

Humbert's Confession in *Lolita**

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Lolita, the Confession of a White Widow (2005) is a postmodern masterpiece by the Russian-American author Vladimir Nabokov. The novel follows the tradition of confession in Western literature is alleged to be a confession made by a middle-aged white man, Humbert Humbert, in the prison before his death about his hideous crime against an innocent girl—Lolita. The whole story fits into the U-type structure of biblical stories and is also characterized of a loss-and-return pattern. While the first part of the novel is no more than a pseudo-confession since Humbert keeps trying to vindicate himself and exonerate him from the conviction of rape, the second part serves as the real confession in that the character admits his crime and is eventually forgiven by and reconciled with his victim. In this thesis, the author intends to interpret Humbert's confession in terms of the changes in the addressees in the narrative, and changes in Humbert's attitude toward Lolita and himself with the biblical references.

Keywords: *Lolita*, Humbert, confession, *Bible*

Introduction

In *Lolita, the Confession of a White Widow* (2005), Nabokov presents the change of the protagonist, Humbert, from a solipsistic and self-indulgent pedophile to a remorseful and generous lover. The whole story fits into the U-type structure of biblical stories and is also characterized of a loss-and-return pattern. The prodigal son, Humbert falls from innocence when his ideal paradise is frozen as his premature love is abolished. He solipsizes a nymphet land where actually he is entrapped and Lolita is victimized. Not until Lolita runs away from his surveillance does he realize that he loses Lolita forever, or, she has never been his nymphet in fact. After his sincere penitence he learns to respect Lolita as an independent person and then obtains her forgiveness. He is redeemed as he kills his double, Quilty, who persecutes Lolita as he does, and dies before his final conviction.

The tradition of confession in English literature dates back to Augustine with a biblical significance as “the expression of true penitence and the condition of divine forgiveness” (Jeffrey, 1992, pp. 185-186). However, the first part of the story is a pseudo-confession in that it is full of Humbert's seemingly self-defending vindication for himself before the jury and misleading narrative about his crime. The readers cannot feel his sincere penitence until the second part of the novel, which is directed to the readers and reinterprets many details about Lolita for her own sake. In this paper, the author will contrast the changes in the addressees in the

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narrative, and changes in Humbert's attitude toward Lolita and himself so as to illustrate that Humbert, in spite of his hideous crimes, is sincere in his repentance and is qualified for Lolita's forgiveness and his reconciliation to her in the end.

Change in Addressees

As is conformed to the linear sequential structure of the *Bible*, the novel ends in a trial, though unfinished. Humbert is confronted with a jury who serve as God in the Last Judgment. He claims that he writes the confession first in order to defense himself in the court but finally to repent. In Part I, Humbert addresses for most of the time the ladies and gentlemen of the jury to convince them of his alleged innocence. At the beginning of Part I which recounts the period through Humbert's first rape of Lolita, Humbert's self-accusations are largely self-serving. He claims to be plagued with guilt because of his actions. With great skill, Humbert manipulates the reader. Throughout Part I his narratees remain primarily the intratextual "ladies and gentlemen of the jury", rather than the general extratextual "reader" he usually addresses in Part II (Lynd, 1990, p. 236). The motivation for the narration is apparent in the narrating character's ideological or pseudo-ideological explanations for his behavior and in his tendency to blame Dolores at least partially, thereby diminishing his own responsibility (Marcus, 2005, p. 198).

He claimed after his first rape of her that it was she who seduced him like "some immortal demon is disguised as a female child". Hence he turns the victim into a victimizer, the pathological into the healthy, and the destructive into the harmless. According to the hypothesis of "the lying narrating character", Humbert is a cynic, well aware of the gravity of his deeds, employing any rhetorical strategy at his disposal in order to prove his ostensible innocence. Humbert imagines that the fictional readers he appeals to and the jury are willing to listen and reexamine their positions. Therefore, they are convincible. Humbert is interested in changing the attitudes of his narratees regarding sex offenders. He claims that the beliefs the narratees hold are false, founded on a misunderstanding on the part of society, which judges such offenders without knowing their true nature. Again, Humbert tries to alleviate the gravity of his crime and clarify its meaning by imputing it to a group of people. Here Humbert does not regard his sin as a prototype for the sins of the whole of humanity but as a sin that characterizes a specific group—the perverts (Marcus, 2005, pp. 198-199).

In the first part of the novel, Humbert addresses the jury on the first page with the largeness of rhetoric, desiring us to give him absolution, forgiveness, or some acknowledgment of understanding. He does not desire acceptance into the moral community after death, but a certain acknowledgement that he has a moral claim to his actions (Ch'ien, 2000, p. 67).

But in Part II, Humbert's narratees change as he, for the most part, addresses only his "readers", a move that shifts his audience outside the text, extradiegetic discourse thus displacing the largely intradiegetic discourse of Part I. He addresses the reader directly no less than 29 times. He begins also to refer to his writings as confessions, increasingly turns his satirical wrath against himself, and is no longer careful to hide from the reader the desperation of Lolita's situation or his own cruelty in maintaining it (Lynd, 1990, p. 240). As the story progresses, another motivation of his confession grows more pronounced in its last part—the admission of error and the expression of guilt. As his sense of guilt grows even more acute, he decides to turn the account of defense for himself into a work of art. The contrasting motivations for Humbert's narration—self-justification, on one hand,

and confession of his faults, on the other—sometimes serve the same goal. The two motivations are equally helpful to someone who does not know how to save his lost and desperate soul from the abyss into which it has fallen (Marcus, 2005, p. 201). Confession becomes the way through which he saves his soul and achieves his moral purification and redemption.

Changes in Humbert the Protagonist

Humbert undergoes progressive but dramatic changes from the beginning to the end of the story. He moves from self-indulgent pedophile to tragic protagonist. He moves beyond his obsessional passion to a not altogether straightforward declaration of genuine love and, finally, to a realization of the loss suffered not by him but by Lolita (Appel, 1993, p. lxiv). The Humbert who is presented to us at the beginning of the text does not merge with the Humbert who is writing until the final pages of the book. Similarly, in the famous opening passage, Lolita is introduced as a purely aesthetic/sexual object (Lynd, 1990, p. 231). The opening paragraph is marked by Humbert's luxurious celebration of the linguistic glory of her name: "Lo-lee-ta. The tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta" (Phelan, 2007, p. 233). Not until the final pages of the text does Humbert give us a subjective Lolita, desolipsized at last. Until almost the end of *Lolita*, Humbert expresses his deepest sense of guilt and grief.

Many times throughout the text Humbert attempts to justify his behavior towards Dolores, claiming that, contrary to his own expectations and those of his narratees, the child with whom he had sexual intercourse was not innocent at all, but rather corrupt, licentious, and vulgar. He did not render her impure, since her "purity" had already been desecrated by previous sexual experience (Marcus, 2005, p. 194). From Humbert's view point, Lolita is nothing but an object of his contemplation and a work of art without her own feelings and thoughts. Sometimes we are appalled by his morbid appreciation of Lolita, the girl whose body Humbert attempts to conquer: "My only grudge against nature was that I could not turn my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys" (Nabokov, 2005, p. 174; pt. 2, ch. 32).

In Part I, Humbert declares his repulsion to doctors and rejects any help by them. Disease, as a metaphor of sin in the *Bible*, dwells in human beings as sin does. Jesus' healing of diseases is considered as both physical and spiritual. Humbert's rejection of healing reflects his refusal of salvation and blocks the way of his soul to redemption. In contrast, after he loses Lolita in Elphinstone, he is beset by desperation. At the moment, he decides to turn to religion for help. Although the priest's consolation cannot completely relieve Humbert from his acute sense of guilt, his willing to at least accept the healing power incarnated as the divine help shows the emerging signs of his repentance and is the first step which leads to his ultimate redemption.

Biblically, to repent means "to change one's mind" or to turn back, to learn one's lesson, to be filled with remorse. The Greek root in most NT (New Testament) instances is the word *metanoia*, which implies a profound change of heart (Jeffrey, 1992, pp. 659-665). In Part II, the changes in Humbert's mind are self-evident. He admits that "it was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita's states of mind while comforting my own base self" (Nabokov, 2005, p. 304; pt. 2, ch. 32). "I was to her not a boy friend, not a glamour man, not a pal, not even a person at all, but just two eyes and a foot of engorged brawn" (Nabokov, 2005, p. 300; pt. 2, ch. 32). This verbal enlargement of his small piece of flesh reduces to absurdity the legend of the phallus, the basic conceit

supporting much of the book, which depends on a willing suspension of disbelief, a collusion to deny the reality that no penis can live up to its fabulous mythical importance (Moore, 2001, pp. 78-79).

He proclaims his genuine love to Lolita and denounces himself near the end of the novel. The first time he addresses Lo as "Dolly Schiller" indicates that he has acknowledged her identity independent from his control. After regaining the ability to love, Humbert fully realizes the seriousness of his harm to Lolita. His true penitence from the bottom of his heart paves the way for Lolita's forgiveness and his salvation.

Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Redemption

E. B. Redlich states the idea succinctly when he says: "Forgiveness is full restoration to fellowship" (as cited in Taylor, 1946, p. 1). The condition of forgiveness is not only repentance, but also the presence of the forgiving spirit. In modern theology, it signifies full restoration to fellowship. We forgive the wrong-doer by the action of love. We repair the broken fellowship and re-establish it upon strong and enduring foundations (Taylor, 1946, p. 23).

The broken relationships between Humbert and Lolita are restored in Humbert's part by his intense true love exhibited in her shabby worn home when they meet again and in Lolita's part by her forgiveness of his hideous crimes on her. When they meet again, Humbert himself is astonished by her crowning him as a "good father" and "honey". "The Frigid Princess" dubbed by Humbert in Part I never smiles to him except in cheating. But in Part II she displays her forgiveness of his unpardonable sins by honoring him "a good father" and "honey". The process of reconciliation is completed by both Humbert's true repentance and Lolita's spirit ready to forgive.

Humbert finally overcomes his self-centeredness and transcends his solipsism by recognizing her subjectivity and her autonomy. He does not, with blinkered selfishness, continue to harass her to leave with him. This is one of the first moments of enlightenment for Humbert Humbert: He sees Lolita as a separate soul with a private, untouchable will to do as she believes. He has no designs here; he waits for her consent—as if for the first time seeing her as having the right to dissent (Ch'ien, 2000, p. 69).

However, neither Humbert's repentance nor Lolita's forgiveness suggests his penalty being removed. Paul said that the wages of sin is death (*Romans* 6: 23). To sin is to die. The repentance of the sinful man cannot free him from punishment. The redemption of a man connotes a price to pay. His sinful soul is to be redeemed for his final salvation. At the heart of the image of redemption is the idea of paying a price to regain something that will otherwise be forfeited. Redemption thus carries double connotations: It implies deliverance and restitution but also a cost that must be paid (Ryken, Wilhoit, & Longman, 1998, p. 698). Near the end of the story, Humbert kills his double—Quilty, who formulates Humbert's entrapment, his criminal passion, his sense of shame and self-hate. He is at once a projection of his guilt and a parody of the psychological Double (Appel, 1993, p. lx).

Humbert's killing of him also symbolizes the end of his own life. He dies of heart attack before the final conviction. His willingness to sentence himself to 35 years for rape—indeed, his willingness to use the term "rape" for the first time—shows that "he stops rationalizing his behavior and starts taking responsibility for ruining her life" (Phelan, 2007, p. 236). The spiritual punishment is even more striking and effective than the legal one. At the end of the story, Humbert wishes Lo good. The selfish and self-centered Humbert in the past is transformed into a noble spirit with generous love, who respects Lolita's choice and blesses her in any way. His expression of remorse and confession of guilt are sincere. His confession is changed from a "palliative of

articulate art" into "the refuge of art" where he and his fatal American child love are entombed and atoned.

Conclusion

In spite of the arguments against the reliability in his narrative, the repentance part in the confession is sincere enough to re-model Humbert as a returned prodigal son. The addressee of his confession is changed from the jury in Part I into the reader in Part II, which conforms to the change in the purpose of his confession. Confession is the way to express one's guilt so as to seek peace in one's heart and reconciliation to God. It is used by everybody ranging from a servant to a saint such as St. Augustine. By means of his confession, Humbert reflects his life with Lolita and becomes aware of his irrevocable harm to her. He realizes that although Quilty breaks her heart he breaks her life. Anyway, admission of his sin is the sign of repentance and the first step to salvation. We can feel his sincere penitence when he sentences himself 35 years for rape. Though he is not yet convicted in the court, his conscience has already suffered from the agony of his guilt. Like the scroll in the Revelation, his confession is the medium by means of which Humbert records his sin, repentance and redemption. He receives salvation through his confession and restores his broken relationship with Lolita and with himself. Close to the end of the novel, he regains his ability to love. It is love, the most important motif in the *Bible*, that saves him from the postmodern man's chaos and the abyss of sin. He is justified by his faith in love and is endowed with a peaceful death in his body but resurrection in his soul.

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