

A Parody of Psychoanalysis in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

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Abstract- In *Lolita* (1955), Nabokov is playing a game with all his readers. Who do you think the winner is and what the game is all about? Nabokov who is a brilliant author wants to criticise Freud and his theory of psychoanalysis. He wants to rebel against Freud and his ideas. This paper aims to show you how successful Nabokov was in conveying his own ideas. We want to see whether or not psychoanalysis can be rejected by the help of Nabokov using a parody and trying to put psychoanalysis three key concepts: sexuality, memory, and interpretation into questioning. In this attempt, Nabokov takes a journey from conscious to unconscious and guides the readers with himself through this journey. He shows them symbols which may not represent real symbols, and simple characters which may not be that simple and plain; characters which have a wound in their Superegos and a dark side in their Ids and Egos.

Keywords- Freud; psychoanalysis; Parody; sexuality; conscious; unconscious; symbolism; Id; Ego; Superego.

"It was love at first sight, at last sight, at ever and ever sight."

--Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

Humbert Humbert who is the main character of *Lolita* (1955) is a middle-aged European scholar who has obsessive love and desire for 'nymphets', or attractive, charming, and sexually mature young girls. He narrates his confession and wants his readers to judge him. He uses a charming language that could melt the heart of the most callous readers. But, the astute and clever readers from the very beginning of the novel will likely notice how connected with Freud's psychoanalytic theory it really is. Although the theme of *Lolita* may at first glance seem rather unpleasant, there is, in fact, Nabokov's attempt to criticise Freud by imitative use of his words, attitude, and ideas behind it. This essay aims to study how Vladimir Nabokov, with *Lolita* as a psychoanalytical parody, attacks the very foundation of Freud's theory and tries to show whether or not psychoanalysis can be thoroughly rejected.

First of all, we should define psychoanalysis to get you a better understanding of its concepts. Then, you as a reader will be able to recognise them in the context of *Lolita*. Freud (1856-1939) as the father of psychoanalysis, believes that behind adults' problems are what happened to them when they were children. Freud's theory, psychoanalysis, suggested new ways of understanding, amongst other things, love, hate, childhood, family relations, sexuality, the conflicting emotions, and etc. that make up our daily lives. As Thurschwell says, three key concepts are necessary when you want to interpret Freud: "sexuality, memory and interpretation" (2). Psychoanalysis shows how these three apparently different terms are connected with each other.

In order to show this connection between psychoanalysis's three concepts, Freud divided mind into the conscious mind and the unconscious mind. He says that "psychoanalysis regarded everything mental as being

in the first instance unconscious; the further quality of "consciousness" might also be present, or again it might be absent." As he states, "in mental life nothing has once been formed can be perished – [...] everything is somehow preserved and in suitable circumstances it can be brought to light" (qtd. In Thurschwell 4). So the unconscious is like a storehouse, a repository, or a place for socially unacceptable ideas, wishes or desires, traumatic memories, and painful emotions. Although childhood memories can be erased from consciousness, they can still live on in unconscious life. But, what is the relationship between unconscious and a literary work?

In Freud's psychoanalytic view, the unconscious can only be recognised by its effects. He believes, when memories and certain psychological experiences are imprisoned in the unconscious, the symptoms arose (Freud 246). And when we study these symptoms in the context of *Lolita*, we are actually applying some techniques of psychoanalysis in interpreting literature which is called "psychoanalytic criticism." There is a two-sided concoction between psychology and literature. As stated by Dastmard et al., "human's soul makes the literature and literature nourishes human's soul" (9420). When we read a literary work it is the ideas and the author's unconscious behind it. Surprenant also believes that "Psychoanalytic literary criticism does not constitute a unified field." But, to some extent, literature can be fundamentally related to the psyche (200). Therefore, literary texts, like dreams, can explicit the author's personal unconscious desires and concerns. But, this is not what Nabokov agrees with.

Nabokov who is a brilliant author used to detest Freud and his ideas. In an interview form the National Educational Television network conducted with Vladimir Nabokov, when the reporter asked him why he detested Dr Freud, he said,

*I think he's crude, I think he's medieval,
and I don't want an elderly gentleman*

from Vienna with an umbrella inflicting his dreams upon me. I don't have the dreams that he discusses in his books. I don't see umbrellas in my dreams. Or balloons. I think that the creative artist is an exile in his study, in his bedroom, in the circle of his lamplight. He's quite alone there; he's the lone wolf. (The New York Times)

Hence, in *Lolita*, psychoanalysis, and Freud himself are actually targets of Nabokov's parody. But, what is a parody?

According to Cuddon Dictionary, parody is the imitative use of the words, style, attitude, tone, and ideas of someone else in such a way to make them ridiculous. And this is usually achieved by exaggerating certain traits, using more or less the same techniques (640). In *Lolita*, As a matter of fact, Nabokov uses parody in different ways. He enjoys playing games with his readers. You as a reader are supposed to discover the meanings. As James D. Hardy and Ann Martin explain, "In *Lolita*, he [Nabokov] presented several paradigms to "help" the reader." And when the reader knows about Freud and his theory of psychoanalysis, he will "succeed at this game." Hardy also adds, "If you were a Freudian, the text would work for you on that level." (33-34). Nabokov himself used to loathe Dr Freud. He detested the imagination of the "Viennese medicine man" (Nabokov 182). But, what you see and read from the very beginning of the story is exactly based on Freud's ideas. In the first sentence of the novel the "fire of loins" is compared to the "light of life." And Further, "Freud's concern with childhood would explain Humbert's adolescent, and permanent, passion" (Hardy and Ann Martin 34). If he loathes Freud, why should he write a story based on Freud's theory?

In fact, Nabokov knows that many of his readers are well aware of the symbols of psychoanalysis, but he tries to address even the "unbiased readers". Those who know about the "standardized symbols of the psychoanalytic racket" (Nabokov 190), will use Freud's theories to interpret the novel and predict their conclusions. But as Falk states, "Nabokov is trying to resist the idea that everything can be explained or predicted by psychoanalysis" (18). This is stressed in the foreword which states that "a great work of art is of course always original, and thus by its very nature should come as a more or less shocking surprise" (Ray 4), showing that art should not be forecasted and it is not even possible. Psychoanalysis may cause trouble for "the autonomy of the artist and the magic of art" (qtd. In Ingham 28), and this is the limitation which Nabokov rebels against, through his parody. For Nabokov, parody is a tool to compensate the problems and threats that psychoanalysis demands. Nabokov makes the novel as a case study that tries to solve a problem of taboo sexual materials and he aims to connect it to the Freud. And according to what Baruxis said, "*Lolita* would not have been *Lolita* without Freud" (24).

As mentioned before, the book is framed as a case history. Appel suggests that "Nabokov parodies the case study by giving Humbert a childhood trauma" (qtd. In Falk 20). Humbert Humbert, the protagonist, was born in 1910 in Paris. His mother died when he was three years old, so his aunt, Sybil, took care of him. However, he lived happily until he was a young boy. Up to thirteen years old, he was just a usual boy, like other children who liked to play and had lots of joy, but then at that time, his father went to take a trip to Italy with Madame de R. Although it was not stated how long his father was gone, but indeed led Humbert in loneliness and confusion, because he was also living in a boarding school, so that his communication with his father did not happen every day. Thus, it made him have no one to share things he wanted to tell because Humbert did not tell the reader whether he had friends or not in the boarding school.

So we could see that Humbert had lost his parents since childhood. His mother died when he was 3, and his father left him in a boarding school. Being left by parents can be a traumatic event for children like what is stated below:

Trauma can have a serious effect on babies and toddlers. Many people wrongly believe that babies do not notice or remember traumatic events. In fact, anything that affects older children and adults in a family can also affect a baby. Traumatic and life-threatening events may include incidents such as car accidents, bushfires, and sudden illness, traumatic death in the family, crime, abuse or violence. (Better Health Channel)

Even new-borns until two years old can notice the traumatic events happen to them, let alone Humbert who was 3 years old when his mother died. In his *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (1917), Freud states that "children will be soon having bliss in their sleeps after having fed by their mothers" (270). So, the point here is by the death of his mother, Humbert was lack of affection from the mother. By his parents' leaving, his opportunity to know about sex education since childhood was lessened. But, what is its effect on Humbert?

As Freud says "children should be held out, convinced, and directed into controlling their sexual instinct" (358). His father indeed gave him sex education. "Later, in his delightful debonair manner, my father gave me all the information he thought I needed about sex" (Nabokov 6). But later on at that time, when Humbert needs someone to consult with and complain to, his father has gone. Therefore, he could not share his confusion and experiences about sex. Thus, in the result, he found Annabel in the state of puberty. "All at once we were madly, clumsily, shamelessly, agonizingly in love with each other" (7). But the worst thing is that Annabel died when he had just found his joyfulness. "I was on my knees, and on the point of possessing my darling, when two

bearded bathers, the old man of the sea and his brother, came out of the sea with exclamations of ribald encouragement, and four months later she died of typhus in Corfu" (8). It is clear that Humbert had experienced another traumatic event related to grief. Here, Humbert was stuck because of the grief and trauma he had regarding what happened with Anabel. And this trauma is the cause of his attraction to nymphets, and in fact, the whole "case study" is rather over-simplistic and could be seen as a way for Nabokov to highlight and intensify what can be considered to be the ridiculous aspects of psychoanalysis.

Furthermore, Humbert refers to "the able psychiatrist who studies my case" (109) and predicts that he will expect him to be driven by some deep urge or compulsion, take Lolita to the seaside, and there, find release from his "subconscious obsession" (109). Humbert is always thinking and doing things earlier than his readers' expectations, and it is not because of some subconscious drive, but by a thoroughly reasonable purpose on his own part. And while Humbert narrates his story, he attacks more and more Freud and his ideas. For example, while Humbert is trying to find Lolita's abductor, tells us how he "pulled the pistol's foreskin back, and then enjoyed the orgasm of the crushed trigger." He then asserts that "[he] was always a good little follower of the Viennese medicine man" (Nabokov 182). Playing with his Freudian readers, Humbert says:

*Sometimes I attempt to kill in my dreams.
But do you know what happens? For
instance I hold a gun. For instance I aim
at a bland, quietly interested enemy. Oh,
I press the trigger all right, but one
bullet after another feebly drops on the
floor from the sheepish muzzle. In those
dreams, my only thought is to conceal
the fiasco from my foe, who is slowly
growing annoyed.* (Nabokov 31)

Later in the novel, Humbert states, "we must remember that a pistol is the Freudian symbol of the Ur-father's central forelimb" (142). And even when Humbert first encounters Quilty at the Enchanted Hunters, he describes him as "staring at my Lolita over his dead cigar and stale newspaper" (92), which is an obvious allusion to Freud. Humbert even takes one more step and calls himself "King Sigmund the Second" (83), and reveals his love of fooling doctors, which he discovers when he admitted to a psychiatric hospital:

*I discovered there was an endless source
of robust enjoyment in trifling with
psychiatrists: cunningly leading them
on; never letting them see that you know
all the tricks of the trade; inventing for
them elaborate dreams, pure classics in
style (which make them, the dream-
extortionists, dream and wake up
shrieking); teasing them with fake
"primal scenes"; and never allowing*

*them the slightest glimpse of one's real
sexual predicament.* (22)

In this passage, Humbert is like Nabokov's substitute, and the psychiatrists are like his readers, keen to analyze and interpret him and his text. "Just as Humbert takes pleasure in playing tricks on his psychiatrists, Nabokov enjoys teasing and leading his readers on, right into his carefully placed traps" (Falk 19). Furthermore, the way Nabokov makes his narrative reminds the reader again of his fictionality.

In order to remind the readers of *Lolita*'s fictionality, Nabokov does not want them to think of *Lolita* as a case study. But if you do so, you will find it more and more similar to Freud's "Dora case." Due to similarities that can be found, it seems to be a link between these two cases. Firstly, Lolita's real name is Dolores. Although it is not exactly like Dora, it reminds the readers of her. In addition, Lolita was in the same age as Dora when she meets Humbert. As Mahony says, "Dora was only thirteen when she was first sexually abused by Herr K" (qtd. In Falk 20). Herr K's advances continued; however, Dora's father pretended not to notice the situation, and Dora felt that her father was giving her to Herr K. Mahony explains, "Freud took the side of Herr K., stating that the best for everyone concerned would be for Dora to give in to Herr K's advances and to marry him" (qtd. In Falk 20). And in *Lolita*, as you see, Humbert wants to be alone with Lolita as her husband. He could not stay simply with Charlotte as a good husband and for Lolita as a good father. Ingham is like Mahony who believes, *Lolita* is based on, parodying the Dora case. He suggests that Humbert represents Dora's father, Quilty Herr K., and, naturally, Lolita represents Dora (43). For example, Dora takes care of her father when he is ill (Mahony 7); similarly, Lolita answers needs of Humbert. Therefore, he and Herr K. are very much alike.

Moreover, Humbert is just like Herr K. a middle-aged man, who is attracted to nymphets. They both believe their targets invite them to continue and advance their relationships. There is also a very similar scene in *Lolita* which is observed by Ingham. He says when Dora was fifteen years old, Herr K in a wooded area near a lake, directly tells her that he would like to have an affair with her, an experience which traumatized her (43). Similarly, Humbert is planning to seduce Lolita into the woods near a Lake, in order to have "a quiet little orgy" (Nabokov 35). He also believes that not only Quilty represents Herr K. but also Freud himself. Yet, why should a character in Nabokov's novel represent Freud, when he detests him?

Although Nabokov loathes Freud, "Humbert suspiciously resembles a model of the Freudian id," as Hardy suggests, "surging irrepressibly toward erotic passion and equally erotic death" (100). According to this theory, which is perhaps Freud's most appealing psychoanalytic idea, there is 3 human psychical equipment that can be classified as "Id" "Ego" and "Superego". Barry says, "The Id is the source of all psychic energy which follows instinctive urges. Between the Id and Superego,

there is the “Ego” which is the voice of reason and rationality. The Superego is an extreme version of the Ego” (131). And as Suprenant states, “the Superego strives towards an unattainable human perfection” (26). For Humbert, the loss of Annabel opens a vulnerable wound in his unconscious:

We loved each other with a premature love, marked by a fierceness that so often destroys adult lives. I was a strong lad and survived; but the poison was in the wound, and the wound remained ever open, and soon I found myself maturing amid a civilization which allows a man of twenty-five to court a girl of sixteen but not a girl of twelve. (Nabokov 15)

But, Humbert consciously has the knowledge of the wound which is created by his first love and loss of his sweetheart, Annabel. He reminds readers of his mother again and claims to have no clear memory of her. And a Freudian reader expects this. Humbert relationship with his mother is very vague to readers. He mentions that “Save for a pocket of warmth in the darkest past, nothing of her subsists within the hollows and dells of memory...” (6). She is simply a “pocket of warmth” for him. Hence, he takes Annabel, like a magical object of fantasy, which distinguishes between ego and his parental objects, to protect him from the law of the father. He consciously shows everything repressed in his Id and indirectly attacks psychoanalysis which is as already mentioned by Surprenant, “the idea that literature is fundamentally entwined with the author’s psyche” (200).

In addition to Humbert’s embodiment of the Freudian’s Id, as a character, he is both powerful and simple. Humbert represents Freud, who in his own way abused Dora, through writing and publishing in 1905 the case history (*Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*), in which he makes her older, and “forces his patriarchal, phallogocentric interpretations on her” (Mahony 35). Nabokov makes Humbert apart from his stable character, someone who is well aware of the fact that time will change his Lolita. Humbert himself praises the relationship of time and love: “I knew I had fallen in love with Lolita forever; but I also knew she would not be Lolita forever. She would be thirteen on January 1. In two years or so she would cease being a nymphet...” (Nabokov 43). And as Hardy states, Nabokov’s presentation of love in *Lolita* keeps a distance from all explanations which are given by modern psychology and sociology, which tend towards “symptoms, clinical conditions, and natural selection” (42).

Additionally, it seems that Freud instead of treating Dora is trying to make her case fit into theories on hysteria. And therefore, he is moulding her to suit his own needs. Like Freud, Humbert has an unrealistic picture of Lolita, which is not based on the real Dolores. He is aware of hysteria’s symptoms. According to Thurschwell “hysteria’s symptoms vary: They can include amnesia, paralysis, unexplained pains, loss of speech, hallucination,

psychogenic fever and etc.” (16). And Humbert just like Freud describes Lolita as someone who is suffering from hysteria and particularly psychogenic fever:

I was passionately parched; but she began to whimper in an unusually dreary way when I attempted to fondle her. Lolita ill. Lolita dying. Her skin was scalding hot! [...] Hysterical little nymphs might, I knew, run up all kinds of temperature [...] she was shaking from head to toe. (Nabokov 158)

Finally, he does not want to cure her. What he wants is to only complete his notes for his later memoir and to fulfil his own desires. In writing his confession, or memoir, he shows her as his fantasies. Hence, he shapes her in a way that is appropriate to his dreams. He does not realise the harm he is doing to Lolita. This is again showing the multiple layers of Humbert. A side of him, which is unknown to those who want to apply Freud’s psychoanalysis theory. A dark side of him.

So what about Humbert’s dark side? Although he may be in his own point of view a good-looking and handsome man who has a Ph.D., he is also a self-professed madman. His world is full of fantasies and violent impulses. He suffers from insomnia and paranoia. He is made of two selves:

No wonder, then, that my adult life during the European period of my existence proved monstrously twofold. Overtly, I had so-called normal relationships with a number of terrestrial women [...] I was consumed by hell-furnace of localized lust for every passing nymphet whom as a law-abiding poltroon I never dared approach. (Nabokov 11)

In the beginning, Humbert tries to keep Lolita’s purity, “Humbert Humbert tried hard to be good. Really and truly, he did” (12), but eventually he gives in to an absolute lust. As Humbert sees it, Lolita is aware of her sexuality, “for little Lo was aware of that glow of hers” (105). To Humbert, Lolita is a fantasy, but by fulfilling his fantasy, he also ruins it, like touching a butterfly that may destroy its wings. In the selfish pursuit of his romantic ideal, Humbert disregards the ‘real’ Lolita and the consequences of his actions. As Freud disregards Dora who was able of turning down Herr K.

Here, Nabokov was aware of the fact that psychoanalysis can show authors’ suppressed desires. So, he vigilantly made a parody of it. Although his *Lolita* rejects some aspects of psychoanalysis, as Fisher and Greenberg (1977), in a review of the literature, conclude that “psychoanalytic theory cannot be accepted or rejected as a package,” it cannot be thoroughly rejected. “It is a complete structure consisting of many parts, some of which should be accepted, others rejected and the others at least partially reshaped” (59). Nabokov rejects psychoanalysis in his *Lolita*’s case, but he fails to reject it

in other cases, like Dora's. He entered a maze in which he is playing only in vain.

This leads to the general conclusion that Freudian literary analysis is, fundamentally, unhelpful, but not thoroughly. Nabokov uses parody to rebel against psychoanalysis and Freud's ideas. He creates an imaginary character as Humbert Humbert, imitates the style and ideas of Freud, puts Humbert in a traumatic event and leads him to a way that is based on Freud and his ideas. There are many references to Freud in the story that makes it more and more connected with him. But, Nabokov is actually playing a game with all the readers who try to interpret the story based on Freud's theory of psychoanalysis. He consciously uses symbolism and makes his characters to fool all the Freudian readers. Even now, nearly a half-century after the novel's publication, most readers are losing the game and they cannot find their true way, through this artistic maze of Nabokov. The parody lets Nabokov fight against the idea that everything must mean something, or have a symbolic value. It is also a way for him to rebel against psychoanalysis which reduces art to the artists' repressed desires and wishes, which threatens their creative freedom. Yes, he uses a parody that seeks its originality; a parody that moves towards parody and even beyond a parody.

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