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Theoretical Critique

Lit 115

Lolita the Proletariat: A Marxist-Feminist Analysis of *Lolita*

Though more controversial in America for its sexual nature, *Lolita* can be read as a criticism of the capitalist system. Vladimir Nabokov uses the relationship between the novel's narrator, Humbert Humbert, and the novel's namesake, Lolita, as an extended metaphor to showcase the system's inherent exploitive nature in a way that shocks the reader out of her false consciousness—by making the former a man in the position of power (the bourgeois/owner), a repulsive, manipulative pedophile, and the latter a young female victim (the proletariat/worker), and a spoiled, vapid brat. Each is to the other nothing more than a commodity, and both exhibit gluttonous commodity fetishism—Lolita, the perfect little American consumer; Humbert Humbert, a man of privilege who views others only as objects to be used, or consumed.

Humbert Humbert is the ultimate representation of the privileged bourgeoisie. Firstly, as the narrator of the novel, he has complete power over what the audience sees of the story, and what they don't see. He is white, and of the privileged sex. His background is purely upper-class: his father owned a resort hotel on the Riviera, and he was constantly surrounded by its rich patrons. He was educated in an English day school as a boy, then a *lycée* (the second stage of secondary education in France) in Lyon, before attending college in both London and Paris. He studied English literature, and is a master of language. Language is an important tool in his manipulation of those around him (as well as the reader)—he dazzles with his clever wordplay and the random insertion of French, German, and sometimes Latin into his speech. After Lolita's mother, Charlotte, dies, Humbert Humbert spins a beautiful tale of an affair with her to her two closest friends, John and Jean Farlow. By the end of it,

Jean is convinced that Humbert Humbert is Lolita's real father (101), though it was only implied in his story. Due to the deeply ingrained hierarchical power the upper-classes have in American culture, those of a lower class tend not to question Humbert Humbert because they assume he must be more knowledgeable than they are. When John Farlow suggest going straight to Lolita's camp to tell her of the horrible news himself, Humbert Humbert argues that doing so might psychologically upset her and "react on her future." John simply replies, "Well, you are the doctor" (101). However, Humbert Humbert is arrogant. He holds himself above all others except when he's trying to charm the reader with his false modesty—but it is transparent. By making his narrator so vulgarly arrogant, Nabokov is stripping the bourgeoisie, leaving it fully exposed, on display. The reader becomes disenchanted with Humbert Humbert, and thus, the charmed bourgeoisie he represents.

Humbert Humbert arrives in Ramsdale with an annual allowance of some means from a deceased rich American uncle. Lolita is instantly taken with his Hollywood good-looks. She was raised in a middle class house, where putting on airs of being wealthier and more sophisticated than one truly is—traits which Humbert Humbert actually possesses—by a single, uninterested mother. Lolita is by nature at the bottom of the hierarchy because of her sex and her age (and the fact that the reader only sees her through the narrator's gaze), but her consumerism makes her repression all the more difficult to overcome. She is "a modern child, an avid reader of movie magazines, an expert in dream-slow close-ups," (49) which gave her unrealistic expectations of love's value and places her squarely, a priori of Humbert's efforts, in the object position. Lolita finds solace in material things, objects with no true use-value: movies, movie magazines, stylish clothes, etc., and throws tantrums on a regular basis. She had thrown one such tantrum after her friend fell ill and their lake picnic had to be postponed, refusing to go to church with her mother as a result (5); however, "any wearable purchase worked wonders" on her mood (64). Her conspicuous consumerism paired with her bratty behavior puts her in poor esteem with the reader. Suddenly one becomes aware of one's own consumer habits, and finding those traits Lolita possesses in oneself leaves the reader in an elevated state of agitation. Consumerism becomes

the dominant factor in Humbert Humbert's manipulation of Lolita. It begins with him using magazines and popular songs to forge a connection with her, and not long after coming to know her, he begins to get the notion that she might be bribed (53).

To Humbert Humbert, Lolita is not a person—she is what he refers to as a "nymphet," a devil-child whose "true nature...is not human" (16) put on this earth to satisfy his dark sexual needs. To Humbert Humbert, Lolita *is* a commodity. In fact, as has been suggested (by a reader of this essay in draft form), the term "nymphet" itself could be read as a sort of brand name. From the start of their relationship's transition from friendly lodger and land lady's daughter to the incestuous one of predator stepfather and enslaved stepdaughter, Humbert Humbert sets a standard of trade on their relations. He transubstantiates Lolita's body into something that has an exchange value by first showering her with gifts, a "treasure box" of new clothes, before raping her for the first time (120). The exchanges of material goods (gifts, trips, etc.) for sex continues for two and some years; on their long and winding road trip, Humbert Humbert stops at whatever tourist attraction Lolita wants to see, just "to keep [his] companion in passable humor from kiss to kiss" (154). He will bring her coffee to bed, "and then deny it until she [has] done her morning duty" (164-165). After "a particularly violent morning in bed," Humbert Humbert would reward, or "pay" Lolita by letting her visit an attraction on her own (159-160). These material gifts were soon given in addition to actual monetary payment, an "allowance, paid to her under the condition she fulfill her basic obligations" (183). Humbert Humbert "might...demand an additional kiss, or even a whole collection of assorted caresses, when [he] knew she coveted very badly some item" (184). It becomes apparent to the reader that the bourgeoisie are vile and self-serving, with no regard for anything other than themselves and their own profit, as does the reader's role as the proletariat. She sees that she's kept distracted by her own consumerism, that she's kept submissively working by the belief that she needs to earn a wage in order to buy products which serve no valuable purpose.

Soon, Humbert Humbert goes under a kind of commodification in Lolita's eyes: she sees him

only as his perversion and his perversion as a way to earn money. She is "a cruel negotiator," raising the price for sex to "three and even four bucks" (184). But she is still the proletariat in their relationship, Humbert still holding the hegemonic role. Humbert Humbert claims she was able to raise her prices because he "could not obtain [her body/his sexual needs] by force" (183), but like all systems of labor-power, even though their exchange is given under the guise of a consensual contractual relationship, Lolita is actually forced into the agreement by lack of any other option. And, like a true capitalist, when given the chance, Humbert Humbert takes back the money he gives Lolita, and in showing his true power over her "[brings] prices down drastically" because he is afraid that "she might accumulate sufficient cash to run away" (184). The reader's identification with Lolita reaches its zenith, as she finds further parallels to her own life and socioeconomic situation in this horrifying, unfair arrangement. She no longer resents the brat consumer, Lolita, but wants to help her break free.

Eventually Lolita does run away, into the care of another perverted old man, Quilty, though this time on her own terms. However, when she does not fulfill his needs—starring in one of his pornographic films with a group of people—he disposes of (fires) her, without a thought, as if she were a broken toaster oven (276). Within the text, there is no move toward resolution or revolution. Lolita ends up working in various restaurants for two years, before marrying and moving into a "clapboard shack" (269). Humbert Humbert, with a guilty conscience and the awareness that he's going to jail for murder, gives her, her husband, and unborn child four thousand dollars. Alas, she dies while birthing her stillborn daughter and never gets to enjoy it. This could be read as a symbol of the fruitlessness of the capitalist system. However, the reader's eyes have been opened to the corruptive and exploitive nature of capitalism, to her own consumer habits and how they add to the problem while only furthering her own repression. What she does with this new enlightenment is up to her, but the more of this knowledge that can be passed through literature the more likely we are to move toward an equal society—if not socialist, than something closely related to it.

Works Cited

Nabokov, Vladimir V, and Alfred Appel. *The Annotated Lolita*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.

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