A Psychoanalytic Perspective on *Lolita*

Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Lolita* is littered with references to psychoanalysis. Though Nabokov was outspoken about his disdain for Freud and psychoanalysis he created characters who can be understood through a psychoanalytic interpretation. Humbert Humbert’s sexual preference for prepubescent girls is rife with opportunities for psychoanalytic interpretation. *Lolita*, it has been suggested, is a proxy for Dora from Freud’s case study *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*. Nabokov also included conscious nods to Freud, parodying the psychoanalytic process. He makes references to the primal scene, dream interpretation, and the stages of psychosexual development. The existence of Freudian archetypes and tropes alongside his obvious criticism within the narrative make for a dynamic reading of the novel.

The relationship between Lolita and Humbert evokes the case study of Freud’s patient, Dora. Dora, much like Lolita, is a young prepubescent girl who tells Freud of a family friend named Herr K., who makes sexual advances on her. One of Freud’s conclusions about this is that Dora has ambivalent feelings towards Herr K., with some degree of attraction toward him. In *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, Freud interprets a dream Dora has about a jewel-case, which he believes is representative of the female genitals, and that Dora wants to give Herr K. her jewel-case: “The dream confirms what I already told you before you dreamed it—that you are summoning up your old love for your father in order to protect yourself against your love for Herr K.” (86). Much like in *Lolita*, the young girl desires an older man who is making sexual overtures towards her and, similarly the reader is told of the girl’s desire not by the girl herself, but by a man who claims to know her mind. From what we see of Lolita, she
seems also to be ambivalent towards Humbert as well, making her escape from him with Clare Quilty later in the novel, after an earlier failed attempt to get away, but also engaging in numerous sex acts with him. Humbert is the parallel to Herr K. and both have a father-figure role in their respective scenarios. In Dora’s case, Freud says that when her father appears in her dreams he is actually standing in for Herr K. He notes a “parallel line of thoughts” (86) when discussing her dream of her father standing beside her bed and a moment that actually occurred in which Herr K. was standing beside her bed. Humbert, in marrying Lolita’s mother becomes Lolita’s stepfather. John M. Ingham also notes similarities between the two in his article “Primal Scene and Misreading in Nabokov’s Lolita,” and additionally includes Clare Quilty as another parallel for Herr K. The author states,

In *Lolita*, Humbert, Quilty, and Lolita take the place of Dora’s father, Herr K. and Dora...Humbert admits to being impotent in his dreams; similarly, Dora suspects that her father is impotent. Dora wants her father to rescue her from Herr K., whereas Humbert sees himself as saving Lolita from Quilty. (43)

The article goes on to enumerate connections between Dora and Lolita and water or wetness: Dora wets her bed, Lolita is in the mushroom classroom at the Beardsley School, Lolita and Humbert encounter thunderstorms and showers during their drives. Humbert, when speaking to the jury talks about the “hot wet private acts of sexual deviation” of men like him who want to have relations with a “girl-child,” and while visiting his “daughter” at school in the mushroom class, Humbert has her “put her inky, chalky, red-knuckled hand under [his] desk.” For Freud wetness is associated with sexuality. In Dora’s case of bedwetting, he comments, “Bed-wetting of this kind has, to
the best of my knowledge, no more likely cause than masturbation...” (Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria, 91). It is obvious that both Nabokov and Freud are linking wetness to sex and the various references to water in Lolita keep this linkage in the fore of the reader’s mind. These various connections between Lolita, Humbert, and Quilty to Dora and Herr K. are numerous and striking in their clarity.

This relationship between father figure, mother, and daughter brings up notions about the preoedipal phase. Freud, in Sexuality and the Psychology of Love, states that “the pre-Oedipus phase in women is more important than we have hitherto supposed,” (185). The preoedipal phase is defined by an attachment to the mother, who, Freud believes, is the first love-object of both male and female children. During the preoedipal stage the mother is seen as being the source of the superego, or one’s conscience, which keeps us in line with societal norms. Since this preoedipal stage is so important in the development of female sexuality, it can be argued that Lolita’s relationship to her mother is also important, helping us understand the basis for her relationships with men, Humbert in particular. Lolita’s relationship with her mother, Charlotte, is abruptly cut short when Charlotte dies after being struck and killed by a car. Lolita has not fully formed her super-ego and thus develops what Freud would term a sexual “perversion.” She continues on with the relationship with Humbert, and then later has another relationship with Clare Quilty, with whom she says she was in love. Both of these relationships are also examples of Lolita attempting to move on to the next phase in her sexual development, where Freud says that “the original mother-object has to be exchanged for the father,” (Sexuality and the Psychology of Love, 184). As noted earlier, both Humbert and Quilty are representative of father figures and Lolita is moving
to the Oedipus stage by having relationships with them, though the relationships are inappropriate because of the sudden ending of her relationship with her mother. Since all of these relationships occur so early in Lolita’s life she is also unable to get through the latency phase (one of Freud’s five stages of psychosexual development) without interruption. In Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, Freud describes what he sees to be the cause of sexual precocity: “It is manifested in the interruption, abbreviation or bringing to an end of the infantile period of latency...” (106). When the latency phase is interrupted, as Lolita’s was by several events—her mother’s death, moving away from her home, living with and becoming dependent upon Humbert as her father—one becomes sexually precocious. This explains the first sexual encounter she has with Humbert, which, so far as we know, is initiated by Lolita. Humbert speaks of the moment it begins, saying, “not a trace of modesty did I perceive in this beautiful hardly formed young girl...” Since Lolita is so comfortable with sex acts at an early age she can be seen as still dealing with issues arising during the preoedipal, Oedipal and latency stages of her psychosexual development.

Humbert can be analyzed in much the same way, looking at a similar traumatic event having to do with his mother. He briefly discusses some family history, first about his mother who, “died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three, and, save for a pocket of warmth in the darkest past, nothing of her subsists within the hollows and dells of memory...” (4). He then also recounts a story about his mother’s sister Sybil, who had a very brief sexual encounter with his father, with whom she was in love. Humbert says he was fond of this aunt, another Oedipal scene within the text. Here the aunt has taken the place of Humbert’s mother after her death, as a sort of mother figure.
whom Humbert desires in place of his real mother. This thought is echoed by John M. Ingham as he explains, “More than thirty years ago, the anthropologist L. R. Hiatt (1967) showed in [American Imago] that Nabokov gives Humbert an Oedipus complex and, more precisely, that Nabokov has him trying to recover the ‘pristine’ relationship with the mother through pedophilia.” So by looking at the relationship Humbert was unable to have with his mother, we can see that his relationships with young girls are an attempt to regain that pure kind of love. But Humbert clearly has a “perversion” in much the same way as Lolita. His preoedipal attachment to his mother continued on well into adulthood and this interrupted the formation of his superego. This manifests differently in Humbert than it does in Lolita, though as it becomes clear that he was not sexually precocious at a young age like she was. His issues arise in reference to his particular view of himself. Warren Holt, in a post on the blog Other/Wise titled “Humbert, Nabokov and the Ego Ideal,” posits that Humbert “would retreat to a state similar to that of primary narcissism, seeking only maternal symbiosis to affirm his omnipotent fantasies. Humbert seems to have developed an idealized self-image...” This sheds light on the grandiose language he uses in his narration of the story, his possessiveness of Lolita, and his sense of superiority and of being above the law. In the novel we see him committing various crimes, even outside his most disturbing act—pedophilia—for which he defends himself to the last, laying much of the responsibility on Lolita. In addition, Humbert kidnaps Lolita after the death of her mother and then kills Clare Quilty with no sense of remorse or concern about the consequences. His narcissism stems from his undeveloped superego, which was unable to form because of the severed tie with his mother so early in his life.
The loss of Humbert’s mother also indicates the idea of the primal scene, which is also mockingly referenced by the main character when he goes to see a psychiatrist. The primal scene, according to Freud, is when a child witnesses a sex act for the first time, generally between his parents. This is thought to traumatize the child and furthermore affect his psychosexual development, leading to perversions later on in his life. There is no primal scene in the novel to speak of, but it can be argued that Humbert has difficulty accepting parental intimacy, much like the child in the primal scene scenario. When speaking of his mother’s death he also recounts the story of his mother’s sister and his father sleeping together once. This aunt was someone Humbert was fond of and who cared for him after his mother’s death, thus becoming a mother figure to him. Those who are traumatized by the primal scene may look to recover a relationship with the mother. Ingham argues that their “perverse scenarios may restage the primal scene with the aim of eliminating the father and recovering an idealized relation with the mother,” (“Primal Scene and Misreading in Nabokov’s Lolita”, 29). This is another instance in which we can look at Humbert’s experiences with Lolita as an act of attempting to reclaim his relationship with his lost mother. Part of his perversion, his attraction to young girls seems to be in their innocence and unadulterated nature. These girls, particularly Annabel Leigh and most significantly, Lolita, become surrogate mother figures because he sees his relationships with them as pure. It is for this reason that he must defend what he does so vehemently and the story must be told from his point of view because Humbert has constructed a world around himself in which he is the protagonist and he stands blameless. Ingham echoes this point as he states that a, “male with strong inclinations toward perverse eroticism may fabricate a false,
pregenital phallus and an artful world of his own,” (29). So the primal scene, as interpreted through Humbert’s father and aunt has had a profound effect on his sense of himself and his sexual development, as can be seen in his relations with prepubescent girls.

Throughout *Lolita*, Nabokov makes conscious references to Freud and psychoanalysis, parodying it and disparaging it. After looking closely at some of the characters and situations in the novel that so clearly mirror psychoanalytic themes, it is interesting to see the author’s outwardly negative attitude towards the practice. Humbert embodies Nabokov’s disdain for psychiatrists. In chapter 9 Humbert goes in for treatment for “melancholia and a sense of insufferable oppression” and realizes he need not take the treatment seriously. He says,

> 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)

This scene is an outright statement about the ludicrousness of the practice, obviously the opinion of the main character, and quite likely that of the author. Nabokov was outspoken about his distaste for psychoanalysis and he worked it into many scenes. In analyzing why Nabokov had such contempt for psychoanalysis, Leland De La Durantaye in his article “Vladimir Nabokov and Freud, or a Particular Problem” explains, “[Nabokov] makes explicit in a French interview what he will never state in so many
Psychoanalysis has something very Bolshevik about it—an inner policing . . . symbols killing the individual dream, the thing itself,” (61). Nabokov’s fear, it seemed was that Freud would invade his stories and tyrannically take them over, putting everything into a rigid order that would no longer allow for the art to come through. Bolsheviks like Lenin had strict policies about art and literature, believing that all art had to be party propaganda. Nabokov’s fears about such totalitarian policies are themes that come up in his work, some critics even suggesting that the entirety of Lolita may be an extended metaphor or allegory of the tyrannical communism that took over in Russia during Nabokov’s childhood. While this seems like a stretch, there are no doubt elements in the story—like Humbert’s oppressive rule of Lolita and his egomaniacal sense of righteousness—that equate him with the Bolshevik communists in power at the time Nabokov fled his native country.

His fears about Freud taking over the story may have come true, as so many readings of Lolita have found psychoanalytic principles throughout. Along with them, the presence of Freud himself is felt in the novel, as someone it is reacting against. Ingham discusses in his article Jeffrey Berman’s assertion that Freud is the actual antagonist of the story, rather than Clare Quilty. Going a step further, Ingham says “I suggest that Quilty is Freud. He is the invasive psychoanalyst who subjects his patient to prurient interpretations,” (“Primal Scene and Misreading in Nabokov’s Lolita”, 61). It seems too simple that Nabokov would have a one-to-one correlation between the character of Quilty and Freud. There are a few other scenes in which other characters play the role of the psychiatrist, most notably the actual psychiatrists Humbert visits and Miss Pratt, the Headmistress of Beardsley College, who tells Humbert that Lolita is shuttling
“between the anal and genital zones of development,” (138). All of these characters evoke the spirit of Freud and parody him in some way. It seems much more useful to the story and much more fitting to say that Quilty is largely a creation of Humbert’s mind, a figure on whom he projects so much of himself. The odd conversation that takes place between the two at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel in which Humbert thinks he is hearing Quilty say things he didn’t actually say (he thinks Quilty has asked “Where the Devil did you get her?” but when asked to repeat himself he says, “I said: the weather is getting better.”) shows that a certain sense of Quilty is being constructed in Humbert’s mind. Humbert projects his fears of being found out and of losing Lolita onto him and Quilty stalks him like a conscience (“another Humbert was avidly following Humbert”) while they are on the road. When Humbert reunites with Lolita many years later and he learns that Quilty had planned to have Lolita star in pornographic films, this seems to be the culmination of seeing the worst of himself and what he could have become in this man. So, it seems that even in his parodies of Freud, Nabokov uses psychoanalysis in his creation of the representative characters. The duality of the nature of psychoanalysis in the text, both explicit and implicit, conscious and subconscious, gives the novel a layer of tension and interest that would not be there if not for Nabokov’s misgivings about psychoanalysis.

The role of psychoanalysis in Lolita is a complicated one, reflecting Nabokov’s condemnation for the practice and his wish to showcase what he believed to be its weaknesses. The novel is full of preoedipal and Oedipal complexes and references to perversions, the primal scene, and Freud himself. There is no simple reading of this text and the way that psychoanalytic elements work within the plot must be appreciated on
two levels at one time. Whether Nabokov wished it so or not, Freud haunts his text and can be found both above and below the surface from beginning to end.
Works Cited


