2000

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https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-mqdn-6990

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Narrative Mastery and Representational Violence

in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

Elizabeth Weston

2000
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Approved, July 2000

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the dynamics of the narrative voice and structure of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. It examines the ways in which the narrator—Humbert Humbert—constructs his account of his experiences with Dolores Haze. He names her “Lolita” and defines her as a nymphet; by representing her as a powerful seductress, he imposes an otherworldly and adult identity upon her. If readers accept this portrayal of her, Humbert’s attempt to justify his mistreatment of her—the kidnapping, rape, and violence—threatens to succeed.

Yet Nabokov undermines Humbert’s narrative mastery in a variety of ways: framing devices that distance readers from the text, metafictional moments that erode our sense of his narrative as immediate and authentic, and the sense that Humbert is constantly attempting to manipulate our image of him. But most of all, the text allows and even encourages the reader’s awareness of Dolores Haze’s suffering; glimpses of her experience threaten to tear through Humbert’s narrative of self-justification.

Ultimately, his narrative cannot contain her. He does not view Dolores as a human being, and so his narrative only offers a highly constructed, stylized image of her. His narrative does not try to represent her actual experience as a human being, and it is also incapable of doing so, as Nabokov’s novel illustrates. Dolores, as an adult woman, necessarily exceeds Humbert’s narrative. The parts of the novel that narrate her captivity illustrate Humbert’s inability to represent her, and the parts that chronicle her escape illustrate his ultimate inability to contain her. In Nabokov’s novel, not recognizing a person’s humanity leads to a failure in narrative, and Humbert’s narrative failings point to the violence of his attempts to control and represent her. The novel *Lolita* illustrates the potential violence inherent in the process of representation itself, and as it critiques Humbert’s narrative it critiques any attempt to use narrative to perpetrate or justify violence.
Narrative Mastery and Representational Violence

in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*
In *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov has designed a text which interrogates the process of reading itself, one that requires that we consistently revise our reading strategies to adapt to the turns of the text. Encountering the novel involves engaging narrative perspectives that reveal themselves to be limited, such as John Ray’s introductory remarks and Humbert Humbert’s narrative as a whole, both of which seek narrative mastery of the account in that they seek to control how it is interpreted, and both of which ultimately reveal their limitations. Humbert’s voice has a strongly seductive pull, yet his perspective breaks down when the reader recognizes the cruelty that underlies that voice, and the way in which his narrative contains and consumes Dolores.¹ His narrative attempts to control her body and perspective in a way that mirrors his more literal predation on her. But the novel as a whole, if read not partially but with attention to all its dimensions— aesthetic bliss, puzzle-solving, and its potential to create an empathetic sense of the poignancy of the characters whose experience it details—is larger than Humbert’s perspective. The novel is a lesson in different modes of reading, but one which does not privilege one mode over the others. Rather, it insists on keeping them all in simultaneous play, to create a world in which Humbert does have some mastery, but one that also ultimately contains him and one that yields Dolores’s escape.

The multiplicity of ways in which a reader engages a narrative and the difficulties of navigating fictional worlds are consistent concerns
throughout the body of Nabokov's work. Because of *Lolita*’s subject matter, it is sometimes treated as a case apart. But Nabokov’s other novels frequently contain deranged or monstrous narrators, and also generate puzzling narratives for the reader to negotiate. The tools that characterize Nabokov’s craft--the games, shifting planes, and distorting mirrors--undermine the reader’s attempt to find a solid footing. The presence of these tricks and devices reminds us, on a conscious level, that we are not in concrete worlds that function in a plainly realistic way; these designs must have a designer or creator who always remains visible beyond his creation. In his novels, Nabokov inserts traces of authorial presence, which seem to insist on authorial control of the text. His own comments on art confirm this sense of the relationship between the writer and writing as one of a godlike creator manipulating his creatures.

Narratives become an account of characters’ attempts to navigate and interpret their worlds; narratives are also often the structures that mystify and contain characters. Critic Julia Bader describes this recurrence of trapped characters in Nabokov’s fiction: “Nabokov locks his characters into prisons or cages of various shapes and designs; the author and the reader share a perception of the patterns invisible to the characters within” (Bader 7-8). In this view, the reader becomes aligned with the author, both of whom have access to the overarching patterns and structures that the character may perceive only in fragments. Or the reader can become aligned with the trapped character, adrift in a puzzling world of signs and clues, the synthetic meanings of which are only available to a larger perspective. Lucy Maddox offers this kind of reading: “Nabokov’s people are consistently
frustrated by the sense of living on the edge of meaning, of being part of a complicated pattern that they get only glimpses of but that must surely make wonderful sense to someone, somewhere” (1). These two perspectives, that of readerly alignment with a controlling author or of identification with a trapped character, seem to correspond with the distinction between the reader who has formed a coherent and clarified interpretation of the novel as a whole and the reader who is still learning to negotiate the dynamics of the text. Nabokov’s texts may not allow the first state of readership to materialize, as they seem to value the process of reading and revision of one’s interpretations as an infinitely fruitful process. The second state may actually be desirable to prolong, as rereading and revision of one’s reading strategies can be valuable in themselves. In this second view, the reader’s experience, as well as that of the characters, is to try to figure out the author’s puzzles and sometimes to become entangled in his webs, snares, and spells.

These two ways of reading Nabokov are applicable to Lolita, as they are to his entire oeuvre. Reading Lolita involves entering into its world of shifting referential systems, detecting the significances of traces of authorial presence, sifting through narrators’ perspectives, as well as reading simultaneously on intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional levels. Yet Lolita is often read as more than—or other than—a typical Nabokovian novel. The text seems to lend itself to some troubling readings, which sometimes find themselves in the position of deflecting attention away from rape and pedophilia, or implicitly justifying Humbert’s actions.

Early reviews of the novel set the tone for later perceptions that
deflect attention away from Dolores as a vulnerable child. For instance, John Hollander portrays her as a “modern femme fatale” (560), a category of adult womanhood that involves agency and the ability to manipulate, even though even Humbert does not conceal the fact that Dolores is a child. He also describes *Lolita* as a tribute to the romantic novel, which he describes as “a today-unattainable literary object as short-loved of beauty as it is long of memory” (560). He romanticizes Humbert’s narrative, characterizing it as trafficking in notions of transient beauty and nostalgia.

Lionel Trilling’s discussion of the novel also effectively treats Dolores as an adult woman, and participates in the tradition of using a woman’s prior sexual experience as justification of rape. He accepts Humbert’s portrayal of her as shallow, and implies that such shallowness mitigates the seriousness of Humbert’s violation of her:

> Perhaps his depravity is the easier to accept when we learn that he deals with a Lolita who is not innocent, and who seems to have very few emotions to be violated; and I suppose we naturally incline to be lenient to a rapist—legally and by intention H.H. is that—who eventually feels a deathless devotion to his victim! (14)

Like many readers and critics, Trilling accepts Humbert’s declaration of love as genuine, and as in some way compensating for rape. His famous comments about the novel as love story prescriptively establish a tradition of focusing on Humbert’s experience and the erasure of Dolores’: “*Lolita* is about love. . *Lolita* is not about sex, but about love. Almost every page sets forth some explicit erotic emotion or some overt erotic action and still it is not about sex. It is about love” (15). Even though he has referred to
Humbert as a rapist, Trilling romanticizes his desire.

Like Trilling, Howard Nemerov also sees her prior sexual experience as having a bearing on the import of what Humbert does to her. He says that “...Lolita, at the age of twelve, turns out to have been thoroughly corrupted already. ...” (320), as if Humbert’s violation of her would have mattered far more if she had been entirely inexperienced. He also implies that Humbert’s suffering—as his narrative presents it—has a potentially redemptive effect: “if Humbert Humbert is a wicked man, and he is, he gets punished for it in the end. Also in the middle. And at the beginning” (312). This perspective seems to overemphasize Humbert’s suffering, and it is exactly how Humbert wishes us to react to his narrative, as he seeks to earn our sympathy by representing himself as a desperate, tortured figure. And of course the question of whether or not Humbert gets away with anything has little bearing on the question of how his violation affects Dolores, so this kind of reading also erases her experience from the text.

Some later readings of the novel, as well as its manifestations in popular culture, continue deflect attention away from what actually happens to Dolores, or suggest that attending to that is to miss the text’s meanings. For instance, Page Stegner precludes readings that examine the actual implications of the actions of Nabokov’s monstrous characters:

It should be obvious that while Nabokov’s novels are filled with aberrant curiosities—perverts, pererasts, cripples, the deformed of one kind and another—they appear not as psychological types, but as reflections of the irony of existence, as expressions of the finite vulgarity and pathos that are superimposed on the beauty and
sublimity of the natural world. (Stegner 41)
The recurrence of these "grotesques" does invite curiosity as to how we are expected to interpret their actions and presence. Yet it does not seem necessary to assume that their presence is merely the formulation of an aesthetic. These characters' own attempts to deflect our attention away from the implications of their crimes operate as rhetorical strategies that the novels call into question, in effect inviting an alternate reading mode, one that does not accept the narrators' attempts to justify their actions on aesthetic grounds. Stegner also argues that readers should suspend their reactions to Dolores' actual experience, and that readers who are able to transcend their socially conditioned response to sexual perversion, to suspend for the time being their moral repugnance for pederasts and nympholepts, find in Humbert's story something that is touching and most un-comic in the destructive power of his obsession. (109)
And Humbert's story does often seduce his readers, as studies of the novel consistently demonstrate. But that does not necessarily mean that we have to--or should want to--put aside our objections to pedophilia or rape. In fact, in doing so we would become Humbert's ideal readers and thereby participate symbolically in his vindication. The success of his attempts at self-justification depends on his appeal to the reader's imagination and aesthetic sensibility. As Stegner argues, "Humbert's eye confronts vulgarity (his own and the world's) and converts it through imagination and subsequently language into a thing of beauty" (114). As readers, we may accept his rendering of his pursuits as aesthetic, but only when we identify
with him and accept his implicit assertion that pedophilia and rape can in fact be justified.

Attention to the text as a tract on aesthetics--and one which forbids readerly or critical reference to anything else--is a response that deflects attention away from Humbert’s crimes. *Lolita* clearly does deal in aesthetics, but it does not seem an inevitable step from that recognition to such an absolute sympathy with Humbert as to preclude both compassion for Dolores and a sense that a perspective like Humbert’s cannot truly represent her. This is not to say that this novel operates as a simple critique of Humbert, only that the text allows a particular mode of reading that exposes the power and the limitations of his narrative, and can generate an awareness of the literal and representational violence that Humbert does to Dolores.

The text allows a view that correlates Humbert’s narrative mastery with his manipulation of Dolores. Maddox describes a similar dynamic in her discussion of sexual desire as an acquisitive or controlling impulse: “Taken in its largest context, the sexual desire of Nabokov’s narrators is a perfectly appropriate synecdoche for that compulsive need to possess the world beyond the self, to possess it sexually and intellectually, that is the real subject of the novels” (10). Most readers and critics, even those with fairly traditional readings of the novel, agree that the text reveals that Humbert’s attempts at manipulating his self-presentation falls short of maintaining absolute control. As Stegner puts it, “the real irony is that Humbert’s power to turn rough glass into sparkling crystal eventually subsumes him, and he is reduced to a servant of his art” (115). Humbert’s author-function
becomes diminished when we see him as Nabokov’s creature. In a very recently published reading of the novel, David Andrews articulates Humbert’s shortcomings as an artist, and thereby questions the equation of Humbert and Nabokov in terms of their projects. He describes Humbert’s misconceptions:

Yet he is incorrect in his assumption that he will achieve literary immortality on his own pitiless terms. Indeed, Humbert is condemned artistically as well as spiritually, his final failure of compassion exactly corresponding to his failure as a writer to rise above the ‘merely’ aesthetic. Consequently, his art is neither his own nor in accord with the intentions of his creator, and he does not immortalize his figmentary Lolita so much as evangelize the unknowable Dolores Haze. (97)

Andrews fixes on the reference to compassion in the afterword’s definition of genuine art, pointing out that Humbert’s art does not actually satisfy Nabokov’s definition of art, particularly in his failure to empathize with Dolores, in spite of his declarations of ostensible love in their last scene together. And I would argue that the fact that, even after this scene has occurred, Humbert can still indulge in his fantasies and discussions of nympholepsy as he novelizes the past suggests that there is no genuine or serious transformation. Even after his ostensible transformation, Humbert’s retrospective narration only cares for its aestheticized, abstracted image of Lolita, not the girl he abuses and whose presence he erases. His is a narrative which reveals itself to be incapable of representing her.

Most critics address the ways in which Humbert’s narrative is limited.
For instance, Julia Bader, who tends to read Nabokov’s novels with attention to their self-reflexive treatment of the theme of art and as intricate systems of patterns, addresses the ways in which Nabokov reveals the shortcomings of Humbert’s representational mode. She points out several instances of readerly awareness of the flatness of Humbert’s images of Dolores, such as when we see Humbert “trying to capture his subject in the act of motion but succeeding only in divesting it of its vitality” (68). She argues that in his image of her playing tennis, Dolores “has acquired the flattened, two-dimensional quality of an abused theme…” (68). Humbert’s abuse is reproduced in his representation of her. Because he lacks the capacity for compassion, and in fact does not truly see her as anything but a projection of his desires, his representation does violence to Dolores as a real being. Bader also asserts that “there remains a tantalizing part of Lolita which is resistant to the process of artistic abstraction, which constantly threatens to grow up and engulf the nymphet part” (69), but she follows this with the claim that “it is this streak which Humbert in the end comes to love” (Bader 69). His text does obliquely encode the part of Dolores that it cannot represent; by its failure to fully represent her, his text implicitly points to that which it excludes. But to claim that Humbert does actually come to gain access to that excluded part of her is disturbing; we would wish that Dolores were able to preserve some part of herself from Humbert’s gaze, and from that which he calls love.

Looking for ways in which the text illustrates the limitations of Humbert’s narrative is a kind of attempt to look for the novel’s morality, a response that John Ray’s foreword tends to preempt. But perhaps it only
need preempt a simple kind of didacticism. Some critics, often
apologetically, do read the book with attention to ethics. Lance Olsen’s
discussion of Humbert’s narration emphasizes Nabokov’s implicit critique
of his actions and his narrative mode:

   But the articulate art he creates is much less stable than he might
wish it to be. While Humbert longs to immortalize his love for Dolly
in language, the language he sculptures also happens to immortalize his
crimes, his rampant immorality, even his ability to jest at the most
somber and inappropriate moments, thereby throwing his definition
of love, not to mention the seriousness of his objectives, into
question. (87)

And Andrews’ comments about Humbert’s failure to measure up to
Nabokov’s definition of art, in terms of compassion, also suggests a mode of
reading that does not exclude morality. It still seems problematic that the
abuse of a child is the means of exploring different modes of reading--one
way to define Nabokov’s project. On the other hand, in effect the novel
offers insight into our collective willingness to excuse pedophilia, and
suggests that the act of representation itself is potentially one of violence.

Although the traditions of reading this novel tend to insist on
deflecting our attention away from these issues, more recent readings engage
them in productive--and varied--ways. Linda Kauffman’s essay on Lolita
appeared 1989, and poses the question of how a feminist reader might read
this novel. Like many other critics, she points out the limitations of
Humbert’s representation of Dolores, and also discusses the implications of
the violence he does her through his actions and his representation:
The challenge for feminist criticism is thus to read against the text by resisting the father's seductions. Is it possible in a double moment to analyze the horror of incest by reinscribing the material body of the child Lolita in the text and simultaneously to undermine the representational fallacy by situating the text dialogically in relation to other texts? It is in the interest of feminist criticism to expose the representational fallacy, since the most sexist critical statements come from critics who take the novel as a representation of real life. (133)

She exposes the ways in which Humbert's representation falls short, and creates an implicit link between the idea that Humbert's representation is not in fact real, but highly constructed to serve his ends. Trying to read Dolores' consent into the narrative becomes problematic because Humbert tries to exclude her perspective, as it would threaten his attempts at manipulating our view of him. But Kauffman discusses a way of resisting Humbert's narrative:

By thus inscribing the female body in the text, rather than consigning it to the hazy and dolorous realm of abstract male desire, or letting it circulate as the currency of exchange between male rivals, one discovers that Lolita is not a photographic image, or a still life, or a freeze frame preserved on film, but a damaged child” (148).

By not accepting Humbert's erasure of Dolores' body and presence from the text, we can perhaps avoid collusion with his attempts at justifying his actions.

Because if we do accept any such attempts--even the final attempt to use his declaration of love to convince us that he has learned from and
transcended his crimes--we participate in the more subtle violence that Humbert does to Dolores, the representational violence of reducing a girl to an image. Elisabeth Bronfen describes Humbert’s strategy of representation, in which he constructs her as emblematic of an idea, to distance himself from the actuality of what he is doing to her:

The duplicity of his behaviour, a form of violent gazing, is that by denying her actual presence and subject position, he deludes himself into believing that he has touched an image not a body. In so doing he not only violates the body but also denies that any violation has occurred. (379)

He violates Dolores literally and figuratively, letting his perceptions stand for hers, erasing her presence and replacing it with an abstracted image. In this way, the text points to the inherent power involved in representation, a power that may have high costs for anyone caught in the representation, as is Dolores. Bronfen argues that

Nabokov effects a brilliant critique of the dangers and necessities of the imaginary, in that he shows Dolores Haze fading beneath H.H.’s tropes and allusions even as she eludes his physical and mental grasp. H.H.’s success in translating her into the completely textualised Lolita neither solves her enigma nor represents her. (373)

Here, she points out that while Humbert’s text attempts to contain her, Humbert himself cannot maintain his literal control of her indefinitely. And in spite of his efforts the narrative itself does not fully contain Dolores, as its own inability to represent the actual girl becomes apparent to the reader.

This is not necessarily the way the novel is commonly read, however.
As Critic Colleen Kennedy points out, readers often feel the need to put aside reactions to what Humbert is doing to Dolores in favor of a more “sophisticated” attention to aesthetics:

The seduction of a twelve-year-old girl becomes the ‘reality’ the reader must ‘overcome,’ in the same way that Humbert must overcome the vulgarity of Dolly; and this training of the reader becomes the means by which Nabokov may overcome the vulgarity of the culture. (51)

Reading *Lolita* often seems to engender this sense of the naive reader who must learn to put aside initial responses to Humbert’s narrative. Very recent criticism has taken up these issues further and confronts Humbert’s narrative (and readings of his narrative) as attempts at justifying unjustifiable actions.

For instance, Elizabeth Patnoe points out the ways in which Nabokov undermines Humbert’s narrative mastery, but often in ways that readers downplay: “While the text offers evidence to indict Humbert, it is so subtle that many readers overlook its critique of the misogyny illustrated in and purveyed by the rest of the text” (Patnoe 83). She, like Kennedy, points out that because of its subject matter *Lolita* is often a very difficult text to encounter, and that we need not view readerly resistance to Humbert’s narrative as inappropriate. She notes that “as countless critics focus on the book’s pleasure and neglect its trauma, they also neglect many of its readers and enable the violator’s pleasure, reinforce it, invite it to continue without confrontation” (Patnoe 87). Maintaining a silence about the text’s painful aspects is to reproduce Humbert’s project, the erasure of Dolores—with the name’s reference to sorrow—and her replacement with the aesthetic object
Lolita.

Jen Shelton also contextualizes this novel within the prevalent reality of incest, referring to the shape of actual incest narratives and finds that this one fits the pattern: “Fathers’ incest narrations tell the comforting story: that incest didn’t happen, or, if it did, it was the daughter’s fault. Daughters’ stories discomfit androcentric culture, naming incest and rape in the fact of their fathers’ contradiction” (279). Deflecting blame away from Humbert allows us to maintain the fiction that incest does not occur regularly, or that it is not a violent imposition of the father’s will upon a child. She also points out that the daughter’s narrative has a disruptive potential, as her disclosure may threaten this fiction: “She will never be fully controlled, for she represents the dangerous potential to betray him, overthrowing his authority and his desire by speaking his secrets” (279).

According to Shelton, Dolores does overthrow the hegemony of Humbert’s narrative in that she writes an outcome that frees her from Humbert and his narrative representation of her: “. . .Dolly writes another story that Humbert does not yet see: the story of her escape. This story, unnarratable in a text structured around Humbert’s desire. . .” (289). Critic Elizabeth Freeman also picks up on this potential reading of Dolores’ assumption of agency. She discusses the novel in the context of what she terms the “pedophiliac picaresque,” a form in which texts “infuse the ‘road trip’ or ‘ramble’ with man-girl pedophiliac energies” (Freeman 865). She reads the scene in which Dolores draws a map of the United States as a scene in which Dolores exceeds Humbert’s attempts at enclosing her within his narrative:
Here the little girl who draws the map is the same one who has withheld the meaning of the anagrammatic 'clues' to her whereabouts, along with her capacities as a 'reader' and a cultural tutor. By keeping a few steps ahead of Humbert, she traps him in the pedophiliac picaresque. (887)

These images of writing a new narrative trajectory and mapping, as they hint as the successful exercising of Dolores' will, reveal the insufficiencies of Humbert's narrative as tool of absolute control. Dolores creates a supplementary narrative, which Humbert is at this point unable to discern.

Frederick Whiting also contextualizes the novel within current thinking about pedophilia, pointing out the common strategy of infiltrating a family and home to gain access to the child. He points out the pedophiliac's "physical resemblance to ordinary human beings," which allows "this infiltration by masking an inner, anomalous desire" (Whiting 836). This description closely fits Humbert: his urbane, cultured persona masks what even he occasionally describes is a monstrous desire. Whiting also challenges the traditional foreclosure of reading this text with any moral concerns that Nabokov's preface has engendered. He points out that the sanction against moral readings is less clear than is often acknowledged:

the split between moral and aesthetic concerns. . .is far less neat than the rhetoric at first suggest. The first three terms that Nabokov places in parenthetical opposition to aesthetic bliss--curiosity, kindness, and tenderness--import into his aesthetic model the very moral register he seems bent on avoiding. (855)

These recent readings of the novel find ways of reading this novel without
participating in Humbert's erasure of Dolores from his text, often by complicating assumptions critics and readers have made and reproduced.

Although Nabokov's novels tend to mock and resist simplistic didacticism, they do demonstrate another sense of morality, in that they represent and critique various kinds of brutality and elevate the value of empathy. As much as Nabokov's novels invite readings that attend to aesthetic and intellectual aspects, and sometimes insist that those aspects of a text can be hypostatized, the experience of reading his novels does not degenerate into a merely appreciative or cerebral exercise. His novels do contain characters and moments which may seem real to the reader and draw a very real response: empathy for a character. And moments that invite delight in a particularly beautiful image read less as cold or abstract definitions of a particular aesthetic than as moments that sharpen a reader's attention to detail, and to apparently mundane moment, which suggests an implicitly valuing of experience. Nabokov has designed his novels to include moments and characters that have the potential to create these responses; by virtue of Nabokov's design these responses do represent a significant part of the experience of reading his novels. The poignant, aesthetic, and emotional moments often remain at least to some degree genuine--not utterly undercut or ironized--for the reader. The experience of reading Nabokov includes these moments of connection with the world of the novel on more than a cerebral level, moments where that world feels fully present. It also includes constant signs of the unreality of that world, of its constructedness; reading Nabokov in general and Lolita in particular is also very much a matter of sifting through layers of ostensible realities or voices
in the attempt to access core meanings in the novels, an enterprise which involves avoiding the many traps and deceptions.

Nabokov, then, pushes the reader into assuming a role which involves two contradictory impulses: actively sorting out carefully constructed puzzle-games and avoiding the master-crafter's traps, while at the same time passively allowing the author to design our emotional responses to Humbert Humbert's experience of Lolita and to Dolores' experience with Humbert Humbert. Bader discusses the doubleness of the experience of reading Nabokov: "The paradoxical observation that Nabokov's novels constantly invite the reader's emotional participation, while insisting on the self-contained nature of the fictional world, points to the aesthetic center of his work" (4). She sees this apparent conflict as central to Nabokov's technique, pointing out that the two modes do not exclude one another: "But the reader's delight in the aesthetic recognition of the structure planted by the author, as well as the reader's assimilation of the sadness or joy associated with the repeated detail, results in a growing involvement with the texture of the fictional world" (4). In this view, Nabokov keeps both modes in play and this results in a tension that creates some of the energy of his novels.

Alfred Appel, Jr., in the introduction to his annotated Lolita, argues that Nabokov is able to have it both ways, involving the reader on the one hand in a deeply moving yet outrageously comic story, rich in verisimilitude, and on the other engaging him in a game made possible by the interlacings of verbal figurations which undermine the
novel's realistic base. (lvi)

He points out this "deeply moving" aspect of the novel, which suggests a reader's role of experiencing the images and events as real, while at the very same time the reader engages with the text with full consciousness of its constructedness to participate in its games: language games, tricks Nabokov plays with the reader's attempts at interpretation, and shifting contexts or worlds. In some ways, the reader's task is to access a stable ground in the texts, a point of reference, or sense of the real as opposed to dissemblings.

Yet to discuss the quality of realness in Nabokov's fiction is of course problematic, because he consistently questions the possibility of perceiving or representing objective reality. To an interviewer's question about the force of imagination he responds:

I tend more and more to regard the objective existence of all events as a form of impure imagination--hence my inverted commas around 'reality.' Whatever the mind grasps, it does so with the assistance of creative fancy, that drop of water on a glass slide which gives distinctness and relief to the observed organism. (Strong Opinions 154)

For Nabokov, the lens of perception always refracts the image, and when the artist's mind functions as a mirror and reflects the outside world it invariably changes it. In his fiction, these refractions and distortions yield not so much imperfections or flaws but creative new visions. But Nabokov does sometimes use the words "real" or "reality" without quotation marks, particularly in reference to Lolita: "It was my most difficult book--the book that treated of a theme which was so distant, so remote, from my own emotional life that it gave me a special pleasure to use my combinational
talent to make it real" (Strong Opinions 15). This quality of realness becomes not unattainable or illusory but achievable and desirable. Here, realness refers specifically to the reader's experience of the novel as real; reality in the abstract or pure form remains elusive. As Nabokov puts it, "[y]ou can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable" (Strong Opinions 11). So the reader's experience of realness in Nabokov's novels is not meant to be objective reality but the simulation of reality that the author has constructed. But even as his novels describe their own distance from the real, they generate a readerly desire for the ever-receding real. Therefore the texts can, in effect, engender consideration of and longing for the absented real.

_Lolita_ involves this generation of the semblance or impression of reality, which in effect can invite a longing for the elusive real, as it crafts a metafictional exploration of knowledge and the possibility representation. Nabokov frames Humbert's narrative with a preface and afterword, and Humbert himself draws attention to the constructedness of his narrative; these metafictional and self-reflexive elements turn form into a subject of the novel. Form may also seem to contradict the subject, as also occurs in _Lolita_, where the form of self-reflexive puzzle-world might appear to work against the often realistic quality of the story and setting.

In _Lolita_, the realistic moments in the story do not lose the "real" quality but instead stand out as jewel-like exceptions or gaps in the larger game. The relationship between form and subject is not, then, one of two
separate levels, or one of vehicle used to express content. Rather, form and subject ultimately meld, because the formal techniques of the novel not only convey but also mirror and are themselves the novel’s content. The narration enchants the reader, lulling the reader into a passive position just as Humbert Humbert wrests away Dolores's agency; in this way form mirrors content. The “cryptogrammatic paper-chase” (250) of the language of the novel reflects the paths of the plot, and perhaps the experience of the reader as well. The reader becomes an agent actively engaging the novel rather than falling under its spells, a shift which may predict Dolores's eventual escape from Humbert and a narrative which sought to contain and to silence her voice.

In this way, *Lolita* is a lesson in the possibilities of the process of reading. It suggests the importance of constantly revising one’s interpretive strategies, to avoid falling into various kinds of orthodoxies or received ideas. Stegner points out this disruptive potential of the text: “an awareness that underlying all his works is an exposure of what he considers to be fraudulent and stereotyped ways of thinking makes us better able to read and appreciate his novels for what that are” (22). Bader draws attention to this idea, that his novels in fact challenge unreflective acceptance of ideas “. . .Nabokov’s work eludes traditional rubrics of interpretation either through use of parody or conscious disregard. . .” (7). The text even challenges whole systems of interpretation--those that insist on conclusiveness and stop short of always re-investigating the question at hand, as Lance Olsen also suggests:

*Lolita* is nothing. . . if not a text that forces questions rather than
answers, endorses processes over products, proclaims inconclusiveness rather than conclusion. Through such a strategy, it reopens our perceptions to the world(s) around us rather than presenting us with the stultifying and standardizing vision of this dogma or that. (126). If the text asks us to resist systematized orthodoxies, perhaps it is pointing out the shortcomings of a too-easy morality, not to reject morality but to illustrate how easily we can be manipulated (as is John Ray, or alternatively, as are readers that accept Humbert’s self-justificatory gestures). Nabokov does comment on the absolute control of the writer over his work, but he does not insist on the passivity of his readers. In fact, he rails against readers who are not careful and alert, those who do not fully engage literature. And fully engaging Nabokov’s art means not passively succumbing to the narrator’s or even the author’s spells; it means the attempt to explore them and to enter fully into the worlds of his novels with full agency as readers.

The Author’s Role

Throughout the body of his non-fiction and his novels, Nabokov creates his own definitions of the author’s role, which may help to explain the particular conceptions of the nature of authorship and readership that operate in Lolita. In Nabokov’s fiction, the author functions as a master-crafter, presiding over his design. The author does not necessarily obtrude into the narrative fabric, but he always remains visible. Traces of his hand thread through the created world, in the forms of patterns which break the illusion of the fiction as real: metafictional moments, the frequent
undermining of the speakers' and texts' credibility, and the infinitely reflecting surfaces and shifting planes which destabilize the texts and emphasize the presence of the author.

Often in his interviews and comments Nabokov insists on authorial control of the text. In his foreword to *Strong Opinions*, he explains: “The interviewer's questions have to be sent to me in writing, answered by me in writing, and reproduced verbatim. Such are the three absolute conditions” (xv). He insists on maintaining absolute control over the interviewing situation and the text it yields, rather than giving more conventional interviews with their possibility for slips and awkwardness. This insistence, on the role of the author as master over the text, extends into the directions he offers as to how to read his fiction. The author rises to the level of a godlike creator, and the novel becomes a newly-created world:

The material of this world may be real enough (as far as reality goes) but does not exist at all as an accepted entirety: it is chaos, and to this chaos the author says 'go!' allowing the world to flicker and to fuse. It is now recombined in its very atoms, not merely in its visible and superficial parts. The writer is the first man to map it and to name the natural objects it contains. Those berries are edible. That speckled creature that bolted across my path might be tamed. That lake between those trees will be called Lake Opal or, more artistically, Dishwater lake. (“Good Readers and Good Writers” 2).

As explorer, magician, alchemist, and creator, the author retains absolute authority over the fictional creation. Furthermore, Nabokov argues that "the real writer, the fellow who sends planets spinning and models a man
asleep and eagerly tampers with the sleeper’s rib, that kind of author has no
given values at his disposal: he must create them himself” (“Good Readers
and Good Writers” 2). With these kinds of images, Nabokov insists on the
author’s power to control interpretations of the text.

By arguing that the author creates the values of this new world,
Nabokov implies that no values other than the ones the author has created
have any relevance to a novel. Similarly, he asserts that “no creed or school
has had any influence on me whatsoever. Nothing bores me more than
political novels and the literature of social intent” (Strong Opinions,
p. 3). Nabokov rejects literature that consciously participates in political or social-
issue debates; he also forbids his readers from bringing schools of criticism
or belief systems (or at least those external to the world of his art) into their
interpretations of his novels. In accordance with his rejection of schools of
criticism or any kind of systems of thinking external to the texts, Nabokov
uses many of his forewords to remind the reader that the “Viennese
delegation” is particularly unwelcome:

*Despair*, in kinship with the rest of my books, has no social
comment to make, no message to bring in its teeth. It does not uplift
the spiritual organ of man, nor does it show humanity the right exit.
It contains far fewer ‘ideas’ than do those rich vulgar novels that are
acclaimed so hysterically in the short echo-walk between the ballyhoo
and the hoot. The attractively shaped object or Wiener-schnitzel
dream that the eager Freudian may think he distinguishes in the
remoteness of my wastes will turn out to be on closer inspection a
derisive mirage organized by my agents... (Foreword to Despair xii)
And he does lay traps for these eager Freudians in the novel:

the violence and the sweetness of my nightly joys were being raised to
an exquisite vertex owing to a certain aberration which, I understand,
is not as uncommon as I thought at first among high-strung men in
their middle thirties. I am referring to a well-known kind of
‘dissociation.’ (Despair 27)

He tempts readers to bring Freudian ideas such as dissociation to their
readings of the text, yet mocks these readings in advance so we will not wish
to pursue them, much in the same way that John Ray’s foreword mocks a
particular kind of moral reading of Humbert Humbert’s tale. As readers,
unless we choose to ignore the author’s explicit instructions, we are trapped
into accepting his prohibitions and preferred styles of reading. He attempts
to consolidate his sole authority over the way his texts are read.

He stays very close to the text in this sense, but remains detached in
other ways. Staying too close to the text might make him vulnerable to
certain kinds of readings which would compromise his absolute control, such
as attempts to link characters or events in his fiction to his own life, or that
especially-hated Freudian approach which seeks to find unconscious
symbolisms, repressions, and other clues to parts of the author’s mind that
might not be absolutely under the author’s control or even in his
consciousness. So Nabokov mocks the Freudian approach to texts, and to
some extent distances himself from his creations:

Some of my characters are, no doubt, pretty beastly, but I really don’t
care, they are outside my inner self like the mournful monsters of a
cathedral façade--demons placed there merely to show that they have
been booted out. Actually, I'm a mild old gentleman who loathes cruelty. (*Strong Opinions*, p. 19)

This way, unless a reader or critic wants to ignore Nabokov's explicit directions of how to interpret his novels, readers and critics are prevented from drawing parallels between the characters and the author. This comment also explains how an author can create problematic, even monstrous characters yet not be sanctioning their actions, as in the case of Humbert Humbert, for instance.

According to Nabokov's definitions of the author's role and the nature of art, a distance exists between the author and his creatures; the author presides above the artistic creation. The author has the power to reshape the ordinary world into a glittering new form, as he explains:

> literature was born on the day when a boy came crying wolf, wolf, and there was no wolf behind him... Between the wolf in the tall grass and the wolf in the tall story there is a shimmering go-between. That go-between, that prism, is the art of literature. (“Good Readers and Good Writers” 5)

Literature defined as "shimmering go-between" sounds like an alchemist's or magician's creation rather than, for instance, a craft requiring only skill and labor. He defines the author's function as that of a deceptive creator of mirages and weaver of spells:

> Every great writer is a great deceiver, but so is that arch-cheat Nature. Nature always deceives. From the simple deception of propagation to the prodigiously sophisticated illusion of protective colors in butterflies or birds, there is in Nature a marvelous system of
spells and wiles. The writer of fiction only follows Nature's lead. 
(“Good Readers and Good Writers” 5)

Defining the author's role as that of an artisan would imply a tangible process and a clear relationship between the author and the work. But defining the author's role as that of a magician or enchanter implies an inscrutable process and ascribes an untouchable authority to the relationship between author and novel.

Live Iridescence: The Nature of Nabokov’s Art

This conception of the author's role implies a complementary definition of the nature of art. For Nabokov, art is a distillation of the external world, through the artist's mind, into a glittering new form. The relationship between the external world and the world of art parallels that between the real and fictional. Art does often appear fantastic or unreal: “From my point of view, any outstanding work of art is a fantasy insofar as it reflects the unique world of a unique individual” (Lectures on Literature 252). Because the artistic creation comes from the unique artist's mind, it may not appear real. But for Nabokov the term “real” needs interrogating. To his mind, objective reality can only refer to an approximation, not to a solid or transcendental truth: “when we say reality, we are really thinking of all this--in one drop--an average sample of a mixture of a million individual realities” (Lectures on Literature 253). Reality as a single entity does not exist; differences in perceptions and circumstances function as lenses or prisms which shape our conceptions of reality. In the same passage, Nabokov mentions that all the different perspectives come together to yield an
approximation of the real: even a lunatic’s view contributes to the brew of perspectives, explaining the prevalence of lunatic figures, who are often narrators, throughout Nabokov’s novels.

A blend of individual realities meld in Nabokov’s plural, empirical definition of reality. He speaks of the “sense” of reality; the impression of reality is contingent rather than predetermined by some overarching force: “The sense of reality depends upon continuity, upon duration” (Lectures on Literature 260). This sense of reality comes from sustained acceptance of something as real rather than any innate realness. This sense of reality is what makes the art live, so the artist’s task becomes the creation of this impression of reality, an act of invention and even deception. Nabokov uses the story of the boy crying “wolf” to illustrate this point: “the magic of art was in the shadow of the wolf that he deliberately invented, his dream of the wolf...” (“Good Readers and Good Writers” 5). If the artist’s mind functions like a mirror using the outside world or objective reality as a source, this mirror does not reflect truly but with refractions: specifically memory and the peculiarities of that individual mind.

The novel Invitation to a Beheading illustrates this conception of the nature of reality and art particularly explicitly, in ways which are also more subtly at work in a novel like Lolita. Cincinnatus describes his condition in Invitation to a Beheading:

I am surrounded by some sort of wretched specters, not by people. They torment me as can torment only senseless visions, bad dreams, dregs of delirium, the drivel of nightmares and everything that passes down here for real life. (36)
These "wretched specters," these unreal beings, plan to execute Cincinnatus for being more real, less transparent, than everyone else. In this novel, Nabokov creates a confrontation between the real and the unreal. Instead of a single unreal specter in a world of real human beings, he creates an unreal world and places one real being in its midst and explores the results. When the unreal world begins to dissolve at the end of the novel, we see the painter's craft going awry through Cincinnatus' eyes: "the perspective was disorganized, something had come loose and dangled" and "something had happened to the lighting, there was something wrong with the sun" *(Invitation to a Beheading* 215, 219). The illusion, the creation which Cincinnatus describes in artistic terms, fails, and only the real Cincinnatus remains. But while art can be linked to illusion, art also serves as a link to the elusive realm of the real. Cincinnatus thinks about recording his experiences in the form of literature:

I could perform...a short work...a record of verified thoughts...Some day someone would read it and would suddenly feel just as if he had awakened for the first time in a strange country. What I mean to say is that I would make him suddenly burst into tears of joy, his eyes would melt, and, after he experiences this, the world will seem to him cleaner, fresher. *(Invitation to a Beheading* 41-42)

Not just a practical account, this work would fulfill a function of art: to communicate something from author to reader. Art serves as a link from the uniquely real Cincinnatus to the other real beings he imagines as readers, and as a transformative force.

In this novel, the real functions as an ideal: purity of experience or
acuteness of perception. Cincinnatus relates a childhood memory or dream which explains what makes him different:

when a man who had been dozing on a bench beneath a bright white-washed wall at last got up to help me find my way, his blue shadow on the wall did not immediately follow him...between his movement and the movement of the laggard shadow--that second, that syncope--there is the rare kind of time in which I live--the pause, the hiatus, when the heart is like a feather. . . (Invitation to a Beheading 52-53)

He sounds a lot like Nabokov's author-figure or ideal reader, both of whom distinguish themselves from others by virtue of the intense clarity with which they apprehend the external world. Nabokov's ideal authors and readers, like Cincinnatus, experience even the most minute details through especially sharply-focused eyes, and all of these figures participate in the creation of art. So although Cincinnatus describes the false world around him in artistic terms, the purest art remains in himself, in the realness in him that differentiates him and inspires his imagination: "in my dreams the world would come alive, becoming so captivatingly majestic, free and ethereal, that afterwards it would be oppressive to breathe the dust of this painted world" (Invitation to a Beheading 92). His moving description of this dream or desire also works well as a potential definition of Nabokov's conception of the nature of art. He often speaks of wanting to make the fictional creation live, and sharing this life with the reader. In spite of Nabokov's rejection of literature which explicitly pursues a purpose or message, his literature does implicitly seek to do something, to communicate to the reader. If Nabokov makes his fictional world come
alive, "captivatingly majestic, free and ethereal," then ideally the reader will find it "oppressive to breathe the dust of this painted world." If this does work as a definition of Nabokov's art, then one of art's functions is to cut through the unreal, the illusory, or the superficial, particularly when these might be pernicious, constricting, or empty. Maybe this is what is occurring in *Lolita*, in which occasional glimpses into the reality of Dolores's experience can cut through the deceptive surface of Humbert's account, in which Humbert is one of the "demons placed there merely to show that they have been booted out," and in which art ultimately escapes Humbert's attempt to manipulate it, in the form of his narrative, turning it into a vehicle for the justification of cruelty.

*Invitation to a Beheading* also illustrates how creating art is to make the raw material--such as paint or words--live. Cincinnatus, unlike the unreal and artistic specters around him, knows this:

Not knowing how to write, but sensing with my criminal intuition how words are combined, what one must do for a commonplace word to come alive and share its neighbor's sheen, heat, shadow, while reflecting itself in its neighbor and renewing the neighboring word in the process, so that the whole line is live iridescence. . . (*Invitation to a Beheading* 93)

While this passage does emphasize the aesthetic quality of live art, it is not an end in itself, or one free of effects. The live iridescence of art may be different than the use of art to transmit a political or moral message, but it is not mere aestheticism for its own sake, either; it has a very tangible power. At the end of the novel, the false art or artifice around Cincinnatus
falls away in the face of his solidity and humanity:
The fallen trees lay flat and reliefless, while those that were standing, also two-dimensional, with a lateral shading to suggest roundness, barely held on with their branches to the ripping mesh of the sky. Everything was coming apart... and amidst the dust, and the falling things, and the flapping scenery, Cincinnatus made his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him. (Invitation to a Beheading 223)

Superficial artifice—in this case the illusory world, in the case of Lolita Humbert’s narrative—ultimately weakens and collapses, and in Invitation to a Beheading Cincinnatus and the genuine art and vitality (which, in this novel, blend together) live and breathe. But more significantly, his intimation of beings like him—vital, solid, and real—seems to be of the less fictive reality beyond his staged world. The inhabitants of that world might be an audience, or to replace the stage metaphor with the book, his readers. And it is when a more acute level of reality cuts through the artifice that he senses the readers’ presence, that an empathetic connection between the character and his readers is forged.

Traces of the Author’s Hand
While Nabokov’s art engages the reader deeply, he plants plenty of reminders that his are constructed worlds. The vitality of these worlds makes them feel real; the complexity of their textures and devices point to a master-craftsman, to the tangible presence of the author. So while his novels depend on the realness of moments and experiences for their power,
his novels also depend on the undermining of realism—as a vehicle for a message or theme—for their dimension.

For instance, in Despair the image of the yellow post becomes inextricably linked with the site of the killing in the forest. It carries a piercingly clear quality:

A pleasant summer day and a peaceful countryside; a good-natured fool of an artist and a roadside post. . . . That yellow post...that particular landmark subsequently became a fixed idea with me. Cut out clearly in yellow, amid a diffuse landscape, it stood up in my dreams. By its position my fancies found their bearings. All my thoughts reverted to it. It shone, a faithful beacon, in the darkness of my speculations. I have the feeling today that I recognized it, when seeing it for the first time: familiar to me as a thing of the future.

(Despair 35)

While the yellow post stands out in acute sharpness in the world of the novel, the image does not function as part of a photographically real technique of description. Hermann describes the post in visually real terms, but also in symbolic terms. The post carries the significance of the site, but Nabokov does not leave this to the reader to establish. In fact, Hermann thinks of it explicitly this way: experiencing the effect of the constructed narrative and at the same time generating that narrative, being both a character and author figure in the world of the novel.

Hermann’s description points to this role as author of the whole account, and thereby to the constructedness of the world we are experiencing: “And the yellow post had a skullcap of snow too. Thus the
future shimmers through the past. But enough, let that summer day be in focus again...” (Despair 37). Because he is retelling an already completed narrative, he can envision the image of the post in the winter scene of the killing to come. But Hermann does not tell his story as a seamless linear narrative, the future image of the snow on the post tinges his description of the summer scene in the same location. As Hermann foregrounds his role as author in this way, the image of Hermann writing this account also points to the image of Nabokov writing this novel.

In addition to thematizing the role of the author in his novels, Nabokov puts himself as author into his fictional worlds with the self-referential games and tricks he plays. Their presence points to their designer; they also undermine the seamlessness of a fictional world. Pale Fire contains a particularly large number of these playful details, such the inclusion of a reference to “Hurricane Lolita” in John Shade’s poem (Pale Fire 58) and Professor Pnin’s appearance as the “Head of the bloated Russian department” in Pale Fire (155). Nabokov’s novels refer to one another, increasing the reader’s sense of the author presiding over the network of his creations.

At times, Nabokov’s views surface almost verbatim in his novels. In one of his letters, he objects to the approach of Cornell’s Russian Language Department: “our students are taught not the Russian language itself but the method of teaching the others to teach that method” (Selected Letters 1940-1977 263). In Pnin, the narrator says that Pnin did not use the linguistic approach to teaching Russian, which he describes as “the method of teaching others to teach that method” (Pnin 10). In the same letter
Nabokov criticizes the Russian Language Department head as unable to speak or write Russian; in *Pnin* Leonard Blorenge, Chairman of French Literature and Language, “disliked Literature and had no French” (*Pnin* 140). And just as Nabokov insisted on reading a prepared text both in interviews and when lecturing, Pnin “was utterly helpless without the prepared text” (*Pnin* 15). In *Pale Fire*, Kinbote quotes Shade’s words about teaching Shakespeare to college students: “First of all, dismiss ideas, and social background, and train the freshman to shiver, to get drunk on the poetry of *Hamlet* and *Lear*, to read with his spine and not with his skull” (*Pale Fire* 155). In “Good Readers and Good Writers” Nabokov argues that a good reader reads “not so much with his brain, but with his spine” (6). We see signs of the author throughout his work; he never lets the reader lose the trail of his presence.

Metafictional moments function similarly: in undermining the sense of realism, they thematize the nature of art and thereby remind the readers that we are exploring fictional realms, the creations of an author. For instance, Cincinnatus reads a novel entitled *Quercus* while imprisoned:

The idea of the novel was considered to be the acme of modern thought. Employing the gradual development of the tree...the author unfolded all the historic events--or shadows of events--of which the oak could have been a witness. . .It seemed as though the author were sitting with his camera somewhere among the topmost branches of the Quercus. (*Invitation to a Beheading* 122-123)

This novel sounds like it would explore perspective and the relationship between the author and art. It also sounds like it might be pale and lifeless.
like the culture which created it, at least in juxtaposition to the brightness and vibrance of Cincinnatus' realness. In this way, the *Quercus* novel functions as a representation of the world around Cincinnatus. *Invitation to a Beheading* functions as representation of Cincinnatus, in other words of another level—the solid world in which Cincinnatus belongs. He dreams of this world, where everyone and everything would be just as real as he: “It exists, my dream world, it must exist, since, surely there must be an original of the clumsy copy” (*Invitation to a Beheading* 93). He sees the transparent world around him as a reflection of an original; since the specters are ghostly reflections or residues he takes them as evidence of real originals, breathing human souls existing somewhere. The living beings’ voices Cincinnatus hears at the end of the novel may be ours; the original might be the world the author and readers dwell in. So in this novel, Nabokov has created a hierarchy of layers of reality. This metafictional structure, while not lessening the involving power of the passages, does draw attention to the constructedness of the fictional world. Cincinnatus’ surroundings are an illusion, like any work of fiction; this thematizing of artistic creation points to the designer, the author.

In these multi-layered fictional worlds, the inhabitants of each layer of reality or reference coexist, yet all claim to be real. In his commentary on *Pale Fire*, Kinbote explains the personal Zemblan narrative he wished to impose on Shade’s poem: “Although I realize only too clearly, alas, that the result, in its pale and diaphanous phase, cannot be regarded as a direct echo of my narrative” (*Pale Fire* 81). Kinbote sees his narrative as real and as an ideal poetic subject; he wishes Shade’s poem reflected it. Shade’s actual
poem functions as a reflection of his own experience, another narrative. Kinbote seeks to weave the Zemblan narrative into Shade’s text. The narratives or worlds coexist and compete, and this competition reveals both to be copies of an original, in this case shadows of the original, or pale reflections of the sun’s light. But if Kinbote’s narrative depends on Shade’s, it is twice removed from the original. Nabokov sets up a hierarchy of authorship: Kinbote as commentator, Shade as poet, Nabokov himself as creator of the poet. Nabokov has created the original image, the sun’s light that Shade’s poem is reflecting. The design of the novel reveals as artistic creations everyone except Nabokov; he presides solidly above the novel.

Reminding the reader of the constructedness of the fictional work implicitly foregrounds the author’s role. His presence also shows in direct references to the nature of authorship: “it was somehow funny that eventually the author must needs die—and it was funny because the only real, genuinely unquestionable thing here was only death itself, the inevitability of the author’s physical death” (Invitation to a Beheading 124). The author’s death means more than human death; the author’s death is the creator’s death as well. Only the creation remains, but when the author leaves so many signs of his presence in that creation, there may be some consolation in its survival. And Nabokov does leave clear traces of his presence. Patterns, reflecting surfaces, and refracting prisms show up throughout his work. They create a distinctive texture or master plan, the complex structure of which necessarily implies a designer. No strictly “realistic” world could include such ornately woven constructions, so their presence points unmistakably to the author.
Our ability to discern the author’s presence is of course complicated in novels like *Pale Fire* or *Despair*. In *Despair*, the presence of two levels of authorship, Hermann’s and Nabokov’s, complicates the reader’s effort to investigate this visible presence of the author. The reader can identify overarching patterns, too pronounced to be coincidental, in the narrative fabric—the recurrence of lilac objects and the resemblance between Hermann and Felix, for instance: “Our trademark on the wrapper showed a lady in lilac, with a fan”; “The public garden, where invalids were hand-pedaling about, was a storm of heaving lilac bushes”; and Felix “wore a dove-grey suit with a lilac tie” (*Despair* 5, 6, 14). The repetition of the color lilac suggests an author placing the image throughout the text; this repetition indicates artifice and therefore an artist’s work. But this recurrence of lilac images could be the creation of our author-narrator’s mind rather than Nabokov’s. When Hermann sees a mirror-image of himself in the stranger Felix, this intense resemblance appears impossible or at the very least extremely unlikely. But other characters within the novel also see this resemblance, so we cannot dismiss it as a delusion of our ostensible author, Hermann. The resemblance must be the creation of the author. Because it is such an improbable coincidence, their similarity exposes itself as the author’s device. 

In *Pnin*, the narrator’s reference to Dr. Rosetta Stone (*Pnin* 44) works a similar effect; this name points to a playful author, whose hand reveals itself, undisguised.

Reflecting and distorting surfaces populate his work, undermining the claim of any singular surface or plane of reference to reality or stability. The surfaces all reflect one another, distorting, refracting and receding into the
distance until no image appears truer than any other. In *Invitation to a Beheading* we see the reflection of a rotated mirror:

Cincinnatus would step in such a way as to slip naturally and effortlessly through some chink of the air into its unknown coulisses to disappear there with the same easy smoothness with which the flashing reflection of a rotated mirror moves across every object in the room and suddenly vanishes, as if beyond the air, in some new depth of ether. (*Invitation to a Beheading* 121)

If mirrors represent the nature of art, images of shifting or distorting mirrors represent those qualities in Nabokov’s art. If art is a mirror to the world, it is a trick mirror, like Hermann’s description of a literal mirror in *Despair*: “Thus we were reflected by the misty and, to all appearances, sick mirror, with a freakish slant, a streak of madness, a mirror that surely would have cracked at once had it chanced to reflect one single genuine human countenance” (*Despair* 89). The mirrors in Nabokov’s worlds distort what they reflect, and the distortion produces a new image, a creative rather than an entirely destructive distortion. In Nabokov’s definition it is deception, not the trueness of the reflector’s surface, that makes an image into art.

With all these images of reflection and distortion, images which suggest the nature of representation, the reader cannot help but be aware of the process of representation on a conscious level; the reader does not lose the sense of the world of the novel as a constructed one. For Nabokov, representation becomes such a strange and uncanny process that it draws attention to its magic, and we see traces of the author’s hand at every turn. Nabokov defines this magical transformation of ordinary life as the ultimate
role of the author:

There are three points of view from which a writer can be considered: he may be considered as a storyteller, as a teacher, and as an enchanter. A major writer combines these three—storyteller, teacher, enchanter—but it is the enchanter in him that predominates and makes him a major writer. ("Good Readers and Good Writers" 5)

And if the artists acts like a magician, his creation works like a spell, as the author-figure Hermann suggests:

...I stood watching a leaf which fell to meet its reflection; and there was I myself, softly falling into a Saxon town full of strange repetitions, and there was my double softly rising to meet me. And again I wove my spell about him. . .(Despair 202)

The reader of Nabokov’s fictions is transfixed yet awake, simultaneously enchanted and alert.

The Reader’s Role

The definitions of authorship, art, and their relationship implicitly outline a definition of the reader’s role: both to unwind the author’s tangled puzzles and to get entangled in his webs. This double-role includes dealing with the pitfalls and traps awaiting the reader in Nabokov’s worlds. Hermann offers a clue to this aspect of the reader’s role:

Tum-tee-tum. And once more--TUM! No, I have not gone mad. I am merely producing gleeful little sounds. The kind of glee one experiences upon making an April fool of someone. And a damnedgood fool I have made of someone. Who is he? Gentle reader,
look at yourself in the mirror, as you seem to like mirrors so much.

(Despair 24)

A major part of the reader's experience involves playing the author's game, avoiding his traps, or more likely falling into some of those traps and getting out again. On the one hand, the reader must engage the text on an active and intellectual level to explore and elude its traps; on the other hand the reader must receptively allow the workings of the author's spell—to experience the poignant, aesthetic, and emotionally-laden moments. So in the complete experience of reading Nabokov the reader simultaneously falls under the novels' spells and dissects their mechanisms of enchantment.

Nabokov summarizes his conception of the ideal way to read, that the reader ought to fully experience the world of the novel, and ought not to bring outside values or contexts to it:

We should always remember that the work of art is invariably the creation of a new world, so that the first thing we should do is to study that new world as closely as possible, approaching it as something brand new, having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know. When this new world has been closely studied, then and only then let us examine its links with other worlds, other branches of knowledge. (“Good Readers and Good Writers” 1)

The “good reader” must enter completely into this newly-created world, studying the details and mapping that new world before drawing connections to anything outside its pages. This good reader does not read passively or mindlessly, but also does not bring too much outside material to the reading. In one of his letters, Nabokov criticizes a translator because “[h]e
does not see what I want the reader to see” (*Selected Letters 1940-1947* 86). Nabokov does seek to convey a vision to the reader, and insists that the reader must be receptive to it: “we should ponder the question how does the mind work when the sullen reader is confronted by the sunny book. First, the sullen mood melts away, and for better or worse the reader enters into the spirit of the game” (“Good Readers and Good Writers” 4). The relationship between art and reader involves the author’s transmission and reader’s acceptance not so much of a message but of a vision or world.

The novel *Pnin* helps to clarify this relationship; in its case the reader is often in a fairly passive position. The narrator describes Pnin in such a way as to elicit the same pity and affection he feels for Pnin from the reader. The narrator describes how Pnin would share passages with his class:

> although the speech he smothered behind his dancing hand was now doubly unintelligible to the class, his complete surrender to his own merriment would prove irresistible. . .All of which does not alter the fact that Pnin was on the wrong train. (*Pnin* 13)

He seems lovable, absurd, and vulnerable at the same; Nabokov skillfully manipulates our emotional response to his character. He combines comedy and pathos: “His life was a constant war with insensate objects that fell apart, or attacked him, or refused to function, or viciously got themselves lost as soon as they entered the sphere of his existence” (*Pnin* 13). Nabokov designs *Pnin* to draw simultaneous amusement at and pity for Pnin’s helplessness, which begins in his riding the wrong train and ending up with the wrong lecture and culminates in the loss of his job at Waindell. Pnin’s characterization produces particularly emotionally-charged moments, such as
in the following description of a room in his house: “a tiny rocker for a three-year-old Pnin, painted pink, was allowed to remain in its corner” (Pnin 146), an image which underscores his vulnerability. Our sense of his vulnerability makes his experiences especially poignant:

Then, with a moan of anguished anticipation, he went back to the sink and, bracing himself, dipped his hand deep into the foam. A jagger of glass stung him. Gently he removed a broken goblet. The beautiful bowl was intact. (Pnin 173)

Nabokov tosses the reader’s emotions around quite frankly here. This near-loss of his beloved bowl prefigures the loss of his job, the doom which cannot be averted. These painful twinges that reader experiences require the reader’s receptivity.

The reader’s receptive role involves not only emotional responses; the reader gets similarly enveloped in aesthetic moments:

An elliptic flock of pigeons, in circular volitation, soaring gray, flapping white, and then gray again, wheeled across the limpid, pale sky, above the College Library. A train whistled afar as mournfully as in the steppes. A skimpy squirrel dashed over a patch of sunlit snow, where a tree trunk’s shadow, olive-green on the turf, became grayish blue for a stretch, while the tree itself, with a brisk, scrabbly sound, ascended, naked, into the sky, where the pigeons swept by for a third and last time. (Pnin 73)

In these kinds of passages, the reader’s role is to appreciate the beauty of the images: “It was a pity nobody saw the display in the empty street, where the auroral breeze wrinkled a large luminous puddle, making of the
telephone wires reflected in it illegible lines of black zigzags” (*Pnin* 110). Nabokov combines beauty and pity, implementing his own version of Aristotle's definition of art. In this novel especially, he designs a role for the reader: to experience the beauty and pathos of his novel in a receptive, if not passive, role.

In *Pnin*, the narrator pushes the reader into this specific role, and plays on his ability to draw an emotional response: “Now a secret must be imparted. Professor Pnin was on the wrong train” (*Pnin* 8). The narrator makes the reader complicitous with his own role, which is to impose a narrative structure on the material, and the narrator draws us into this task:

Some people—and I am one of them—hate happy ends. We feel cheated. Harm is the norm. Doom should not jam. The avalanche stopping in its tracks a few feet above the cowering village behaves not only unnaturally but unethically. (*Pnin* 25-26)

The narrator shapes Pnin’s experiences into a narrative structure or plot. But he draws attention to this role, and thereby involves us in it, placing the reader into the less passive, more complicitous role of desiring to see doom takes its course, to see the avalanche complete its path.

Merely playing Nabokov's intellectual games would not be a complete experience of his fiction; these other aspects of reading his fictions claim a significant stake of the reader’s attention. Explicitly pointing this out, he criticizes Robert Louis Stevenson’s work for neglecting this second part: “We enjoy every detail of the marvellous juggling, of the beautiful trick, but there is no artistic emotional throb involved...” (*Lectures on Literature* 254). In Nabokov’s view, Stevenson handles the trick part skillfully, but he fails to
incorporate the aesthetic and emotional moments, which, as the reader experiences them, make the novel live and breathe. If this second part is an essential component of novels, we should expect that Nabokov would incorporate it into his own fictions, including Lolita, in which the aesthetic moments and even the moments of empathy--of emotional response--are also in operation, at least potentially, in the brief glimpses does offer into Dolores's experience.

Nabokov uses the image of the spine--an idea that John Shade's ideas about reading echoes--to explore this complexity of the reader's role and relationship to the text, their multiple dimensions. Instead of the images of heart or mind which imply only emotional or only cerebral readings, the image of the spine falls in between the conscious intellect and the less controllable shiver or thrill of the nerves:

In order to bask in that magic a wise reader reads the book of genius not with his heart, not so much with his brain, but with his spine. It is there that occurs the telltale tingle even though we must keep a little aloof, a little detached when reading. Then with a pleasure which is both sensual and intellectual we shall watch the artist build his castle of cards and watch the castle of cards become a castle of beautiful steel and glass. (“Good Readers and Good Writers” 6) The author's magic works upon the reader's whole being--not just the mind or heart--to give life to the fictional creation.
Reading *Lolita*

In Nabokov’s words, “of course, art at its greatest is fantastically deceitful and complex” (*Strong Opinions*, p. 33). This describes all of Nabokov’s work, and *Lolita* especially well, as *Lolita* contains an abundance of deceptions, with its subject matter adding an extra level of complexity to the reader’s attempts at interpretation. The emotional reactions that the subject matter produces (the specific nature of which may of course vary from reader to reader, but is unlikely to be absent) undermine any sense of sure-footedness the skillful decipherer of puzzles might feel. Looking at *Lolita* only in that very cerebral way would not yield a full reading. And although many of his other works contain moments which draw emotional reactions from the reader, the subject matter of Humbert Humbert’s crimes and his explanations of them opens this novel up, somewhat uniquely, to referential systems such as moral and aesthetic systems or philosophies which could seem to conflict with the idea of the novel as a world unto itself.

Whether these extra-textual referential systems have any place in the reader’s experience of the text or not, Nabokov has designed the novel in such a way (such as by including an example of a moral reader of Humbert’s narrative in the foreword) that readers will at least engage them, whether to dismiss or accept their relevance. In this way, *Lolita*, rich as ever in Nabokov’s usual devices--the distorting mirrors, refracting prisms, shifting planes, and shadow worlds--gains some extra complications. Nabokov’s spells, lures, and transfixing patterns enchant, seduce, and mesmerize the reader with particular force and added dimension.
Nabokov offers ample comments on this particular novel, comments that could help to reveal what kind of a reading experience he imagines for this novel. Some of his comments emphasize the puzzle-solver’s role. For instance, he says that he would “never regret Lolita. She was like the composition of a beautiful puzzle--its composition and its solution at the same time, since one is a mirror view of the other, depending on the way you look” (Strong Opinions 20). He also emphasizes the idea that reading the novel should mean engaging only the novel, not bringing other systems of reference to it. When asked in an interview why he wrote Lolita, Nabokov responds that

It was an interesting thing to do. Why did I write any of my books, after all? For the sake of the pleasure, for the sake of the difficulty. I have no social purpose, no moral message; I’ve no general ideas to exploit, I just like composing riddles with elegant solutions. (Strong Opinions 16)

Nabokov also describes the novel as the most “abstract,” as a novel perhaps especially distant from the real: “I would say that of all my books Lolita has left me with the most pleasurable afterglow--perhaps because it is the purest of all, the most abstract and carefully contrived” (Strong Opinions, p. 47). Describing it as the most abstract and contrived suggests that he has consciously created a representation that is not in fact real; the novel creates the semblance of reality but not authentic reality:

*Lolita* is a special favorite of mine. It was my most difficult book--the book that treated of a theme which was so distant, so remote, from my own emotional life that it gave me a special pleasure to use my
combinational talent to make it real. (Strong Opinions 15)

The novel generates the sense of reality, but it also reminds us--through word games that point to the constructedness of its world, and through gaps and framing devices in Humbert’s narrative that undermine it--that it is only an impression. The image Nabokov wished to have on the book jacket suggests this emphasis on creating the semblance of reality but not reality itself:

Who would be capable of creating a romantic, delicately drawn, non-Freudian and non-juvenile, picture for LOLITA (a dissolving remoteness, a soft American landscape, a nostalgic highway--that sort of thing)? There is one subject which I am emphatically opposed to: any kind of representation of a little girl. (Selected Letters 1940-1947 250)

He argues against actual representations of real girls, and instead for a nostalgic or dreamy image--for “pure colors, melting clouds, accurately drawn details, a sunburst a receding road with the light reflected in furrows and ruts, after rain. And no girls” (Selected Letters 1940-1947 256). He argues for an impression that creates the feeling of reality but he takes pains to illustrate the difference between such an impression and reality itself, a point which the novel as a whole is itself suggesting.

In fact, seeing rents in the illusion of reality is essential to a full reading of the novel. If we simply accept the representation Humbert creates of Dolores, we are failing to attend to the ways in which the novel as a whole undermines that representation. The narrative as self-justification in a sense does contain and trap the representation of Dolores because it
shapes our reading of her, often preventing readers from seeing past its own rhetoric and deception. But there are gaps in that rhetoric, signs of the constructedness of the world of the novel, and framing devices that allow the reader to resist the spell of Humbert’s narrative. And Nabokov clearly does want us to be aware of Dolores’s suffering even though Humbert’s narrative cloaks it. Humbert attempts to portray Dolores as seductive and otherworldly, trying to disavow his responsibility, but the name that Nabokov chooses for her undermines this attempt as it points to her girlhood and her suffering:

Another consideration was the welcome murmur of its source name, the fountain name: those roses and tears in ‘Dolores.’ My little girl’s heartrending fate had to be taken into account together with the cuteness and limpidity. (Strong Opinions 25)

The cuteness and limpidity suggest youth and innocence, which Humbert takes from her and which her name reminds us of, lest we lose sight of that fact. Nabokov also states that his “moral defense of the book is the book itself” (Selected Letters 1940-1947 210), a comment which suggests that the book must contain elements that undermine Humbert’s defense of himself.

A disjunction between the narrative voice which seeks to both romanticize and justify its own desires and the underlying events of the story arises, a disjunction which the novel does not hide and which seems central to its reading. What we have in Lolita is a novel that presents us with something monstrous--the desires and actions which Humbert describes to us, as he attempts to cloak them in the language of romanticized longing--but also a novel that presents us with the way to
avoid simply repeating the monstrosity, to avoid allowing the experience of reading to be merely the passive absorption of Humbert’s narrative. Certain ways of reading the novel lead to a process of sorting through the distortion of Humbert’s narrative and accessing an underlying image. In this way, the novel sounds like the “nonnons” of *Invitation to Beheading*, an image which seems a clear figuration of how art functions. To represent human experience and imagination, the author does not simply draw what he sees, but designs his art in the image of the toy mirrors Cincinnatus’ mother describes:

> there were objects called ‘nonnons’...a special mirror came with them, not just crooked, but completely distorted...you would have a crazy mirror like that and a whole collection of different ‘nonnons,’ absolutely absurd objects, shapeless, mottled, pockmarked, knobby things, like some kind of fossils--but the mirror, which completely distorted ordinary objects, now, you see, got real food, that is, when you placed one of these incomprehensible, monstrous objects so that it was reflected in the incomprehensible, monstrous mirror, a marvelous thing happened...the shapeless speckledness became in the mirror a wonderful sensible image. (*Invitation to a Beheading* 135)

To capture this “wonderful sensible image” the viewer needs the mirror, or the system for seeing the image. The image we are seeing is monstrous and distorted, but can be transformed into a sensible image through certain ways of seeing, or of reading. Not all readings of Humbert’s narrative need accept his account, his monstrous justifications of his actions. Nabokov’s method—representing Humbert’s monstrosity but not in a simple didactic way—is in
keeping with Nabokov's comments about the function of art. Rather than imply insert an easy moral into a straightforward account as would John Ray if he were the author, Nabokov instead creates a living narrative and world which we must figure out a way to negotiate, and the significance of the novel emerges there: not on the page itself but in the process of turning the novel over in one's mind, in the process of reading.

In *Lolita*, Nabokov creates a world of layered voices and perspectives that play against one another, problematizing both representation and interpretation. Nabokov embeds the primary narrative of Humbert and Dolores within the larger structure of the novel, framing it with the interpretive voices of John Ray in the foreword and Nabokov himself in the afterword. And the narrative in between these is Humbert's account of the events--a defense he writes for his jurors--rather than an account we are to see as objective. By embedding narratives which refract the representation of Humbert and Dolores through lenses of unreliable narratorial voice and interpretative models (psychoanalytic and moralistic, for example), Nabokov keeps his readers at a distance from the actual events of the story. Julia Bader describes Nabokov as creating narratives in which “the self-mocking commentary of the narrators on their own passionate involvements, the self-conscious dissection by the author of his own work, and the shifting nature of the characters within each work suggest that there is no stable, empirical ‘reality’” (62). Yet at the same time, the novel does allow us to see through Humbert’s narrative, to see it as a justification of himself that we need not accept, through those very framing devices that seem to distance us from the story as well as through aspects of Humbert’s narrative itself. The
framing devices and word games in the world of the novel point to the constructedness of that world; Humbert’s narration creates the semblance of reality but not reality itself. The quality of Humbert’s voice is romantic in such a consistent way that a disharmony between that voice and what it describes must necessarily arise as a central part of the experience of reading *Lolita*. And we see rents in his narrative of self-justification—brief glimpses of Dolores suffering—that could be glimpses that Humbert is intentionally allowing, or they could be moments in which Nabokov takes control of the narrative, in which we read Humbert Humbert as the object of artistic creation rather than its author.

By beginning the text with the voice of the fictional persona of John Ray, distinct from the narrating voice which speaks for most of the novel, Nabokov spins out a text of competing voices that tend to undermine one another. At the outset of the novel, John Ray’s voice reduces his own credibility, as for instance when he is so pleased with himself for winning a prize for “a modest work (‘Do the Senses make Sense?’)” (3). Yet his comments do have the crucial effect of undermining our acceptance of Humbert’s text as anything but a heavily constructed account. In the foreword, we learn that Humbert’s lawyer has asked Ray to edit Humbert’s manuscript (3); John Ray may have interfered with the text itself, for all we know. Furthermore, Ray points out that Humbert Humbert did not want to change the nickname “Lolita,” because it “is too closely interwound with the inmost fiber of the book to allow one to alter it” (4). But Humbert weaves the names “Humbert Humbert” and “Haze” into the narrative rather closely as well, with all the plays on their sounds and meanings:
“Humbert Humbert lumbering” (23), “and I a humble hunchback” (62), the times when people like the principal mis-say his name—“Mr. Humberson...Dr. Hummer...Dorothy Hummerson” (178), Dolores’s plays on his name—"Dear Mummy and Hummy” (81), and the plays on the alias “Haze” such as “my dolorous and hazy darling” (53). That Humbert leaves the nickname “Lolita” as it is, decides to change other names to “Haze” and “Humbert Humbert,” and yet integrates these aliases into the fiber of the narrative just as much as he does “Lolita” illustrates how skillfully and completely Humbert has manipulated his representation of Dolores and himself. John Ray’s telling us that he has changed “Humbert” but not “Lolita”—which prompts the recognition of Humbert’s authorial license—actually undermines Humbert’s narrative because it warns us about accepting everything he says without questioning it.

As much as Nabokov makes Ray a ridiculous character, he attributes to him a sense of the concept of the “real” as a false or impossible idea, as does Nabokov himself later, in the afterword: “For the benefit of old-fashioned readers who wish to follow the destinies of the ‘real’ people beyond the ‘true’ story, a few details may be given” (4). Nabokov himself says that the word “reality” is “one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes” (312). Having Ray say “real” in quotation marks as he does himself seems to be a playful way of keeping his readers from feeling comfortable or sure about anything. In this way, Nabokov keeps his readers attentive and active rather than passive, while at the same time as reminding us of his authorial control. This comment also provides us with a warning about simply accepting—or dismissing—any single or overly
simplified reading of the narrative to come.

Nabokov writes John Ray as a preemptive strike against our reading Humbert’s narrative as he does, with a oversimplified view of Humbert’s actions and their effect on Dolores Haze: a dismissal of Humbert as anomalous and outside the pale of humanity. After Ray says, in such an unappealing tone, that Humbert “is a shining example of moral leprosy” and that “He is abnormal. He is not a gentleman” (5), most readers would feel silly in reading the text which follows with a simple moral evaluation of Humbert’s character or actions; Nabokov’s strategy in parodying the moral reader tends to preclude any degree of compassion for Dolores for most readers. As Linda Kauffman argues, in John Ray’s section “parody thus acts as an injunction against a certain mode of referential reading” (133). She points out that with this move Nabokov is restricting literature to the realm of “self-referential artifice” (133) rather than allowing that it might comment upon or even affect the world outside of itself. But this effect of parody may not inevitably produce this effect, or preclude empathy for Dolores. It precludes reference to, for instance, concrete moral systems, but perhaps simple compassion or empathy need not fall into such a category; they are in fact not barred from but rather essential to the reading of Nabokov’s novels in general.

The reason for Nabokov’s exclusion of modes of readings that refer to systems of thinking and evaluation exterior to the text may not be so much the attempt to produce the complete evacuation of moral value from the world of fiction, as the product of desire for authorial control, for mastery of text and its interpretation. In *Strong Opinions*, when asked whether his
characters ever took on a life of their own, he replies that he is the absolute "dictator" in the world of his fiction. Art must be self-contained and under the control of its creator, protected from readers who could refer to contexts outside of the piece and form interpretations which might infringe upon Nabokov's control of his fictional representation. But this insistence is different from a desire for passivity in the reader, and it is also different from absolutely barring all emotional responses to the novel; there may be room for compassion for Dolores and disgust at Humbert's actions to emerge in the process of reading.

Another possible reason for exiling the straightforward moralistic approach that John Ray's reading represents is that his perspective may actually minimize the monstrosity of Humbert's actions. Such an approach as John Ray's, viewing Humbert not as a human being whose narrative reveals him to have some capacity for control but instead viewing Humbert's actions more as symptoms of a disease, which implies relative lack of control, does not get at the most disturbing qualities of the story: that a person with a very clear head (at least at times, and the moments of apparent loss of control may very well be fabricated by Humbert), a person whose voice has the power to cast a spell over us, commits such actions and then attempts to justify his actions in such appalling ways to his listeners. A John Ray response would rob the narrative of its most startling quality, the disjunction between the appeal of his voice and the events it describes. In this way, the shape of the narrative--its form--and content seem to work on different levels or even in opposition.

The opening passage of Humbert's narrative is seductively musical
and appealing until we learn that Lolita is a young girl. But Humbert maintains the appealing quality of his voice even after we see what it is describing. And Humbert’s voice retains its lulling and lyrical qualities throughout his account, even as our sense of the disjunction between such a voice and what it describes increases. After Humbert reveals Dolores’s age, he draws the readers into his experience in other ways, such as in the passage describing his secret meeting with Annabel (14-15). He draws the readers in a complicitous involvement with his desires; we share their experience of fear at being discovered. He invites us turn our reading into complicity, even into participation:

I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay; I want them to examine its every detail and see for themselves how careful, how chaste, the whole wine-sweet event is if viewed with what my lawyer has called, in a private talk we had, with ‘impartial sympathy.’ (57)

The seductive quality of his voice, and his invitation to complicity, threaten to lure the reader into alignment with his pursuits.

These elements complement the function of the narrative as carefully constructed self-justification, as a self-defense for his trial to win over his readers, the jurors. From the very beginning, Humbert seeks to construct our view of him so as to earn our sympathies. In describing his summer with Annabel, he offers an explanation for his adult desire for nymphets which casts him as passively shaped and wounded by circumstances rather than as being responsible for himself and future actions: “the poison was in the wound, and the wound remained ever open. . .” (18) In attempting to
analyze the origin of his desire, he describes the difficulty of fixing that 
source but also casts himself as a creature of cravings and a particular 
nature, implicitly suggesting that his impulses are not under his control, and 
by extension that it would be difficult to hold him responsible for acting on 
them:

was it then, in the glitter of that remote summer, that the rift in my 
life began; or was my excessive desire for that child only the first 
evidence of an inherent singularity? When I try to analyze my own 
cravings, motives, actions and so forth, I surrender to a sort of 
retrospective imagination which feeds the analytic faculty with 
boundless alternatives and which causes each visualized route to fork 
and re-fork without an end in the maddeningly complex prospect of 
my past. (13)

His desire sounds like a force that he cannot explain or control, a kind of 
disease with which he is afflicted, and his emphasis on his uniqueness or 
oddity is a subtle way of almost aestheticizing his condition, and of 
removing it from the realm of choice and control.

In his discussion of Annabel, Humbert also attempts to play on the 
reader’s sympathies by sentimentally representing himself as unloved as he 
wishes: “Oh, Lolita, had you loved me thus!” (14) Humbert attempts to 
disguise the gulf between the two experiences, the difference between the 
relationship between a boy and young girl and a man and a young girl by 
implying that Lolita replaced Annabel: “I broke her spell by incarnating her 
another” (15). To say that he broke the spell is also to ascribe a demonic, 
superhuman, power in an attempt to hide the essential powerlessness of a
young girl under an adult’s care. Humbert consistently crafts our impression of Dolores, differentiating her from other children: “But let us be prim and civilized. Humbert Humbert tried hard to be good. Really and truly, he did. He had the utmost respect for ordinary children, with their purity and vulnerability” (21). He also points out that he would not do such things to “ordinary” children. According to his narrative, Dolores is different and therefore the usual standards do not apply to her, as if what he terms her “eerie vulgarity” justifies his desire: Humbert claims that she is not “the fragile child of a feminine novel” (44).

He attempts to justify acting upon his desires by differentiating her from “ordinary” children most fully in his discussions of his theory of nymphets. This theory questions the humanity of nymphets and seeks to draw attention away from the powerlessness of a young girl by emphasizing the wiles and spells the nymphet can cast: “Now I wish to introduce the following idea,” that there exist creatures who are “not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac)” (16); he describes the nymphet as a “deadly demon among the wholesome children” (17). By defining nymphets this way, Humbert seeks to draw the reader’s sympathies to himself, away from the young girls he desires. He continues in this strategy throughout the novel, representing Dolores as a particularly sinister nymphet:

I should have understood that Lolita had already proved to be something different from Annabel, and that the nymphean evil breathing through every pore of the fey child that I had prepared for my secret delectation. (125)

Even as he is describing the way he has drugged her, rendered her utterly
passive and helpless, he represents her as demonic and dangerous.

In addition to demonizing nymphets, he represents his desire as a kind of aesthetic pursuit: “I would have the reader see ‘nine’ and ‘fourteen’ as the boundaries--the mirrory beaches and rosy rocks--of an enchanted island haunted by those nymphets of mine and surrounded by a vast, misty sea” (16). In this passage, he renders his attraction as a state of beautiful, dreamy wistfulness. When he describes the way he remembers Dolores, he does so in the terms of artistic representation, emphasizing the aesthetic qualities of the image rather than describing a living, actual human being; he suggests that there exist “two kinds of visual memory” (11). One is a sort of scientific recreation, and the other more an aesthetic image: “when you instantly evoke, with shut eyes, on the dark side of your eyelids, the objective, absolutely optical replica of a beloved face, a little ghost in natural colors (and this is how I see Lolita)” (11). Later, when Humbert has Dolores drugged upstairs, he sees another young girl in the lobby, a pale girl, who he represents as the aesthetic counterpoint to the darker Dolores (126). He aestheticizes his pedophilia by proposing that it is an artistic pursuit, and argues that only some people recognize nymphets, a skillful preemptive strike against the skepticism of the reader who would argue that nymphets are a creation of his mind, a position which the fact that only Humbert sees them would support: “You have to be an artist and a madman” (17). Only the romantic figure of the mad artist has access to the nymphet’s true nature, the perception of which becomes an aesthetic pursuit. And finally, Humbert takes pains to ensure that this theory of nymphets includes a clause that to perceive the nymphean nature, the man
must be significantly older than the girl:

since the idea of time plays such a magic part in the matter, the student should not be surprised to learn that there must be a gap of several years, never less than ten I should say, generally thirty or forty, and as many as ninety in a few known cases, between maiden and man to enable the latter to come under a nymphet’s spell. It is a question of focal adjustment, of a certain distance that the inner eye thrills to surmount, and a certain contrast that the mind perceives with a gasp of perverse delight. (17)

Humbert casts the age difference as essential to the aesthetic pursuit to justify his desire on artistic grounds, and he casts the reader as student of this theory in an attempt to draw the reader into complicity with him.

In keeping with his alignment of the relationship between writer and reader with that of teacher and student, part of his ostensible instruction includes anthropological discussions of how different cultures view pedophilia. He summarizes his “research”:

Here are two of King Akhnaten’s and Queen Nefertiti’s pre-nubile daughters (that royal couple had a litter of six), wearing nothing but many necklaces of bright beads, relaxed on cushions, intact after three thousand years, with their soft brown puppybodies, cropped hair and long ebony eyes. Here are some brides of ten compelled to seat themselves on the fascinum, the virile ivory in the temples of classical scholarship. Marriage and cohabitation before the age of puberty are still not uncommon in certain East Indian provinces. (19)

The catalogue of societies allowing pedophilia continues, a comprehensive
list of situations in which he would be allowed to pursue his desires freely. He hopes that he will earn our sympathies, attempting to transfer blame onto excessive societal restrictions: "I soon found myself maturing amid a civilization which allows a man of twenty-five to court a girl of sixteen but not of twelve" (18). Here, he also implies that society is being unreasonable in establishing such taboos to distract us from holding him responsible.

Through all these rhetorical strategies Humbert employs to shape our view of him, Nabokov thematizes the rhetorical power of language, inviting us to explore the potential disjunction between language or between fiction and the world it avows to reflect. Humbert attempts to aestheticize his desire, to displace blame by demonizing nymphets or critiquing social taboos, and to use rhetoric to conceal the underlying facts of what he is doing. Language, skillfully manipulated, threatens to suppress the reality of Dolores's experience. A gulf opens up between language--and the fictions Humbert creates about his pedophilia--and what it describes. Humbert's narrative creates the impression of reality, but only its semblance or illusion. Yet the novel as a whole allows the possibility of the reader seeing through the illusion, at least at times and in a limited way.

Even if we were to fall for some of Humbert's ploys, certain elements of his attempts at self-justification fail as the narrative unfolds. For instance, at first he has some success at creating the impression that he is not really hurting her, that he is taking his pleasure without her knowing: "I knew exactly what I wanted to do, and how to do it, without impinging on a child's chastity; after all, I had had some experience in my life of pederosis; had visually possessed dappled nymphets in parks. . ." (56). He attempts to
convince us that there is "no harm done," and that "[w]hat I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another fanciful Lolita--perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness--indeed, no life of her own" (62). This idea that he can fulfill his desires without affecting the actual, real Dolores quickly begins to break down, however, as he takes this rhetorical strategy to excess:

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the majority of sex offenders that hanker for some throbbing, sweet-moaning, physical but not necessarily coital, relation with a girl-child, are innocuous, inadequate, passive, timid strangers who merely ask the community to allow them to pursue their practically harmless, so-called aberrant behavior, their little hot wet private acts of sexual deviation without the police and society cracking down upon them. We are not sex fiends! We do not rape as good soldiers do. 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. Emphatically, no killers are we. Poets never kill. (88)

This appeal for sympathy fails in part because of the self-pitying tone, in part because as the novel progresses we see that he does in fact rape, and also because we know that he has killed. His pursuit of Dolores also begins to escalate from mere contact--the scene where she sits on his lap--to his plan to drug her. He is still trying to keep her from being aware of what he is doing, but is now proposing to do much more to her.
If his tricks, his attempts at gaining our sympathies, work on the reader, they only do so for a time. They are easily recognizable as carefully constructed ploys upon close reading and rereading; Nabokov does not prevent the reader from seeing the strategies of Humbert's attempt at self-justification and resisting them. Although Nabokov does present Humbert as controlling his narrative, Nabokov is of course the shaper of his character and ultimately in control of whether or not Humbert's attempts at gaining our sympathies are successful. And although some readers do align themselves with Humbert, Nabokov has built the grounds for the reader's resistance of Humbert's efforts—for our refusal to accept his representation of Dolores and who should bear the responsibility for the events of the narrative—into the text in a variety of ways.

Knowing that his mental health is in question, for instance, opens up the possibility of readers questioning his account. Sometimes information about his mental instability seems part of his attempt to gain our sympathies, but there does seem to be evidence that at least some degree of his mental instability is real. Early on we hear about his bout with insanity, when he goes to a sanatorium and plays tricks on the psychiatrists (34). If the fact that all our information comes from Humbert and therefore might be part of his carefully constructed self-justification seems to preclude any reading of the novel as a whole as not necessarily legitimizing Humbert's actions, reports of his insanity reopen the possibility that Humbert may not be entirely clear-minded and by extension may not be in full control of his narrative at all times, and that we may be able to see through his attempts at self-justification. In addition to hearing references to his instability, we
even see examples of it, moments of dissolution that destabilize his narrative:

This daily headache in the opaque air of this tombal jail is disturbing, but I must persevere. Have written more than a hundred pages and not got anywhere yet. My calendar is getting confused. That must have been around August 15, 1947. Don't think I can go on. Heart, head--everything. Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita. Repeat till the page is full, printer. (109)

This passage constitutes the entirety of Chapter 26, and obviously the printer has not followed this directive. Humbert describes his confusion and the pressure he feels, and the text in its narrative and self-justificatory capacities degenerates to compulsive repetition, to a series of sounds that cease to signify.

Sometimes the terms of Humbert's self-justification shift, which also destabilizes his narrative. For instance, he usually uses the idea of the artist as an analog for what he is doing to Dolores as a central part of his project to redeem himself in the readers' eyes. But in the following passages, he shifts to describing himself as a recorder rather than an artist: "I consider it my artistic duty to preserve its intonations no matter how false and brutal they may seem to me now" (71); "but I am no poet. I am only a very conscientious recorder" (72). This shift in terms calls into question the authenticity of his claim that pursuing nymphets is akin to art. Representing himself as an artist reveals itself to be a mere rhetorical strategy, one which may be modified and even reversed to suit his ends. In this case, if we read this moment in this manner, we remember that
Humbert is in fact the true author’s creature, and that author seems at least somewhat committed to keeping the reader alert to Humbert’s strategies and the ways in which they break down.

Hints of his violent streak also undermine his attempt to represent himself as engaged in mere aesthetic pursuit, one that does not really harm anyone. We learn that he used to twist Valeria’s wrist (83) and that Charlotte is less easy to control. He speaks menacingly of Charlotte too, though, as he describes how Charlotte “rubbed her cheek against my temple. Valeria soon got over that” (93). Some of Humbert’s descriptions of himself also sound like those of a monster or predator: “I am lanky, big-boned, wooly-chested Humbert Humbert, with thick black eyebrows and a queer accent, and a cesspoolful of rotting monsters behind his slow boyish smile” (44). He describes himself with spider imagery, saying that his “web is spread all over the house” (49), and with wolf imagery as well: “It was still a nymphet’s scent that in despair I tried to pick up, as I bayed through the undergrowth of dark decaying forests” (76-7). Of course the fact that Humbert has written these passages seems to problematize our reading them as undermining his own self-justification, but Humbert is still always a character himself, a creature of Nabokov’s, speaking the lines written for him. So Nabokov may be scripting these kinds of passages to ensure that Humbert’s attempts at portraying himself as a harmless artist do not fully succeed.

A technique Humbert uses to distract the readers from thinking too much about the consequences of his actions for Dolores, a technique which does seem intentional and within his control, is of undermining any
attempts to read his narrative as realism. For instance, he turns our attention away from the action and character’s experiences with word play, sometimes as a substitute for his encounters with Dolores: “Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!” (32). This passage can have the effect of lightening the mood and obscuring the reality of what he has done to Dolores, representing it as playful and insignificant. Similarly, he attempts to disguise an act of blackmail in aesthetic playfulness, calling it “mauvemail” (71), which sounds much less ominous. He uses word games as a distracting technique when he incorporates an excerpt from Who’s Who in the Limelight that is rife with coincidences and word games, as is the list of children in her class. In the afterword, Nabokov fondly mentions the latter as one of the aesthetic moments he most remembers from the novel, maintaining an emphasis on this aspect of reading—appreciating a text’s aesthetic qualities. But such moments may simultaneously be aesthetically pleasing moments and distracting techniques; they need not be only one or the other. It is Humbert who tries to appeal to the reader’s aesthetic sensibilities in an attempt to justify his actions or to distract us from their implications for Dolores, and as readers we can notice aesthetic or formal qualities without neglecting the other dimensions of reading, such as noticing the poignance of a character trapped in the fictional world, as is Dolores here.

In addition to distracting us with word play, Humbert draws our attention away from his actions and their consequences by undermining the narrative’s realistic base. The self-referentiality of his narrative reminds us that it is in fact a construction, a piece of artifice apart from the world we
inhabit and therefore not subject to its laws. Undermining realism allows Humbert to escape judgement, or at least he hopes it does. For instance, Humbert’s explanation to Charlotte that his diary is a collection of notes for a novel he is writing reminds us that in a sense we are reading the notes for a novel: “the notes you found were fragments of a novel. Your name and hers were put there by mere chance. Just because they came handy” (96). He tries to use this explanation to answer Charlotte’s charges, just as he constantly draws attention to his narrative as a construct to distract us from the reality of his actions and their consequences for Dolores. Nabokov of course sometimes uses this same tactic to insist that we read fictions as worlds unto themselves, of a different substance than that of daily life. But the desired effect of such comments seems quite different: to encourage deeper engagement of a text, not to justify the actions of a pedophile. And this novel does invite an exploration of the relationship between fiction and reality, so discussing that relationship is in fact an essential part of entering into the world of the novel on its own terms, as Nabokov asks us to do.

Humbert explores this relationship between fiction and reality, pointing out that the semblance of reality in fiction is something that must be carefully cultivated. But in so doing, he actually undermines that semblance of reality, reminding us that it is the result of careful artifice: “every once in a while I have to remind the reader of my appearance much as a professional novelist, who has given a character of his some mannerism or a dog, has to go on producing that dog or that mannerism every time the character crops up in the course of the book” (104). This discussion of how the novelist creates the illusion of consistency, of the tangible reality of characters, in
effect cuts through the illusion of reality in Humbert’s text, which can produce the effect of turning the reader’s attention away from the reality of Dolores’ experience.

Humbert undermines the realistic base of his narrative in a second way as well: through the insistence on fate as a driving force of the narrative, an insistence which grows into a kind of parody of that idea as he takes the idea to excess and renders it artificial-sounding. For instance he personifies fate in the figure of “Aubrey McFate” (56), giving the attempt to incarnate fate or assign it a physical presence a comic ring. He uses the conventional techniques of allegorizing and personifying abstract forces—in one case fate, in another coincidence, the opposite of fate—to excess, with the effect of creating a sense of fictionalization or artificiality: “granted it was the long hairy arm of Coincidence that had reached out to remove an innocent woman, might Coincidence not ignore in a heathen moment what its twin lamb had done and hand Lo a premature note of commiseration?” (105). At times, fate also seems too mechanical of a force to seem genuine, also potentially undermining the illusion of reality, as in Humbert’s description of the car accident that kills Charlotte: “nothing might have happened, had not precise fate, that synchronizing phantom, mixed within its alembic the car and the dog and the sun and the shade and the wet and the weak and the strong and the stone” (103). The repetition creates a hypnotic momentum that could draw the reader away from thinking about the implications of this accident for Charlotte’s daughter.

Much of the first third or so of Humbert’s narrative occupies itself with these various techniques of self-justification and strategies of
distraction. Nabokov does provide the grounds for resisting these techniques and strategies, and as we move further into his narrative these grounds become firmer. Humbert’s tone begins to tend further toward comic comments on the reality of Dolores’ suffering. For instance, when clothes-shopping for her he describes “pumps of crushed kid for crushed kids” (108) and “some pyjamas “in popular butcher-boy style. Humbert, the popular butcher” (108). The playfulness of the language no longer disguises the costs of what he is doing to Dolores.

As the strategy of representing his desire as artistic become less effective--and he seems to be aware that they might not work as well after he has told us about the details of their experiences--he looks to other means, or refinements of those earlier means, to keep our sympathies. He expands the idea of Dolores as inhuman or demoniac, reinventing it in his representation of her as already sexually experienced (135) and therefore not as vulnerable. Of course he does not address the difference in Charlie’s age and his; their camp relationship was much closer to one of equals, and presumably much less affected by an imbalance in terms of control.

Our insight into the strategies he uses to manipulate Dolores increases. Early in their story, he capitalizes on his resemblance to an actor she has a childhood crush on (43). He takes advantage of her view of him as “a great big hunk of movieland manhood” (39). On a more serious level, Humbert takes advantage of her innocence, of her sense of sex as a game kids play with each other (133). When she kisses him, he goes along with her sense of sex as a game:

I knew, of course, it was but an innocent game on her part, a bit of
backfisch foolery in imitation of some simulacrum of fake romance, and since, (as the psychotherapist, as well as the rapist, will tell you) the limits and rules of such girlish games are fluid, or at least too childishly subtle for the senior partner to grasp--I was dreadfully afraid I might go too far and cause her to start back in revulsion and terror. (113)

Not only does Nabokov choose to represent her initiation of this encounter as a child's game, portraying Dolores as not fully aware of what she is initiating, but Nabokov also takes pains to make us aware that Humbert knows this too and takes advantage of that knowledge. If Humbert is revealing the fact that Dolores approached him to justify what he does, we are still aware that Nabokov is ultimately deciding what Humbert reveals and he leaves out, so the inclusion of this detail can actually serve to undermine Humbert's attempt at self-justification.

The aftermath of this experience reveals that Dolores has initiated more than she expected to, that the experience has robbed her of the innocence of seeing sexual experience as play between children or adolescents of comparable age. She begins to make comments that reveal a sense that what he has done is morally questionable. For instance, according to Humbert the word “Dad” sounds ironic now when she speaks it: “Dad (she let the word expand with ironic deliberation)” (112). Her apparently playful jokes begin to reveal a sense of her realization that their experience differs radically from the sex-play between equals at camp. When he kisses her on the neck, she responds not with flirtation as she might have earlier in the narrative, but with disgust: “Don't do that,” she said looking at me with
unfeigned surprise. 'Don’t drool on me. You dirty man’” (115). And she even names what they are doing “incest”—a clear illustration of her loss of the innocence of childhood (119). In addition to these brief moments of insight into Dolores’ experience, Humbert allows us access to his contemplations Dolores’ experiences. He reports his attempt to try to remember that she is a human being and a child—rather than the demoniac nymphet creature of his imagination: “Remember she is only a child, remember she is only—” (112). And also in apparent contradiction to the impulse towards self-justification, Humbert admits to regretting not withdrawing from her life: “And my only regret today is that I did not quietly deposit key ‘342’ at the office, and leave the town, the country, the continent, the hemisphere,—indeed, the globe—that very night” (123). Both of these moments undermine the earlier strategies of self-justification and distraction. In these moments, Humbert seems more a creature of Nabokov’s narrative than an author in full control of the world of his narrative, and using these moments as grounds for distancing ourselves from Humbert and his desires becomes a more viable mode of reading.

He does continue to employ all the old strategies, but they become less effective as his comments sound increasingly menacing and his voice more out of control. For instance, when she is asleep in their room at the Enchanted Hunters he describes her as the “velvety victim locked up in one’s dungeon” (125). His attempts to control our interpretations, for instance by belittling the women of the jury and making them sound prudish and peevish, begin to sound desperate and work less effectively, as in the following remark: “Gentlewomen of the jury! Bear with me! Allow me to
take just a tiny bit of your precious time!” (123)

A reference to the reader’s exasperation, an attempt at preempting or dismantling any such response in the reader, does not work as well now that we have seen the actual fulfillment of his desires:

Please, reader: no matter your exasperation with the tenderhearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect hero of my book, do not skip these essential pages! Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me; try to discern the doe in me, trembling in the forest of my own iniquity; let’s even smile a little. After all, there’s no harm in smiling. For instance (I almost wrote ‘frinstance’), I had no place to rest my head, and in a fit of heartburn (they call those fries ‘French,’ _grand Dieu_!) was added to my discomfort. (129)

In this passage Humbert employs his usual strategies with special skill, distracting us from his rapaciousness with his urbane, cultivated persona as well as with playfulness, and representing himself as vulnerable and tortured. Here, though, referring to himself as a character in his own book reminds us that he is just that; by extension we sense that his comments and actions are part of a larger orchestration of Nabokov’s, and that the disjunction between Humbert’s rapaciousness and the way he represents himself as artist and aesthete is one that Nabokov might wish us to recognize.

In the scene in which Humbert first glimpses and desires Dolores, readers might well have been somewhat sympathetic or even complicit in his desire for her. We might have even seen her as the flirtatious otherworldly creature Humbert portrays her as, for a time. But the narrative does not fully sustain either of these readerly positions, if we actively explore
Humbert's narrative rather than passively succumbing to his spells, if we notice when the text turns and shifts rather than simply applying the same formulas to it repeatedly. Passages positioned in the middle ranges of the narrative read differently that the early ones, because of the accumulated weight of intervening events and descriptions. A passage in which Humbert tries to portray himself as an artist or aesthete simply does not read in the same way after he has intercourse with Dolores as if would have before. One such later passage echoes earlier ones quite closely in its language and technique, yet reads differently than the ones that precede Humbert's kidnapping and raping of Dolores:

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 not, 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 crime's prowling ground" (131).

He has to emphasize the distinction more heavily, because with the reader's knowledge of what has transpired—that Humbert's original intention to avoid doing anything to her of which she would be aware has been fully abandoned—the distinction might not be so supportable. It is simply much harder for him, now, to prove that he is not brutal. The way he satisfied himself before, by trying to keep her from being aware that he was using her body to satisfy himself, might not have seemed as fully criminal (although somewhat so, as a kind of violation whether she was conscious of it or not) as the act of intercourse between a child and adult.

The old refrains about Dolores as demoniac seductress—as "the
immortal daemon disguised as a female child” (139) sound more obviously like hollow constructions of Humbert’s mind and rhetoric. He insists that sex is not what he was after, but the fact that the sexual act is what satisfies him explodes that argument: “I am not concerned with so-called ‘sex’ at all. Anybody can imagine those elements of animality. A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once and for all the perilous magic of nympha-ts” (134). “Fixing magic” is the name he assigns to his longing, but the descriptions of their sexual experiences, the descriptions of how each of them feel afterwards, and the fact that Humbert’s appetite is never sated all belie that claim. For instance, after they have sex “a queer dulness had replaced her usual cheerfulness” (139), suggesting that this method of “fixing the perilous magic of nympha-ts” does not succeed; rather it fails to capture any kind of magic or beauty and it in fact destroys the one he terms a nymphet.

Humbert’s descriptions of Dolores generate or develop the reader’s awareness that he is harming her; he describes himself as feeling “as if I were sitting with the small ghost of somebody I had just killed” (140). Humbert—or Humbert’s narrative as Nabokov constructs it—includes her calling him a “brute” (140). Even if readers had accepted his justification of sleeping with a twelve-year-old because of her previous experience or because she approached him, a remark like this one reminds us that Dolores, being a child, might not have the ability to fully comprehend the consequences of what she does. He realizes this too, afterwards, and shows some remorse:

This was a lone child, an absolute waif, with whom a heavy-limbed, foul-smelling adult had had strenuous intercourse three times that very morning. Whether or not the realization of a lifelong dream had
surpassed all expectation, it had, in a sense, overshot its mark—and plunged into a nightmare. (140)

Humbert recognizes that his fantasies have real consequences when he takes them out of the realm of fantasy, and that he has taken advantage of her. He reveals the details of how this experience has hurt her. She—whether in a joking manner or not—sums up what has happened to her: “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, dirty old man. . .ominous hysterical notes rang through her silly words” (140). And he has hurt her physically, too: “she started complaining of pains, said she could not sit, said I had torn something inside her” (140). Because it appears that she may have already lost her virginity at camp, this does not seem to be a reference to the tearing of her hymen, but rather a sign of Humbert’s roughness. If this marked their final experience together, the novel would be entirely different; it would still be a tale of Humbert hurting Dolores, but it would conclude with him in a state of remorse over what he has done. But it does not end here, and in fact Humbert repeats what he has done over and over again, ranging ever further away from his original stated intention of taking pleasure without Dolores’s knowledge, without harming her. And in addition to hurting her in these ways, he hurts her by revealing her mother’s death to her in a cruel and threatening way, showing her that she is fully in his power. When she wants to call her mother, he coldly informs her: “your mother is dead” (144), a little while after reminding us that she is trapped with him: “You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go” (142). With this final line of the first part of the novel we see that the narrative has
changed irreversibly; only by insisting on maintaining ideas about the text which the text no longer supports can the reader see the novel as a whole as a wholly uncritical portrait of Humbert.

The second part of the novel pulls back to some degree from this kind of insight into the reality of what Humbert is doing to Dolores, returning to a more anti-realistic mode of language play and reference to the text's constructedness, a mode which continues to function throughout the rest of the novel. David Packman, in his discussion of detection in the latter part of the novel, argues that "detective fiction plays out an epistemological project; it is about knowledge and how it is obtained" (31). The sequence in which Humbert attempts to decipher Quilty's trail of clues takes us out of our absorption in the tangible aspects of Humbert's and Dolores's experiences and turns to a more metafictional exploration of how we know or perceive reality as well as how narrative representation can operate. In this mode, the text explores the nature of reading, as we see Humbert reading the web of clues and as our experience as readers reflects his. Packman discusses this mirroring or doubling: "The problem of reading that Humbert encounters in the fictive world of the novel doubles our own when confronted by the Nabokovian text. The cryptogrammatic paper chase is itself a thematization of the activity of reading in general" (27). The reader is returned, in part, to the mode of self-conscious, cerebral puzzle-solving in which Humbert is engaged.

Although there are still glimpses of how Humbert manipulates Dolores and of the nature of Dolores’s experience, the second half of the novel withdraws, to some degree, from those insights. In the opening lines
of Part II, the narration replaces the close-up insights into Dolores’s experience with a more panoramic mode, in the case of the opening scene a view of the American landscape:

It was then that began our extensive travels all over the States. To any other type of tourist accommodation I soon grew to prefer the Functional Motel--clean, neat, safe nooks, ideal places for sleep, argument, reconciliation, insatiable illicit love. At first, in my dread of arousing suspicion, I would eagerly pay for both sections of one double unit, each containing a double bed. (145)

The novel is still recounting their experiences, but is less involved in close examination of scenes of Humbert exerting control over Dolores. Here the references to their experiences take the shape of detached third-person descriptions, which distance us from the scenes at hand. Nabokov does take Humbert’s narrative close enough to Dolores to offer glimpses of her suffering every now and then, temporarily foregrounding Humbert’s manipulations of her. But these moments come intermittently, interspersed with other kinds of passages--such as scenic descriptions and word play--that can distract the reader from Dolores’s plight, the potential result of Humbert’s increasingly sophisticated strategies for manipulating the reader.

He refines his portrayal of Dolores as the creature of capitalism and pop culture, describing her as a “a disgustingly conventional little girl,” the kind “to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster” (148). And Humbert represents himself as satisfying the desires on which advertisements capitalize and which they help to produce. If she is the ideal consumer--if that is her identity--then a
person who provides her the means to consume would be her ideal partner. Portraying her in this way provides another means of representing himself as not really harming her, and as satisfying her desires. After a description of her wishes, he explains: “I itemize these sunny nothings mainly to prove to my judges that I did everything in my power to give my Lolita a really good time” (163). The flippancy of his tone increases our sense of the coldness of a relationship based upon economic exchange. To further develop this image of Dolores as motivated largely by the desire to consume the products of advertisements, Humbert presents us with images of her extracting money from him, of selling herself in a very capitalistic way. He says that he gives her a “weekly allowance, paid to her under condition she fulfill her basic obligations...” (183). He describes another scene in terms of economic exchange:

O Reader! Laugh not, as you imagine me, on the very rack of joy noisily emitting dimes and quarters, and great big silver dollars like some sonorous, jingly and wholly demented machine vomiting riches; and in the margin of that leaping epilepsy she would firmly clutch a handful of coins in her little fist, which, anyway, I used to pry open afterwards unless she gave me the slip, scrambling away to hide her loot. (184)

The comedy of this image disguises the awfulness of this kind of exchange, and the Dolores’s underlying desperation if this is in fact not so much a scene of acquisitiveness as an attempt to save up enough money to escape. Humbert articulates that fear:

what I feared most was not that she might ruin me, but that she
might accumulate sufficient cash to run away. I believe the poor fierce-eyed child had figured out that with a mere fifty dollars in her purse she might somehow reach Broadway or Hollywood—or the foul kitchen of a diner (Help Wanted) in a dismal ex-prairie state. . .

(185)

If we had been viewing her as an unpleasingly materialistic person, this passage dismantles such a reading. In his effort to gain sympathy for his fear that he might lose her, and when suggesting that she would be worse off without him, Humbert in effect reveals the desperation Dolores feels.

In the face of this kind of insight into her plight, Humbert’s attempt to represent himself as helplessly subjected to his own desire for nymphets begins to sound hollow. He imagines talking to an officer, saying: “Officer, officer, my daughter has run away. In collusion with a detective; in love with a blackmailer. Took advantage of my utter helplessness” (224). Soon after, he describes himself as about to “enter a new cycle of persecution” (227). But the accumulation of the images of Dolores wanting to escape undermine his attempt to gain our sympathy. He simply does not sound as passive and helpless as he would have us believe; he does not sound like the one being persecuted. His strategy of portraying himself as suffering from his need for nymphets also begins to undermine itself as he reveals how far he is willing to go to keep Dolores in his power. He manipulates her with outright threats: “it would take hours of blandishments, threats and promises to make her lend me for a few seconds here brown limbs in the seclusion of the five-dollar room before undertaking anything she might prefer to my poor joy” (147). At another point he describes the means he
uses to terrorize her:

In those days, neither she nor I had thought up yet the system of monetary bribes which was to work such havoc with my nerves and her morals somewhat later. I relied on three other methods to keep my pubescent concubine in submission and passable temper. A few years before, she had spent a rainy summer under Miss Phalen’s bleary eye in a dilapidated Appalachian farmhouse that had belonged to some gnarled Haze or other in the dead past...And it was there that I warned her she would dwell with me in exile for months and years if need be, studying under me French and Latin, unless her ‘present attitude’ changes. (149)

This terrible possibility—being jailed in isolation with Humbert, completely in his power—would be even worse than their present condition, in which Dolores at least can keep alive her hope of escaping. In addition to these outright threats, Humbert tries to create the illusion that she is somehow complicitous in what is happening to her, that she bears some guilt too; he describes “that background of shared secrecy and shared guilt” (151). If she were to believe that they share guilt, she would be less likely to turn to the authorities for help.

As we become more attuned to Dolores’ plight, the reading of her as demonic and depraved becomes progressively less supported by the text as a whole. The text itself keeps reminding us how very much she is a typical girl of twelve; her desires revolve around movies and being with other children her own age, the second of which Humbert tends to deny her. She wants to go roller skating with other kids (160), which he allows reluctantly, a scene
which reminds us just how young and vulnerable she is. Yet Humbert continues to treat her roughly, as he admits:

With the quiet murmured order one gives a sweat-stained distracted cringing trained animal even in the worst of plights (what made hope or hate makes the young beast’s flanks pulsate, what black stars pierce the heart of the tamer!), I made Lo get up, and we decorously walked, and then indecorously scuttled down to the car. (169)

The image suggests the way in which he has reduced her to the state of a trapped animal, how he has not treated her as a human being. Humbert’s attempts at gaining our sympathy by exposing his desperation--how he suffers at the thought of her getting away and therefore how he must control her--incidentally have the effect of offering us a glimpse into how terrible her situation is. In this way, Humbert becomes more character than author, more a creature of Nabokov’s than one able to maintain full control of our interpretation of him.

The fact that he admits to bouts of insanity further complicates his ability to control our view of him; we become increasingly skeptical of his perspective. In this passage he reveals his mental instability and the full extent of how far he is willing to go to satisfy his appetite for nymphets:

I could switch in the course of the same day from one pole of insanity to the other--from the thought that around 1950 I would have to get rid somehow of a difficult adolescent whose magic nymphage had evaporated--to the thought that with patience and luck I might have her produce eventually a nymphet with my blood in her exquisite veins, a Lolita the Second, who would be eight or nine around 1960,
when I would still be dans la force de l'Age; indeed, the telescropy of my mind, or un-mind, was strong enough to distinguish in the remoteness of time a vieillard encore vert--or was it green rot?--bizarre, tender, salivating Dr. Humbert, practicing on supremely lovely Lolita the Third the art of being a granddad. (174)

He reveals the full extent of his appetite here, and his complete disregard for women as human beings becomes fully clear. This passage complicates the possibility of reading the end of the narrative as a scene of Humbert’s eventual recognition of Dolores’ humanity, particularly because he has chosen to leave this passage in the narrative even after that final scene occurs, not excising it in the process of revision. Because Humbert’s story is retrospection in written form, earlier moments maintain a kind of currency because he has made the authorial decision to include them even after the experiences of later, ostensibly transformative moments.

Nabokov has designed a text which makes it difficult for the reader to maintain the same interpretations as it develops, one that requires that we consistently revise our reading strategies. For instance, as the narrative intersperses references to Humbert’s aesthetic pursuit of nymphets with images of violence and animality, we reconsider Humbert’s presentation of himself as harmless aesthete. The strategies that may have worked in the beginning work less effectively in light of our knowledge of the events of the narrative. For example, Humbert continues to invoke his notion of the nymphet. He describes a girl named Eva Rosen as “a good example of a not strikingly beautiful child revealing to the perspicacious amateur some of the basic elements of nymphet charm, such as a perfect pubescent figure and
lingering eyes and high cheekbones" (190). He reminds us of how he has tried to represent his desire for nymphets as artistic, by calling attentions to the formal aspects of his desires: “The reader knows what importance I attached to having a bevy of page girls, consolation prize nymphets, around my Lolita” (190). He likes to have Dolores in the middle of what sounds like a formal composition, with an arrangement of other nymphets around her. The earlier attempts to aestheticize his desires occurred before we had seen the lengths to which Humbert will go to satisfy these desires, before we had seen him abandon his avowed resolve to not actually harm Dolores, and before the scenes of rape and violence. These later attempts simply read differently because of the intervening events. The violent and animalistic moments pile up and acquire an accumulated weight that undermines Humbert’s presentation of himself as aesthete. Nabokov designs Humbert’s narrative so that Humbert’s strategy of gaining sympathy by representing his desperation and misery incidentally reveal Dolores’ desperation and misery.

His desperation, rather than evoking our sympathy, makes him sound like a predator. When he is chasing Dolores, he represents himself as a bird of prey, hunting her down: “My talons still tingling, I flew on” (206). And his desperation, his need to keep her in his power, tends to lead to scenes of violence, which recur and accumulate in the reader’s mind. He admits to hurting her, tacking on a declaration of remorse:

I held her by her knobby wrist and she kept turning and twisting it this way and that, surreptitiously trying to find a weak point so as to wrench herself free at a favorable moment, but I held her quite hard and in fact hurt her rather badly for which I hope my heart may rot,
and once or twice she jerked her arm so violently that I feared her wrist might snap, and all the while she stared at me with those unforgettable eyes where cold anger and hot tears struggled, and our voices were drowning the telephone, and when I grew aware of its ringing she instantly escaped. (205)

Although he purports to feel regret for hurting her, he continues to hurt her, which undermines his attempt to profess his remorse to gain our sympathy, as in the following passage: “You’ve again hurt my wrist, you brute,’ said Lolita in a small voice as she slipped into her car seat” (221). Her voice is small; she is reduced in presence as her experiences continue to wear her down. On another occasion, he stops at a picnic ground and hits her: “...Lo looked up with a semi-smile of surprise and without a word I delivered a tremendous backhand cut that caught her smack on her hard little cheekbone” (227). This is in response to her running off again, not a spontaneous but a consciously retributive blow. He reveals his self-possession here; he sounds calculating, not like a desperate creature bound and tormented by his desires. His references to the definition of a nymphet continue to grow even more chilling, rather than aesthetic and playful, as he would have them seem. After telling her to watch her diet, he explains: “The tour of your thigh, you know, should not exceed seventeen and a half inches. More might be fatal (I was kidding, of course)” (209). The phrase “of course” sounds forced here, because we well know that in her role as nymphet she becomes worthless to him, perhaps even disposable, when she matures beyond a certain age.

Readers could view the scene in which she asks him to carry her
upstairs as a sign that she enjoys their relationship, but the scenes Humbert
describes do not bear that out (the scenes of money exchanging, or the
scenes of violence, for instance). Humbert reports her words: “Carry me
upstairs, please. I feel sort of romantic to-night” (207). This moment
occurs immediately after he sees her talking desperately to someone on the
phone and she goes home with him. She seems to have been getting closer
to orchestrating an escape, and perhaps she is being careful to act
complaisant and distract him from thinking about that possibility, and also
trying to avert the retributive act of violence that always seems to follow an
escape attempt. And we do know that she calls their first encounter rape,
from when she refers to “the hotel where you raped me” (202). Nabokov
has set us up to be aware of how she views their relationship, so unless we
ignore those signs her request ought to sound forced and artificial. The
whole of the text does not support a reading of their relationship as
romantic or voluntary; this one moment does not overturn the presentation
of their relationship in the whole of the rest of the text. The fact that
Dolores has no will to win in tennis (232) signals how she is being destroyed
by what Humbert is doing to her. And the description of how Dolores cries
her self to sleep every night dispels the notion that she sees this relationship
romantic or desirable any longer, or that their relationship is anything like
what she thought it would be when she flirted with him before her mother
died. Humbert describes this nightly weeping:

And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only
defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, 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. (176)

Yet even as he admits that she is miserable, he still attempts to distract us from that misery, deflecting the defilement onto the American landscape, away from Dolores’ body.

Whenever Humbert begins to offer us too close a glimpse into their relationship, one which offers us too much insight into its consequences for Dolores, he pulls back in some way. He also adopts a strategy of referring to his own narrative in a way that encourages us to study its form rather than maintain an empathetic connection to Dolores. For instance, he begins to refer to his narrative as a cinematic construction, as when he describes the wanted signs in a post office: “If you want to make a movie out of my book, have one of these faces gently melt into my own, while I look” (222). Or, he suggests that we perceive his narrative as artifice, concentrating on its aesthetic qualities. He refers to occurrences as narrative devices—in one case “machina telephonica”—rather than as actual events: “With people in movies I seem to share the services of the machina telephonica and its sudden god” (205). Humbert uses the device of fate in a similar manner, personifying the abstract force in the figure of Aubrey McFate. He does so somewhat parodically, poking fun at the way literature often personifies such forces to create a concrete sense of an overarching power that is an identifiable cause of events. The effect of the use of the figure of McFate calls attention to his own narrative as a narrative, as a construction rather than a fluid sequence of real events:
I now warn the reader not to mock me and my mental daze. It is easy for him and me to decipher now a past destiny; but a destiny in the making is, believe me, not one of those honest mystery stories where all you have to do is keep an eye on the clues. In my youth I once read a French detective tale where the clues were actually in italics; but that is not McFate's way—even if one does learn to recognize certain obscure indications. (211)

He tries to draw us into thinking of this narrative as a novel, as a collocation of narrative devices and plot development and resolution, drawing our attention away from Dolores' experience as an actual human being rather than as a figure in a detective story.

Many of Nabokov's novels employ self-referentiality to call attention to form, but this device may work differently here, in a novel that--however much Nabokov has parodied the attempt to find the "real"--has asked us to look for clues as to the actual experience of Dolores Haze, or at the very least has built that mode of reading into the text as one part of the experience of reading Lolita. So while Nabokov often creates novels that refer to themselves as novels to call attention to form, in this particular instance it is Humbert that refers to his narrative as a construction in an attempt to distract us from the actual consequences his actions have for Dolores. In this way, the technique reminds us how skillful a deceiver Humbert is. But the fact that we are conscious of the technique also reminds us that Humbert is a creature of Nabokov's, and that the strategies Humbert uses and the story he tells are constructions rather than real. So in the case of this novel, self-referentiality has the effects both of calling
attention to artifice but also, by implication, suggesting that there is something real that Humbert is attempting to hide through artifice. And unless we choose to succumb to Humbert’s array of tricks, which seems a problematic way of reading Nabokov, Dolores’ experience does come through, if only through brief glimpses. The briefness of the glimpses point to the insufficiency of Humbert’s narrative; we become conscious that his narrative is incapable of expressing some things, in this case Dolores’s perspective. We could use this consciousness of the shortcomings of Humbert’s narrative to simply dismiss Nabokov as unable to or uninterested in representing Dolores’ perspective. But on the other hand, the text as a whole leaves many readers with a sense of longing for her perspective, a sense of its lack. The text as a whole does allow, and even generates, the reader’s consciousness of the lack of female presence.

Humbert’s narrative is ambivalent in its tendencies to both reveal and conceal Dolores’s subjection within its trajectory. It sometimes hides her experience with moments of aesthetic pleasure and language webs, but it also sometimes reveals her experience, in the second case emphasizing Humbert’s role as a character rather than author in full control of the narrative. The figure of the game in its various manifestations suggests also the conflicting aspects of Humbert’s role as both character and author. For much of the narrative, he has a high degree of control and mastery, as the image of the chess game with Gaston suggests: “In my chess sessions with Gaston I saw the board as a square pool of limpid water with rare shells and stratagems rosily visible upon the smooth tessellated bottom, which to my confused adversary was all ooze and squid-cloud” (233). But Humbert
progressively loses some of this mastery and becomes less in control of his actions and the reception of his narrative, as for instance in the scenes in the hospital when he is ill and drunken. As Humbert loses some degree of mastery over the events and their account, he becomes more like a character entrapped in the machinery of the narrative. Humbert's description of his failure to control the encounter with Quilty suggests this shift: Quilty "succeeded in thoroughly enmeshing me and my thrashing anguish in his demoniacal game" (249). This could easily describe what the novel as a whole does to Humbert, in that Humbert becomes less of an author figure and more of a character, himself enmeshed in the web of the narrative and its framing devices.

But even as this shift seems to be occurring, in the latter parts of the novel Humbert attempts to reclaim the authorial role. When he describes the moment at which he realized Dolores was with Clare Quilty, the language he employs suggests the image of an author weaving a tale:

Quietly the fusion took place, and everything fell into order, into the pattern of branches that I have woven throughout this memoir with the express purpose of having the ripe fruit fall at the right moment; yes, with the express and perverse purpose of rendering--she was talking but I sat melting in my golden peace--of rendering that golden and monstrous peace through the satisfaction of logical recognition, which my most inimical reader should experience now. (272)

Although at the time Humbert was experiencing the revelation of a character enmeshed in an unfolding of events previously beyond his awareness, he renders this moment of revelation as the drawing together of
the threads of the carefully constructed and richly textured narrative, the product of his artistry.

While this presentation of himself as author emphasizes the formal and aesthetic aspects of that role, Humbert also attempts to maintain his authorial mastery by continuing his efforts at controlling our view of his actions and character. His earlier claims that his inclinations were the harmless pursuit of the aesthetic have been replaced by his posture of the suffering desperation of uncontrollable desire, and towards the latter parts of the narrative he begins to introduce the notion of the transformation of his lust to genuine love for Dolores. He does admit that the lust remains part of his nature:

My accursed nature could not change, no matter how my love for her did. On playgrounds and beaches, my sullen and stealthy eye, against my will, still sought out the flash of a nymphet’s limbs, the sly tokens of Lolita’s handmaids and rosegirls. But one essential vision in me had withered: never did I dwell now on possibilities of bliss with a little maiden. ... That was all over, for the time being at least. (257)

His ostensible newly acquired ability to keep from acting upon his desires is compromised by the last comment, that the suspension of his pursuit of his desires may only by temporary. But he does imply that his experience with Dolores has changed him, perhaps that he has even undergone at least a limited moral transformation. His account augments this impression with the insistence that he has come to love Dolores, as when he explains why his vengeful anger is not directed at her: "I could not kill her, of course, as some have thought. You see, I loved her. It was love at first sight, at ever and
ever sight” (270). He paradoxically insists that although what he did to her is monstrous, that monstrosity coexists with genuine love for her:

I loved you. I was a pentapod monster, but I loved you. I was despicable and brutal, and turpid, and everything, mais je t’aimais, je t’aimais! And there were times when I knew how you felt, and it was hell to know it, my little one. Lolita girl, brave Dolly Schiller. (285)

This bold claim reveals his consciousness of the brutality of his actions, a brutality he does not hide from the reader. His appeal to the reader at this point in the narrative trajectory is rather in the attempt to convince us that his consuming lust has metamorphosed into love, and in the attempt to gain sympathy by claiming discomfort with his actions or regret. He inserts the French restatement of his declaration of love to reinvoke the currency of his urbane, cultured persona. In this address, Humbert draws upon all the subtleties of the process of manipulating the reader, all his authorial strategies. Yet the strong sense of Dolores’s silencing and consumption by Humbert’s voice and presence comes through and undermines his mastery of our impressions of him.

In the latter parts of the narrative, Humbert’s voice is increasingly ambivalent in its impulse to justify his actions and its impulse towards regret or recognition of the cost of his desires for Dolores. This second impulse is problematic in our overall view of Humbert; it seems to draw us back towards him, if not in sympathy at least into some kind of alignment in that both reader and Humbert are looking back on the events as tragic. To some degree this sense of the tale as tragic involves its costs for Dolores, as in Humbert’s recollection of a scene that prompts the recognition of how
little he actually knows her, of her absence from the narrative in anything but bodily form. He remembers overhearing a conversation between Dolores and a friend, in which she comments: "'You know, what's so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own.'" In retrospect, he thinks about the implications of this comment:

and it struck me, as my automaton knees went up and down, that I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate--dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me, in my polluted rags and miserable convulsions; for I often noticed that living as we did, she and I, in a world of total evil, we would become strangely embarrassed whenever I tried to discuss. . .anything of a genuine kind. (284)

On the one hand, Humbert presents this recollection as a sign of his awakening awareness of how little he knows of know, of her essential absence from his narrative. On the other hand, a great part of his regret stems from the shallowness of experience of her, a regret at not accessing these other parts of her, of only consuming her surfaces and not these imagined interior regions. As ever, even as he acknowledges the "total evil" of the world he has created and in which he has placed Dolores, he insists on our paying attention to his desires, what he missed in her as opposed to what she preserved from his grasp. Humbert knows that he has stolen her childhood, and appears to express regret for doing so, as in this direct address to the reader: "Reader! What I heard was but the melody of
and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of the voice from that concord" (308). But this sounds less like regret for what Dolores has lost, and more like a longing for her to remain part of the composed scene of children at play, the scene of his predation.

The conflict between these different aspects of Humbert's narrative projects—the attempt at self-justification, the recognition of his own predatory nature and its costs for Dolores, and the bald disregard for Dolores as a human being—becomes increasingly uncomfortable at the close of the narrative. For instance, he frankly acknowledges his crimes against Dolores: "Had I come before myself, I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years for rape, and dismissed the rest of the charges" (308). But very soon after, his voice takes a cold turn, in his final address to Dolores, when he makes light of her experience: "Be true to your Dick. Do not let other fellows touch you. Do not talk to strangers. I hope you will love your baby. I hope it will be a boy" (309). The internal tensions of the different projects of Humbert's narrative are encapsulated in his own description of it, of his story, which does not attempt nor claim to be Dolores's story: "This then is my story. I have reread it. It has bits of marrow sticking to it, and blood, and beautiful bright-green flies" (308). The coexistence of these two aspects of the story, the marrow and blood—the violence—and the aesthetic moments, lead the last parts of the narrative into a mediation on the nature of art, partially lifting us out of the world of the events of the narrative. His frank admission of the costs to Dolores, which he had earlier tended to conceal, is jolting to a reader who has succumbed to his attempts
at self-justification:

Unless it can be proven to me--to me as I am now, today, with my heart and my beard, and my putrefaction--that in the infinite run it does not matter a jot that a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac, unless this can be proven (and if it can, than life is a joke), I see nothing for the treatment of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art. (283)

Yet his desire for the easing of pain is for himself, not Dolores, who has withdrawn from his narrative in part by her own devices, no longer under his spell. The final withdrawal of her presence from the narrative is not quite the same as Humbert’s silencing of her voice in his account; it is rather the sign of her own agency and eventual ability to disentangle herself from the grasp of Humbert and his narrative. The only trace of her presence is in the closing lines: “I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita” (309). But this final attempt to enclose Dolores in his account is limited; only Humbert’s construction of Dolores--Lolita--can ultimately be represented by or contained in his narrative. In this way, Nabokov underscores not only the predatory, manipulative aspects of a Humbert, but also the potential limits of the grasp of such a figure.

The piece of art that is the novel as a whole exceeds Humbert, in its form of a lesson in reading, and in its imagining of a world that allows Humbert to exist but also culminates in Dolores’s escape. Her need for his
financial support does indicate the continued effect of him on her life, and her death in childbirth seems to problematize her escape as successful step towards autonomy. This may be the necessary narrative path, the inevitable resolution of the story of Humbert's stealing her childhood. Her experience of girlhood turning to adulthood and motherhood is somehow thwarted by Humbert's interference with that process, perhaps. But nonetheless she does escape from him and exits the space of narrative that silenced and contained her. The latter events of her life leave us with a sense of the inevitable tragedy of her life once Humbert has entered it, a sense of longing for her presence when she is silenced and when she withdraws from the narrative, and the sense that a narrative such as Humbert's can never represent female presence because Humbert sees in Dolores little more than the surfaces of her body, not the full human being.

Even in the view that the text as a whole points out the lack of female voice and even may create a longing for that voice and presence, Nabokov's choice of this particular subject matter to make various points about the experience of reader still can remain problematic; that Nabokov's lesson in reading requires Dolores' suffering can be disturbing. But on the other hand, the particular mode of reading Nabokov is implicitly encouraging is an alert, active, and sometimes critical mode of reading, and most importantly, a mode of reading which includes a strong component of compassion and even empathy for characters. Although Humbert strives for the authority of narrative mastery, he is ultimately one of his author's creatures, another one of the unbalanced characters of Nabokov's worlds, even one of the "demons placed there merely to show that they have been booted out" or exiled on
account of their monstrosity (Strong Opinions 19). If we resist Humbert’s tricks, his attempts at narrative mastery, and are instead sympathetic to Dolores, we are identifying Humbert’s webs and snares and fully engaging the whole of the text. Admittedly, Nabokov’s comments about art and morality could be read as precluding that kind of sympathy, that kind of concern over Dolores’s place in the narrative. For instance, in the afterword, he writes that “Lolita has no moral in tow: (315). His following sentence complicates this observation, thought: “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 (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (315). This comment, the notion that art is a way of reaching towards tenderness and kindness, may not be the simple moralism of a John Ray. Instead, it indicates a concern with the value of tenderness and kindness, perhaps empathy, which is a persistent concern throughout Nabokov’s novels, one that does not become subsumed in the many other dimensions of his works. The artistic work becomes a site for these values, and the reading process offers a means of resisting the potential violence of rhetoric and representation. Humbert’s narrative illustrates the possibility of narrative violence, and through the failure of that narrative, Nabokov equates aesthetic and ethical failure.
Notes

1. Humbert renames Dolores Haze, recreating her as an aesthetic object, as Lolita. Feminist critics, in an attempt to avoid repeating this representational violence, may choose to refer to her as Dolores or Dolly. Critic Linda Kauffman discusses the importance of naming:

   She is thus the object of his appropriation, and he not only appropriates her, but projects onto her his desire and his neuroses. Significantly, she only serves as a simulacrum when her nicknames—Lolita, Lo, Lola, Dolly—are used, for her legal name, Dolores, points too directly toward another representation—Our Lady of Sorrows—and thus to a higher law than man’s. An abyss lies between the ‘Lolita’ who is a purely imaginary project of Humbert’s desire, and the ‘Dolores’ whose legal guardian is the source of her suffering. (137)

Kauffman’s project is to explore this gap between representation and the actual girl.

2. Various appropriations of this text in popular culture tend to take Humbert at his word, viewing Dolores Haze through Humbert’s construction of her as Lolita. Critic Lance Olsen describes this kind of reading: “Through a series of media hyperboles and critical mirroring distortions, it has developed in our culture’s consciousness into an icon for the idea of transgression” (30). The two film adaptations, the song “Don’t Stand So Close to Me” by The Police, descriptions of Amy Fisher as “The Long Island Lolita,” and popular uses of the term “nymphet” all illustrate—to varying degrees—ways in which Humbert’s representation of Dolores and his treatment of her have come to dominate.

3. Other critics also focus on these terms, suggesting that they complicate the idea of art as separate from morality. Rampton points out that they

   hint at the kind of emotional and moral commitment involved in what he regards as the ideal relation between the observer and
the aesthetic object. *Lolita* is more than an impersonal artefact which gave its creator a certain amount of pleasure in the making, because it dramatizes the potential inhumanity of the kind of aesthetic attitude to experience that fails to make this kind of commitment. (119)

Andrews develops this idea as well:

If Nabokov suggests an amoral, art-for-art’s sake attitude in claiming that *Lolita* ‘has no moral in tow,’ this suggestion is quickly modified by his parenthetical definition of ‘art’ as ‘curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy’; what Nabokov suggests about *Lolita*, then, is that it is moral without being moralistic. (Andrews 95)

These two comments, along with those of critics who contextualize the novel within the realities of incest, all attend to the ethicality of Humbert’s actions in various ways.

4. Nabokov does say that the author should not worry about his audience, so it might seem strange to try to establish a sense of what Nabokov wants in his readers:

His best audience is the person he sees in his shaving mirror every morning. I think that the audience an artist imagines, when he imagines that kind of thing, is a room filled with people wearing his own mask. (*Strong Opinions* 18)

Nabokov sees himself as his ideal reader, possessing what he describes as the necessary tools for good reading: “imagination, memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense…” (“Good Readers and Good Writers” 3). But while he says that the author should not be too concerned with the audience, he also frequently makes comments as to how his readers should approach reading novels, as in his lectures and interviews, and the novels themselves often contain images of different ways of reading.
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VITA

Elizabeth Anne Weston