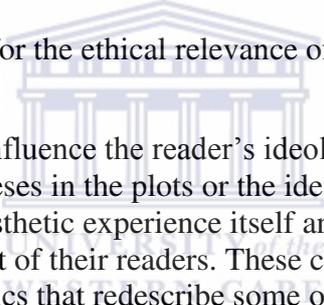
2) Nabokov’s Taboos: The *Afterword* Worldview

Many critics have surmised what Nabokov’s worldviews on taboo topics might be. Surely the construction of a novel which is so deeply concerned with the psychological implications of a rapist and child sexual offender must hold some form of moral message for the reader? If this is the case for Nabokov’s *Lolita*, then it is not the construction of morality in conventional terms, for Nabokov states in the afterword that *Lolita* has no moral in tow (Nabokov 358).

It appears that *Lolita* holds a very different view of morality from that of a conventional novel. For Nabokov, the deconstruction of hegemonic morality through playing with language becomes the ethical reflection within the novel. Nabokov states that, for him: “[...] a work of fiction [...] affords [...] aesthetic bliss” (Nabokov 358). Words themselves, and how readers interpret them, come to determine the morality of readers for Nabokov. The interpretation of style, structure, symbols and puns alike spur readers into a state of deep thought that latches on to the emotional self. “Aesthetic bliss” for Nabokov comes to define a collective consciousness and state of being where individual readers are brought together under the common human emotions of “tenderness, kindness, ecstasy” through the catalyst of art (Nabokov 358). This for Nabokov is the norm or ethos of existence. Essentially this state of being, this collective consciousness, becomes the ethos of the community of readers. By this, I mean that ways of seeing the world of the text are defined by Nabokov’s concept of “aesthetic bliss”. It is thus not difficult to deduce that, for Nabokov, an

essential part of ethics is rooted in the linguistic, as words are the means through which he communicates art. Nafisi backs Nabokov's idea of morality when she says that “a novel is not moral in the usual sense of the word. It can be called moral when it shakes us out of our stupor and makes us confront the absolutes we believe in” (Nafisi 129). In this sense, the novel *Lolita* is a deeply moral work of art, flouting the structures of conventional morality. The candid discussions of taboo topics in minute detail become a way for Nabokov to open up debates on topics that society often avoids. He forces readers to confront their discomfort with taboo topics, but most importantly, by analysing the linguistic significance of the work of art, he forces them to confront why they feel resistance to taboo topics. This is what makes *Lolita* a significant work of high art.

On the linguistic significance of Nabokov's writing, Toker uses a threefold linguistic principle to describe the importance of poetics for the ethical relevance of *Lolita*:



Nabokov did not seek to influence the reader's ideology via direct sociopolitical or ethical theses in the plots or the idea-content of his works. He saw ethical value in aesthetic experience itself and created conditions for such experience on the part of their readers. These conditions can be discussed under three rubrics that redescribe some of the on record principles of Nabokov's poetics: vitality, refinement, and saturation (Toker 232).

In a straight forward manner in the afterword to the novel, Nabokov describes the resistance that publishers displayed towards the novel and named taboo topics as one of the core reasons for the novel's rejection: “[...] This, I suspect, is one of the reasons why not all the four firms read the type script to the end [...] Their refusal to buy the book was based not on the treatment of the theme but on the theme itself [...]” (Nabokov 357). For Nabokov, we find that the way people interpret the theme, even before engaging with the text, is his fundamental concern (Nabokov 357). He identified paedophilia and rape as the central reasons for resistance towards the novel. Ethical issues, particularly involving these potentially sensationalist themes, are thus placed under scrutiny. For Toker “aesthetic experience itself”, that linguistic rollercoaster which both appeases the reader's sense of artistic yearning in literature and appals the readers to their core

by dealing with sensitive taboo topics, provides the catalyst for reflections on ethical issues (Toker 232). It is a necessity to analyse Nabokov's literary devices. Toker describes "vitality" in these terms:

The vitality of Nabokov's prose style is a matter of the force of unforgettable single images [...] of the dynamism with which would-be static descriptions are transformed into accounts of the flow of the perceiving consciousness, and of the transformations of states of consciousness in the course of the same sentence or paragraph (Toker 233).

Toker attempts to show how the active and energetic imagination within individual images lends power to Nabokov's fiction. The example Toker gives is that of "Dolly Haze at tennis in *Lolita*" (Toker 233). On its own, and in the hands of a less talented author, such imagery might be a static and one-dimensional description of qualities of a character. However, Nabokov transforms these potentially static images into a depiction of the perceived consciousness and the changing states of consciousness of characters (Toker 233). Humbert recalls how:

[...] Lolita had a way of raising her bent left knee at the ample and springy start of the service cycle when there would develop and hang in the sun for a second a vital web of balance between toed foot, pristine armpit, burnished arm and far back-flung racket, as she smiled up with gleaming teeth at the small globe suspended so high in the zenith of the powerful and graceful cosmos she had created for the express purpose of falling upon it with a clean resounding crack of her golden whip (Nabokov 263).

The way in which Humbert describes Lolita at play is photographic in nature, creating for the reader a portrait of Lolita as happy when playing, suggesting a child-like innocence that contradicts his portrayal of her as a seductress. Just a few lines down from this, Humbert muses: "That I could have had all her strokes all her enchantments, immortalised in segments of celluloid, makes me moan to-day with frustration. They would have been so much more than snapshots I burned!" (Nabokov 263). A break in consciousness and a changing of consciousness too, is seen. Humbert attempts to preserve an image of Lolita innocently at play, contradicting his portrayal of her as a nymphet and indicating a break in his own consciousness. The desire for preservation of

the innocent Lolita also indicates Humbert's realisation that Lolita is a person beyond his solipsistic world, indicating a shift in realisation for his character. The succession of static images thus tracks the progression of Humbert's evolving and fluctuating consciousness and, ironically for a fairly mundane and static image, gives motion to the novel.

Ethically speaking, this literary device exemplifies Humbert's artistic crime in demonstrating the human condition of solipsisation. Lolita's description in static images shows how Humbert solipsises her into a photographically stagnant state. This effectively entraps Lolita as this particular image, immortalising her within this state. This is a cause for concern as Humbert's subjective opinion of Lolita is framed within the mind of a paedophile attempting to justify his abuse of a young girl, and this is seen by society as immoral. Taking this into account, Nabokov's "vitality" within his images is evidence of a paedophile solipsising his victim, forever capturing her in a static image to suit his abusive ends. Nabokov's linguistic devices are deeply ethical when analysed in a way that accounts for the psychological condition of Humbert.

Toker goes on to describe the second of the threefold linguistic principle, "refinement":

The principle of refinement is phrased negatively in Nabokov's on-record remarks: it consists in the exclusion of common, heavy-duty, ready-made tired forms of language and thought—except for parodic purposes (Toker 233).

In this instance, Toker refers to Nabokov's blatant derogatory use of frameworks such as anthropology and psychology to discourage readers from thinking in a certain way. Nabokov has famously cited his contempt for Freudian theories and set structures that are usually associated with certain genres of writing. When questioned by Appel about his contempt for psychoanalysis, Nabokov answered: "Let the credulous and vulgar continue to believe that all mental woes can be cured by a daily application of old Greek myths to their private parts. I really don't care" (Appel *An Interview With Vladimir Nabokov* 130). Nabokov's contempt for psychoanalysis is at one with his stance on other frameworks and genres that come to define styles of writing. As previously

mentioned, Nabokov discusses how these overused and formulaic ways of writing are detrimental to discursivity using pornography as an example of a set framework. He rejects pornography's aspiration to high art and describes how the static structure of this genre has come to define it. *Lolita* does not follow this trend. In fact, because the novel does not follow set trends, many feel disappointed and do not finish the novel. *Lolita* flouts this expectation to propose alternative views on morality, which alienate readers so that many readers tend, as Nabokov describes it, to "feel cheated (a mentality stemming from the routine of 'true' fairy tales in childhood)" (Nabokov 356).

Finally, Toker describes the third aspect of his linguistic principle, "saturation":

The saturation of the prose text consists in the richness of the semiotic and symbolic loads of meaning economically signaled by lexical choices, collocations, and recurrences [...] The effect of this feature of Nabokov's texts on the reader consists in creating a feeling of minor revelations waiting to happen, of the unexpected joy of epiphanies, of gratitude to other readers who facilitate the discoveries, and, not seldom, moments of shame at having overlooked clues, connections, allusions, challenges (Toker 233-234).

Toker alludes to a form of gratification that Nabokov offers with his play on words and puns. This makes up for the intertextuality, interdiscursivity, metaphors, symbolism and foreign language references which Nabokov employs, and which readers may misunderstand (Toker 233-234). The purposeful mocking of certain frameworks, and the misunderstandings that derive from this, gives readers a sense of being lied to as we progress through the novel. The literary device of "saturation" gives readers brief moments of realisation within the novel, thus providing hope that the entire plot is not lost in purposeful deceptions (Toker 233-234). In this way, readers do not totally disregard the novel as a work created to purposefully deceive. Instead, the reader finds small bursts of gratification upon discovering plays on words and meanings behind allusions. This gives the reader the illusion that they are still somewhat on par with the characters' and authors' (Nabokov, John Ray, Jnr. and Humbert's) mental capacity so that they do not feel, in Nabokov's words, "cheated" (Nabokov 356). "Saturation" also raises an important question about the theme

of the novel. At what point does the treatment of the theme end and the theme itself begin? “Saturation” provides “instant gratification” to readers and may imply an avoidance of plot, characterisation and narrative strategy that are often complex to comprehend. This implies that Nabokov keeps readers engaged even though they may not fully comprehend the “rich symbolic and semiotic loads” with which Nabokov weights the novel (Toker 233-234). Thus, “saturation” can be defined as a technique used by Nabokov to maintain readers’ attention even though they may misinterpret the complexities of his “aesthetic bliss”. It may also be a means to maintain readers’ interest in the hope that they will grasp the deeper ethical issues by the end of the novel. Interestingly, this may be a form of grooming by Nabokov in a way that paedophiles groom their victims. Copious amounts of time and energy are spent on making children susceptible to a paedophile’s desire, showing links between Nabokov’s way of writing and the deception that Humbert the paedophile employs. If this is the case, then Nabokov may be as deceitful and manipulative as Humbert, or as Quayle put it earlier in chapter one, “an ‘other-deceptive’ narrator” (Quayle 7). In terms of being deceptive and manipulative in writing a novel, however, it may be fair to describe Nabokov’s efforts as arrogant or elitist.

The style, imagery and puns Nabokov employs are a means of plotting not only key events within the novel, but they also represent the ethical question central to any novel: if we misunderstand a novel do we give up all hope of discovering the differing functions and alternative worldviews proposed by literature? For *Lolita* the implications of ignoring the misunderstandings we as readers find in the novel invariably means that we will misunderstand the trauma that the abused child experiences. This is yet another reason why that aspect of the novel is as effective emotionally on readers as are the grotesque themes at play within it. Toker describes the aesthetic effect of Nabokov’s literature thus: “The aesthetic effect of Nabokov’s works is based not only on matters of style and imagery but also on intricate and often witty structural patterns that

characterize both his plots and their episodic constituents” (Toker 234). Language games are woven intricately into the meaning, and by implication, the ethics of the novel. This makes the aesthetic of the novel a fundamental part of understanding the morals within the novel. To misread and misunderstand the novel’s intricate language is thus to misunderstand the traumas and moral actions of the abuser and the abused. It is not suggested that there is a single way of interpreting a novel. There are many different ways of understanding literature and likewise many different ways to misunderstand it. The important issue is that some will identify and sympathise with the paedophile while others come to abhor him. This brings to the table of debates an acknowledgment of differing ways of seeing the world. Though some may feel that paedophilia is abhorrent, acknowledging these views brings them to light, and does not suppress them as if they do not exist. This is what censorship does and may serve to magnify the problem, as suppression makes it impossible to address taboo topics and discuss crimes like rape and child sexual abuse. For Nabokov, educating our sensibility is key to understanding the human condition and all its intricacies. The understanding of the human condition itself comes with many ethical questions. To deny that *Lolita* has any moral in tow is a very literal and limited assessment of a novel that is so deeply concerned with ethics and morality. Certainly, readers who pick up a novel dealing with ethical matters intend, in some form, to engage with the questions they will read about. It is also a very natural response to seek answers to questions within a novel that appeals to a reader’s sense of curiosity. Devereaux elaborates on this by stating:

When we read a narrative, we read it in a particular way. We do not just take in the words and individual incidents. We typically find ourselves asking questions about what is going on; about why the characters and their motives are presented as they are; about the novel’s point of view. Thus, for example, we may ask what attitude *Lolita* takes toward Humbert Humbert’s pedophilia; what we as readers are to make of his predilection; and about the meaning or point of the narrative. This is part of what it *is* to read a narrative story (Devereaux 5-6).

Though it may be true that *Lolita* does not deal with ethics in the conventional manner—by explicitly discussing the issues of rape and child sexual abuse and instructively providing guidelines for the treatment of sex offenders—it does use art and language to exemplify how we as readers take for granted certain aspects of right and wrong. The novel becomes a way in which readers are able to gauge their own moral compass in comparison with the moral compass of the characters within a novel.

Speaking on Nabokov's aesthetic and artistic brand of ethics, Toker notes how similar it is to Immanuel Kant's perception of aesthetic experience: "By educating our senses we thus learn to admire the world around us with the kind of disinterestedness that Immanuel Kant held to be the sine qua non of aesthetic experience" (Toker 236). "[S]ine qua non" refers to a prerequisite, a universal and essential precondition for all aesthetic bliss. To admire the world with this form of disinterestedness is a way of becoming aware of, and aloof to, the delicate nuances that derive from it. This is *not* to say that we do not appreciate delicate nuances or aesthetic experiences. Devereaux compliments Toker's argument by referring to the Scottish philosopher David Hume as cited in Iris Murdoch's *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*: "[...] the novel provides the possibility of something like moral education. This education takes place by schooling the imagination and what Hume calls the sentiments: providing means for the reader's emotional engagement with the 'centers of reality which are remote to oneself.' So understood, the novel offers the possibility of understanding, empathy and tolerance" (Devereaux 8).

One may argue that disinterestedness or remoteness makes it much easier to see detail and nuance which a reading based on preconceived notions obstructs. For Nabokov this appears to be true, as he is a Russian author who reconstructs America from the viewpoint of an émigré. This enables Nabokov to stand both inside and outside of culture and language, affording him the freedoms to recreate, manipulate and transform cultures and worldviews. This is successfully achieved with

the alternative way he represents morals through the taboos in *Lolita*. Culler further backs Toker's idea of aesthetics by stating that

[a]esthetic objects, for Kant and other theorists, have a 'purposiveness without purpose'. There is a purposiveness to their construction: they are made so that their parts will work together towards some end. But the end is the work of art itself, pleasure in the work or pleasure occasioned by the work, not some external purpose. Practically, this means that to consider a text as literature is to ask about the contribution of its parts to the effect of the whole but not to take the work as primarily destined to accomplishing some purpose, such as informing or persuading us (Culler 34).

Culler's account of Kant's aesthetic supports Nabokov's notion of "aesthetic bliss" and how it is limiting to study a work of art for a particular purpose or for the purpose that the author may have in the construction of the novel. Through aesthetic bliss, Nabokov uses his position as outsider as a means to interrogate ethics in the novel, and by implication the taboos which he addresses, without importing preconceived notions attached to the culture that he writes about. Certainly, for Kant, in the absence of disinterestedness an aesthetic experience is not possible. In the presence of disinterestedness, an aesthetic experience is not a given as there may be other conditions which may need to be fulfilled. Human beings become naturalised into a way of experiencing situations and circumstances, which affords us unfeeling towards these occurrences and circumstances. The taboos in the novel are no exception. The disinterestedness is thus a prerequisite of an aesthetic experience without forcing an aesthetic experience to occur. Readers have often come to find themselves indifferent to the suffering of *Lolita* due to the skilful rhetoric of Humbert. Toker goes on to describe how "This aspect of [Nabokov's] art can be read as a protest against the near-universality of unconscious or deliberate callousness, one of the most widespread transnational cultural phenomena of the century in which he lived" (Toker 236). As if, in conversation with Kant's ideas of universality, Nabokov appears to be making a comment about the near-universality of unconscious or deliberate callousness towards taboo topics (Toker 236). It could be argued that the atrocities of World War II and the genocides that have occurred in this era inform

Nabokov's protest. We could also argue that Nabokov's writing is affected both consciously in the sense that his fiction discusses taboo topics, and subliminally as his aesthetic bliss and skilful rhetoric and language raise ethical issues in a most profound way, while avoiding the conventional prescriptive ethical writing that is usually associated with moral philosophy.

Conversing with both Toker and Nabokov on the idea of aesthetic experience and language, Devereaux discusses how an aesthetic experience is an essential part of ethical criticism because “[r]eaders cannot make a competent moral judgement about the text without engaging with the work’s literary form, with how its content is presented and structured. Why? Because in order to form a principled moral judgement about the *work* – whether it is morally good or bad, enlightening or demeaning—I need to determine what the values and commitments of the work itself are” (Devereaux 9). As previously discussed, Toker takes the position that individualism as opposed to a collective consciousness of morality is what Nabokov is most concerned with (Toker 237). In contrast to “rational individualism” Humbert is effectively solipsising and “actively violating” the individual’s identity by effectively erasing Lolita's own view of her traumas. In a further violation of her autonomy, Humbert commits this account into discursivity, effectively and “actively violat[ing]” Lolita each time the trauma is relived through its reading (Toker 237). Thus, “rational individualism” becomes a central ethical concern in the novel and interrogates readers’ complicity, complacency and perceptions towards their own ethics.

Upon further interrogation of the idea of “rational individualism”, Toker analyses the second category, those who solipsise, more thoroughly. It is my contention that Humbert not only belongs to the third category but also the second, for Humbert’s “experience challenges the reader to analyze their fundamental ethical misprisions or self-delusions” (Toker 237). The various allusions to Humbert's deception, both overtly by Humbert and covertly through cracks within his state of consciousness, show his untrustworthiness as both narrator and character. Furthermore, the

same “ethical misprisions” call the reader to assess his or her own acceptance of Humbert's abuses when misreading and misinterpreting the novel’s intricate wordplay (Toker 237). Humbert's self-delusion causes readers to reflect on their own disengagement from ethics as a result of temporarily being complacent about or aloof from his abuse of Lolita.

3) Taboos: The World of the Text and the World Outside of the Text

While Humbert appears to be an abhorrent figure, readers should not simply dismiss this as a discussion of taboo topics in an imagined world. The text acts as a catalyst to discuss these issues in the world outside of the text and to reflect on a truth that all human beings experience. This is arguably what Nabokov refers to as the “[...] sense of being [...] connected with other states of being” (Nabokov 358). Fiction is thus a catalyst that uses imagination, untruths, fairytales and folklore in order to discuss real world referents, not so much reality as a truth that is universally experienced by individuals. Aesthetic bliss is partly a form of social bonding while simultaneously connecting individuals who remain separate entities in their own right. Culler describes the notion of the self as a subject in his chapter “Identity, identification and the subject”. He states that “[...] the subject is an actor or agent, a free subjectivity that does things, as in the ‘subject of a sentence’. But the subject is also *subjected*, determined [...]’ the subject of an experiment’. Theory is inclined to argue that to be a subject at all is to be subjected to various regimes” (Culler 110). The idea of the human “self” becomes a central notion that is reflected upon in fiction. Meditations, analysis and discussions of “the self” are still important, as no community within aesthetic bliss can exist without the individuals who comprise it. This makes the individual an essential component in the discussion of fiction. The human condition of emotion and feeling common to all people is brought into question within fiction. We identify common characteristics that we have with other people and at the same time identify an individualism in thought and reasoning. Fiction reflects on these notions and causes us as readers to critically assess these aspects of human nature.

What makes Nabokov different, and this novel more repugnant to readers, is that he unashamedly allows Humbert to shape his own world into an esoteric space controlled by perverse desires. This allows readers to experience a truth about paedophilia and rape that other fictions treat in a less complex manner or which they prudishly shy away from so as not to alienate readers. Humbert represents Nabokov's idea of human individual rationalism more closely.

For Appel, the main objective of Nabokov's fiction is not concern about the overtly scandalous themes of taboo topics, but rather the reflections on the self that derive from the reader's interpretations and feelings towards taboo topics. For Appel:

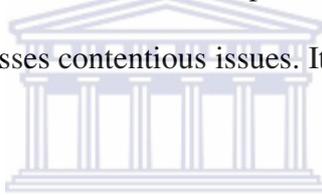
The reader who can follow the process of involution and calmly play the games effected by parody, and realize their implications, will not worry whether Nabokov "approves" or "disapproves" of his characters. What is extraordinary about *Lolita* is not the presence or absence of the author's "moral position," but the way in which Nabokov enlists us, against our will, on Humbert's side [...] Nabokov purposely takes a shocking subject in *Lolita*, and when we are sympathetic to Humbert, Nabokov has successfully expanded our potential for compassion, and has demonstrated that the certainty of our moral feelings is far more tenuous than we ever care to admit (Appel "Lolita': The Springboard of Parody" 224-225).

Through fiction, Nabokov demonstrates to readers how similar we are to Humbert, in the sense that we all identify with common emotions as human beings. This is where the importance of ethics in fiction lies for Nabokov. It is the goal of Nabokov's fiction to "demonstrate [...] that the certainty of our moral feelings is far more tenuous than we ever care to admit" (Appel "Lolita': The Springboard of Parody" 224-225). The effect that Nabokov's fiction has on the reader's ethos thus extends beyond the pages to touch them in the world outside of the text by challenging their sense of understanding and leading us to empathise with the emotions and human conditions that these taboo topics inspire. The complex nature of morality in fiction is further acknowledged by Appel where he discusses how moral doctrines within fiction may themselves be ambiguous and manipulative. This, as Appel describes it, is part of the impressive game that Nabokov plays with rhetoric and language, as the irony that derives from this causes us as readers to reflect on our own

longing for release from culpability, both in the world inside the text and the world outside it. To demonstrate this, Appel poses the following argument: “Because Lolita seduces Humbert she might seem to be the agent of immorality, but the irony is another trap in the game: [...] it does not mitigate [...] that Humbert has denied Lolita her youth, whatever its qualities may be [...]” (Appel “*Lolita*: The Springboard of Parody” 224-225). If Lolita is seen as seducing Humbert, readers may feel no guilt for empathising with Humbert. However, the very willingness of readers to accept this point of view exemplifies how easily readers are willing to accept “release from culpability”, regardless of Humbert's lengthy abuse of Lolita. Though it does not “mitigate” Humbert's abuse of Lolita, it is an easier way for readers to avoid the ensuing guilt of identifying with the emotions of a paedophile and rapist (Appel “*Lolita*: The Springboard of Parody” 224-225). Thus, the “rhetoric of morality” and the ensuing irony within it encourage moral reflection that readers are called to critically analyse. The essential message that Appel attempts to make clear is that *Lolita* does not attempt to provide a structured and ready solution to moral problems within society. Nabokov's fiction does not denounce any dealing with morality. Instead, he asserts that his fiction is not morally instructive in any way. By this, Nabokov means that his fiction does not create any moral imperatives about how to see the world, instead Nabokov asserts that the efforts that he put into creating the novel is not “didactic” in nature (Appel “*Lolita*: The Springboard of Parody” 224-225). Fiction is thus far less of an instructive model than it is a descriptive model of the world outside of the text. Often this description is distorted, not to minimise occurrences of rape, incest and paedophilia in the world outside of the text, but to propose alternative ways of seeing an established ethos and worldviews. Ideally, this allows readers to review old, hegemonic ideas of morality.

Conclusion

The fear and shame associated with taboo topics in society determined *Lolita*'s undesirability at a time when taboo discourses were seen to corrupt the morality of communities. The prudery with which older generations have regarded literature has been replaced with a freedom to discuss contentious issues in a safe and constructive environment that advances the study of literature as opposed to hindering it. Censors who propose to protect the public morality from possible corruption only aid in hindering the education of the masses when they ban or place sanctions on literature that does not infringe on basic human rights. In an age that has reverence for freedom of speech and the need to discuss and learn from formerly taboo topics, the older way of learning our morality through association from parents and institutions is now being aided by our education which discusses contentious issues. It is now common practice to interrogate accepted truths.



The taboos in *Lolita* address sensitive issues such as paedophilia, rape and molestation of a young girl, which in today's society, with its focus on protecting children's rights, are seen as abhorrent and this raises uncomfortable issues. However, the breaking of the central tenet of parenthood—protection of a child—is a legitimate area of concern for society as it is still a prominent crime within our communities. Thus, breaking central tenets of parenthood require discussions and education around all of its nuances. Implicitly, our morality, ethics and ethos will be interrogated as well. This is an important reflection for society as it interrogates ethical absolutisms that create boundaries between communities. Discussions of taboos allow for various perceptions on morality to be debated, and by so doing, may promote a more inclusive approach to morality and ethics.

It is not for the reader to attempt to identify the author's moral position in the fiction he creates. Instead, it is for the reader to interrogate their own learned morality, and by implication, assess whether the absolutes that define society at a given time are valid beliefs—that is beliefs that have acquired the kind of persuasive strength associated with a valid argument—that should be accepted and followed unquestioningly. *Lolita* allows the reader to do this through subtle breaks in consciousness and a distinct lack of voice from certain characters. This creates a space where self-realisation within the fiction makes possible the education of the reader, a more constructive and long lasting form of education.

Readers who are not as perceptive to the subtle morals in the novel have made up the readership that detests it. The controversy around the novel alludes to a deeper contestation than merely discussing taboo issues: if the learned morality of prudish readers' is to be questioned and proven obsolete or ridiculous, then the ethical basis for all readers' moral convictions may be questioned. It is due to the novel's covert and nuanced manner in proposing subtle lessons and morals, that misreading has led to its ban.

This thesis does not claim that frameworks such as the law are completely inept, incompetent or inappropriate when it comes to matters concerning high art. Perhaps it is more fitting to look at the law as being set in old ways, and without proper consultation, it may be ill-adapted to govern high art in an ever-evolving society. Older laws should be adapted to consider secularisation—a world that has evolved into a more liberal and freedom-orientated space. Discussing taboos is no longer seen as an abomination to society and its morals, but more a secular and alternative approach to seeing the world. Open discussions about taboos are becoming increasingly popular and acceptable in modern society. High art should indeed be held to standards that conform to the legal protection of society. However, fiction that does not impede human rights should be allowed to speak its own truths freely. It is essential that language, and practitioners of language, have equal

influence in consultation with the law in order to govern high art. The role of language, and its interpretation, is thus of fundamental importance.

For Nabokov, morality in fiction is something that is intimately and intricately entwined in the complexities and nuances of language itself. Language causes readers to reflect on rational individualism, and the perspectives that ethics and morality bring to literature. In this sense, language and the text become a reflection on ethics, bridging a gap between the world of the text and the world outside of the text. It is not so much the acts of paedophilia, rape and murder that Nabokov wishes to focus on. For Nabokov, these are merely themes used to discuss deeper matters. Little wonder that during the court case on the banning of *Lolita* in New Zealand, the judge concluded that: “It would not be true to say that any publication dealing with sexual relations is obscene. The relations of the sexes are, of course, legitimate matters for discussion everywhere” (Davis 771).

What the judge in the court proceedings makes clear is that it is difficult to ascertain a particular standard of what is acceptable or unacceptable, desirable or undesirable at any given time in society. This is due to the ever-changing nature of society and the individual rationalism of the members who make up this society. Fiction does not necessarily promote taboo issues by discussing them, it generally creates debates around these issues which are necessary for their evaluation in an ever-evolving society. The banning or sanctification of individual works of art, whether textual or graphic, that do not impinge on human rights thus becomes an illegitimate sanction against a form of expression which holds the potential to generate debates and discussions. A South African example of this is the case of the Jacob Zuma painting, *The Spear*, which depicted the president with his genitals exposed. This garnered offence from a group of South African citizens, specifically members of the ANC, and a defamation lawsuit ensued. Despite the painting offending the sensibilities of a few, the Film and Publication Appeal Tribunal

removed all restrictions of access to the paintings publication on the grounds that many flawed arguments were considered in the classification of the image, and that a ruling that banned the image violates of the rights of publishers.

The idea of the unreliable narrator in fiction is very important as it allows for readers and guardians of social morality, they being the duty-bearers who ensure freedoms and rights for society, to realise that fiction is a genre that safely discusses taboos without fear that it may corrupt readers. Readers' complicity with older discourses that claim that fiction that addresses taboos merely inspire latent desires to experience the taboos is the reason that education through fiction is being hindered. *Lolita* forces us to examine ways in which we take our learned morality and ethics for granted. Without fully understanding why, we follow unquestioningly these guidelines on what "ought to be". This is a dangerous endeavour to undertake, because if we allow ourselves to become complicit in what powerful figures such as censors prescribe us to read, then we run the risk of blindly accepting what they offer to us as truths.

Another previously banned novel by George Orwell, *1984*, expresses the idea of censorship of the arts. The novel is set in a world where the government rules every aspect of community life. Food, thought, words, deeds and even emotions are dictated and governed by police forces. Reflecting on the restructuring of language and the censorship of words by the government, one character muses:

Don't you see the whole aim of [censorship] is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. Every concept that can ever be needed will be expressed by exactly *one* word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten [...] Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller [...] The whole literature of the past will have been destroyed. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron—they will exist only in [censored] versions, not merely changed into something different, but actually changed into something contradictory of what they use to be [...] How could you have a slogan like "freedom is slavery" when the concept of freedom has been abolished? (Orwell 55-56).

To ban or sanctify is to limit art's ability to create in people the capacity for self-reflection, education, and cognitive freedom. The role of these grotesque and taboo topics in Nabokov's fiction is to promote a deeper reflection on ethics and ethos, a reflection on individual readers themselves and their shared emotions. It is through these reflections that Nabokov's fiction achieves its main purpose: to call into question, through taboo topics discussed in fiction, the notion that ethics, morality, ethos and worldviews are homogenous and universal. There is no single way of reading and interpreting texts, likewise for ways of seeing the world. Nabokov comes to exemplify, through language, the fallacy that fiction promotes its themes for its own sake, or that we as humans see, accept and describe our world in static, homogenised or universal terms.



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