

Compromising and Complicating the Normativity in *Lolita*

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Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* shocked and appalled its American audience upon its publication in 1955. In its blurring of the fine line that separates "normal" sexual behavior from "deviance," *Lolita* touched, and still touches, a peculiarly American nerve. Another work that examined the boundary between abnormal and normal sexual activity was Alfred Kinsey's controversial scientific surveys of sexual behavior among men and women, published in 1948 and 1953. These studies, the so-called "Kinsey reports," also raised a furor in 1950s America. Both Kinsey and Nabokov essentially challenged myths about the presumed "innocence," or sexual naiveté, of American women.

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Although *Lolita* is presented through the eyes of a pedophile who sees her as an American Eve, the novel appropriates the language and scientific perspective of the Kinsey reports to undercut this mythological view of her. While Humbert presents *Lolita*'s sexuality as deviant or precocious, Nabokov invokes (albeit parodically) statistical, scientific studies of female sexuality similar to the Kinsey reports; the effect of this perspective is to suggest that *Lolita*'s sexuality is in fact "normal." Failing to recognize this scientific view of *Lolita*, clearly represented in the novel, critics sometimes see *Lolita* exclusively from Humbert's perspective—as an archetypal temptress, a modern-day femme fatale. Indeed, critics have sometimes conflated Humbert's view of *Lolita* with Nabokov's, ignoring the ways in which Humbert's mythologizing of *Lolita* and his construction of her sexual deviance is one of Nabokov's many targets in *Lolita*.

For example, in a survey of the trend of reviews and criticism of *Lolita* shortly after its 1955 publication, Todd Bayma and Gary Fine found that the majority of critics shared Humbert Humbert's misogynistic interpretation of *Lolita*. They note, "By arguments similar to those used by convicted rapists in order to view themselves as non-rapists, reviewers depicted Dolores Haze as both morally unworthy and at least partly responsible for her [End Page 87] own victimization" (167). The way Nabokov deconstructs Humbert's myths about *Lolita*'s perversity eluded these reviewers, who ultimately adopted, rather than condemned, Humbert's view of *Lolita*. Some contemporary feminist critics have also, I believe, misjudged the novel, erroneously conflating Humbert's view of *Lolita* with Nabokov's. Linda Kauffman, for example, argues that

"the novel allegorizes Woman" and feels as though Nabokov "elides the female by framing the narrative through Humbert's angle of vision"(64-65). It is not the novel, I would suggest, that "allegorizes Woman," but Humbert. And Humbert's "angle of vision" is not the only one we have of Lolita, although it predominates. Nabokov, I suggest, utilizes the sexology that was so controversial in the 1950s to suggest an alternative interpretation of Lolita, one which views her not as a special, nymph-like girl already perverted before Humbert exploits her, but rather as an ordinary, juvenile girl whose "normal" sexual development is warped by a maniacal, myth-making pedophile. By interrogating the boundary between sexual "deviance" and "normality," Nabokov's Lolita, like Alfred Kinsey's studies, exposes cultural myths, like the Edenic one Humbert Humbert creates, that turn "normal" sexual behavior into "deviance." In giving us not only the misogynistic, mythical perspective of Humbert for Lolita's sexual behavior, but also that of the new science of sexology, which normalized supposedly deviant behavior, Nabokov exposes the volatility of the subjective, social constructs of "deviance" and "normality."(3)

Lolita poses the question of how a woman's sexual awakening should be viewed. Specifically, through what interpretive or epistemological frame should readers view Lolita's sexuality—through what Humbert and myth tell us, or through a more prosaic lens? Through conscious and obsessive allusions to the Garden of Eden, Humbert creates a distinctly Edenic framework, an epistemology, for interpreting Lolita and her troubling sexuality. If we accept Humbert's epistemology, Lolita, like Eve, is culpable for her fall from innocence, and her fall from sexual ignorance becomes a mark of innate depravity.

But Nabokov provides (without endorsing) an alternative interpretive framework [End Page 88] for understanding Lolita's sexuality. Modern science, or, more specifically, sexology, provides a competing epistemology by which to understand Lolita's sexuality. The science of sexology undermines Humbert's Edenic perspective of Lolita and establishes her behavior and development as normal. Rather than being a nymphomaniac who seduces

Humbert Humbert, from this perspective she becomes a normally developing young woman who is exploited by an imaginative man who ironically sees her as the deviant. In highlighting Humbert's ironic interpretation of Lolita as deviant (and himself as "helpless as Adam") and showcasing his clever arguments about the normalcy of his own apparently deviant behavior, Nabokov suggests that the concepts of "deviance" and "normalcy" are disturbingly fluid, contingent upon our social perspective, and shaped by our own prejudices and desires.

From Humbert's literary and mythic perspective, Lolita is a modern avatar of a long line of wayward, deviant women. From the perspective of Alfred Kinsey and other "sexologists" of Lolita's day, she is a normally developing female experimenting with her sexuality. By providing us sporadically with such a perspective—albeit through the exaggerating lens of parody—Nabokov forces readers to reconsider Lolita's apparent deviancy and exposes the myths by which Humbert and many critics turn Lolita into a deviant "nymphet."

While Humbert sees a "twilight" in Lolita, there is also an important dawn of sexuality in her that must not be overlooked. And it is Lolita's awakened sexuality that enables Humbert, and some

critics who concurred with his sophisms, to cast her as a "fallen" woman even before he first has intercourse with her.

While Lolita's juvenile experiences could be viewed as an awakening, Humbert sees her experience as a mark of depravity. Soon after Humbert justifies his exploitation of Lolita with the trump in his deck of rationalizations—"it was she who seduced me" (132)—Lolita reveals to Humbert, as Humbert [End Page 93] puts it, "the way she had been debauched" (135). For Humbert, Lolita is the experienced temptress. And yet Lolita's frank discussion of sexuality suggests not so much a fallen woman as a girl who confuses, or is unable to distinguish, natural sexual experimentation with sexual perversity. Ironically, Lolita seems naively eager to teach, rather than seduce, Humbert. Clearly, she is negotiating in her own mind the meaning of what normal development of human sexuality constitutes. Humbert notes, for example, her preoccupation with the "proper" or "normal" technique of loving: "It was very curious the way she considered—and kept doing so for a long time—all caresses except kisses on the mouth or the stark act of love either 'romantic slosh' or 'abnormal'" (133). Lolita, like Humbert, has her own ideas about what constitutes normal, as opposed to abnormal, sexual behavior. A moment later, Lolita assumes the role of Humbert's sexual instructor, appalled that he has not had her "normal" experiences. Lolita insists upon "teaching" Humbert, and Humbert interprets Lolita's apparently precocious knowledge of human sexuality as a mark of "hopeless" depravity caused by "modern co-education" (133).

Lolita's juvenile sexual experiences, which, for Humbert, are evidences of her "depravity," can be viewed, in light of such contemporaneous studies as Kinsey's 1953 *The Sexual Behavior of the Human Female*, as the normal sexual awakening and sex play of girls Lolita's age (barring her experience with Humbert, of course). From Humbert's perspective, though, it is essential to establish Lolita's experiences as utterly perverse so that he can feel exonerated from the charge of perverting her; consequently, he uses Lolita's account of her juvenile sex life to justify his own innocence. She makes explicit sexual confessions to Humbert—talking to him, it seems, almost as one juvenile girl confiding in another. She begins with a tale about a girl named Elizabeth Talbot, Lolita's tent-mate at a summer camp.

Humbert tells us that Elizabeth "instructed her in various manipulations," an ambiguous experience that Humbert interprets as "sapphic diversions" (136). What is more interesting to Humbert, he tells us, is Lolita's "heterosexual experience" (136), which he neatly summarizes for us: "Well, the Miranda twins had shared the same bed for years, and Donald Scott, who was the dumbest boy in the school, had done it with Hazel Smith in his uncle's garage, and Kenneth Knight—who was the [End Page 94] brightest—used to exhibit himself wherever and whenever he had the chance [...]" (136-37). What we see is that Lolita's experiences are not unique, strange, or exceptional. Sexual experimentation (including homosexual experience and exhibitionism) is here placed, by Lolita, in the context of normal sexual development. Seeing her behavior in context raises the question of whether Lolita is really, as Humbert argues, a specially depraved, fallen child. Humbert denounces the new generation as sexually precocious, compared with his own.

And yet looking back on his own exploits with Annabel, we see that he too, like David Knight, exhibited himself; he too, like Charlie Holmes, absconded into the woods to discover his sexuality. So Humbert's experiences, despite his profession that he is "naïve as only a pervert can be" (25), complement, rather than distinguish themselves from, Lolita's descriptions of the sex play and encounters of her classmates. Her reference to the Miranda twins is also telling: the allusion to the Shakespearean heroine connects Lolita with a character who is the quintessence of juvenile discovery. Lolita, like Shakespeare's Miranda, is discovering a brave new world. Her encounters with Charlie are spurred by curiosity, "to try what it was like" (137), and not, as Humbert proposes, by some intrinsic depravity congruent with her status as "nymphet." By placing Lolita's "experience" alongside those of her peers, Nabokov begins the process of blurring the clear line Humbert has tried to draw between normal sexual behavior and Lolita's precocious, deviant, nymph-like sexuality.

In this sense, the novel is like Alfred Kinsey's reports, which challenged prevailing notions of "deviance" by showing how prevalent and widespread such behavior was among large groups of the American populace—among them, to the shock of the American public, supposedly chaste married women and young, juvenile girls. In a section on "Pre-Adolescent Sexual Development," for instance, Kinsey reported that "14 per cent of all the females in our sample [...] recalled that they had reached orgasm either in masturbation or in their sexual contacts with other children or older persons [...]" (105).

The statistics on "Pre-Adolescent Heterosexual Play" were even more striking: "15 per cent had had sex play only with boys, 18 per cent had had it only with girls, and another 15 per cent had had it with both boys and girls" (108). When viewed in such a context, a pre-adolescent girl's sexual experimentation with other girls and boys might seem less like special indications of depravity than part of a pattern of sexual activity among a sizable group. Although these and other findings were later called into question and were perhaps compromised by the dubious representativeness of Kinsey's sample, the popular impact they had made Americans reconsider the question of "normal" sexual behavior. In particular, the reports threatened myths about [End Page 95] sudden "falls" into womanhood and instantaneous "loss of innocence." It is just such a myth that Humbert creates to justify his exploitation of Lolita.

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