

# Interpretation of Lolita's Characters of *Lolita* from the Perspective of Reader-response Criticism

XIE Jin-yuan

Department of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China

Reader-response criticism, which began in the 1960s, differs from traditional literary criticism in that it emphasizes that criticism should be reader-centered, believing that the meaning of a work lies in the act of the reader and the reading process. The true artistic and appreciation value of a work is realized only after the author publishes it and after it has been read by readers. American writer Vladimir Nabokov's "*Lolita*" has since its publication been attracting a large number of readers to read it, analyze it from different angles and there is contradictory sometimes; perhaps it is the contradictory views that have made it so famous that readers continue to study it from new points of view. This paper focuses on the controversial heroine's character in the novel by applying the three aspects of reader-response criticism: horizon of expectation, expect reconstruction and response-inviting structure.

**Keywords:** *Lolita*, horizon of expectation, expect reconstruction, response-inviting structure

## Introduction

*Lolita*, written by Russian American novelist Vladimir Nabokov, was published in 1955. The novel was considered as Nabokov's most well-known work and once controversial due to its erotic motif and pedophilic subject. It is mainly about an abnormal and complicated love story between a middle-aged man, Humbert and a lovely twelve-year-old girl, Lolita. Lolita is a young girl with outstanding looks and innocence, raised independently by the widowed Mrs. Haze. She could have spent her childhood and grown up like an ordinary girl under her mother's careful upbringing, but after Humbert moved into the Haze's house, her life changed radically and silently. The author does not give a clear account of Lolita's end in the novel, but only uses a seemingly unrelated narrative to imply that she dies in childbirth. This narrative perspective leaves a gap in the reader's reading and makes the presentation of Lolita's character strongly incomplete and uncertain, thus attracting the reader to interpret the uncertain meaning of the text and to have a different position on the characterization of the heroine. Therefore, it is significant to analyze the construction of the heroine's character from the perspective of reader-response criticism, and to deeply explore the aesthetic value of the novel and the readers' active role in filling in and constructing the meaning of the work.

### Horizon of Expectation

The reader in reader-response criticism is not the passive reader in traditional aesthetics, the reciter of the language of this text, but the active and ontological reader. The reader becomes the core of literature, the literary text should serve the reader, and the author should establish a reader-centered view. How can authors adapt to the shift in writing values and thus realize their values? Hans Robert Jauss puts forward the famous concept of "horizon of expectation"—"Before and during the process of reading literature, readers, as receptive subjects, often have a preconceived structural schema based on complex personal and social reasons. This preexisting mental schema by which readers read a text is called reading experience expectation horizon, or horizon of expectation for short" (Jauss, 1989, p. 340). If the reader does not recognize it, the meaning of the work naturally cannot be realized.

Generally speaking, readers have their own specific "horizon of expectation" before or during reading a work. If the work can distance the reader from the expected horizon, the reader will feel novelty and excitement, thus creating a unique aesthetic feeling. *Lolita* is a novel that takes full advantage of the reader's "horizon of expectation".

First, the novel's difficult publication process was very attractive to readers. The novel was initially rejected by four publishers in the United States, and was published in France as an erotic novel, branded as a "pornographic" novel. The British author, Graeme Greene, considered it the best novel of its time and gave it high marks, and the ensuing outpouring of criticism and protest, combined with the author's impassioned and unrelenting retort, aroused the attention of the literary world. What kind of novel was it that was rejected by four American publishers at the same time, why did this work cause so much controversy in the literary world, and why did the American publishers later offer a high price to buy out the author's publishing rights in the United States? It can be said that the book *Lolita* formed a strong "horizon of expectation" for the readers who wanted to find out what it was all about before they even read the novel. The American edition of *Lolita* was published by Putnam's Press in 1958 and "shot to the number one spot on the New York Times bestseller list," leading to more "fierce protests and condemnations". As a result, the book was banned for a time and then unbanned again. In the publication of this link, the novel has successfully attracted the attention of a large number of readers, pre-formed in the hearts of readers want to see the psychological expectations, readers cannot wait to see this once banned and unbanned works on earth, why can cause so much controversy and criticism in the literary community.

Secondly, the title and the foreword of the novel also take full advantage of the reader's horizon of expectation. The title of the novel is "*Lolita*", which makes readers think about the meaning of Lolita as soon as they see the title of it. Lolita is not a common word or name, so what does it refer to? Is it the narrator of the work? Is it the heroine of the novel? With these questions in mind, the reader opens the novel's opening section, the foreword, and the first sentence is: "Lolita, or the Confessions of a White Widowed Male," These are the two titles of this peculiar account that the author received before writing the text. "'Humbert Humbert', their author, had died in legal captivity, of coronary thrombosis, on November 16, 1952, a few days before his trial was scheduled to start" (Nabokov, 2000, p. 3). The novel opens with a plot that makes the reader unconsciously ask again, "If Lolita is the heroine of the novel, then why is the novel the story of a white widowed male, and what is

the relationship between Lolita and the white widowed male?”. The series of questions creates an aesthetic expectation that the reader will want to read on to find out more.

Finally, when the writer talks about the origin of the novel and the character archetypes in the introductory section, it is supported by unclear evidence. For example, When it comes to the origin of the story: “Reference to ‘H·H’'s crime may be looked up by the inquisitive in the daily papers for September-October 1952” (Nabokov, 2000, p. 3); the author mentions the witness like this: “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 as received from Mr. ‘Windmuller’, or ‘Ramsdale’...” (Nabokov, 2000, p. 3). In addition, the last paragraph of the foreword can be said to hold the readers in suspense:

As a case history, “Lolita” will become, no doubt, a classic in psychiatric circles. As a work of art, it transcends its expiatory aspects; and still more important to us than scientific significance and literary worth, is the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader; for in this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson; the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac—these are not only vivid characters in a unique story: they warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils. “Lolita” should make all of us—parents, social workers, educators—apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world. (Nabokov, 2000, p. 4)

In this paragraph, the author both connects *Lolita* to psychiatric circles and emphasizes the ethical impact it has, before finally landing on the educational implications for the next generation. The author seems to reveal the plot of the novel, but it seems not to; it seems to confirm some of the reader’s suspicions, but it seems to bring more questions to the reader: Was Humbert mentally ill during his lifetime? What crime did he commit that landed him in jail? Did his crime have anything to do with Lolita? Why did he commit the crime? Based on these questions that cannot be answered for the time being, readers will be eager to read on, consciously participating in the reading process, constantly asking and answering more questions to the work itself, and thus advancing the reading process.

According to Wolfgang Iser, “In the writing of a literary work, there is always a ‘implied reader’ in the author’s mind, and the writing process is the process of narrating the story to and conversing with this implied reader. Thus, the role of the reader is already embedded in the structure of the text” (Iser, 1980, p. 14). Any reading is done with a certain vision of expectation, and the reader subconsciously predicts the “middle plot” and “ending” from the moment he or she reads the novel. If the work is exactly as expected, the novel lacks artistic charm; on the contrary, if the reader’s horizon of expectation is constantly broken in the reading, then the reader gains a magical artistic space beyond the horizon of expectation, and the novel has a high aesthetic value.

### **Expect Reconstruction**

Reader-response criticism points out that when reading literary works, readers are accustomed to reading the works from their own horizons of expectation, and if the reading experience is consistent with their existing horizons of expectation, readers will feel bored because the works lack novelty and excitement, and thus lose interest in the works they read and give up reading. On the contrary, if the information content of the work is different from the reader’s original expectation, it can arouse the reader’s curiosity to know the information beyond his or her expectation. Therefore, readers are curious to break the conventional thinking and adjust the structure of their own horizon, so as to reconstruct new reading expectations (Jauss, 1989, p. 349).

In the perception of Lolita's character, the writer has set up some obstacles while satisfying the readers' expectations. The writer constantly creates misunderstandings and suspense for the reader by using defamiliarization devices beyond the reader's horizon of expectation, so that the reader's perception of Lolita is not single and fixed, but constantly changing (Huang, 2010, p. 120).

First of all, when the reader thinks that the plot of chapter 2 of the first part of the novel will naturally continue to develop immediately after the repeated mention of Lolita in chapter 1, the plot of chapter 2 changes suddenly, and the author turns the narrative time to the date of the narrator (hero)'s birth in 1910, and the plot of the novel from chapter 2 to chapter 9 presents the trivial details of the hero's marriage and divorce from birth to adulthood, without mentioning Lolita at all. Such a large plot written by the author is irrelevant to the heroine Lolita, which can't help but make the reader feel confused and lost, and even make the reader have the illusion of whether the novel is describing Lolita or not. And just when the reader is about to lose the patience to read on, at the end of chapter 10, Lolita, as the heroine of the story, finally begins to officially appear and enters the reader's field of vision, at which point the reader feels relieved and determines that this is a novel related to Lolita.

Secondly, in the process of constructing the image of Lolita, the author consciously "leaves blank", rarely or almost no direct description of her, readers can only slowly construct the "Lolita" image in their hearts through the limited perspective and the unreliable narrative of the narrator, and the most real Lolita image also subverts the reader's previous prejudgment with the development of the plot. The author describes Lolita's first official appearance in the tone of an onlooker and a conversation:

It was the same child—the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair. A polka-dotted black kerchief tied around her chest hid from my aging ape eyes, but not from the gaze of young memory, the juvenile breasts I had fondled one immortal day. (Nabokov, 2000, p. 23)

"This was my Lo," she said, "and these are my lilies."

"Yes." I said, "Yes. They are beautiful, beautiful, beautiful!" (Nabokov, 2000, p. 24)

This is the surprise and stirring that Humbert feels when he first meets Lolita, and through the main character's reaction and description, the readers are preconceived with an image of Lolita in their mind when they first get to know the character: she is as beautiful as a white lily, pure and untutored 13-year-old girl. However, as the plot continues, the readers find that the real Lolita in reality is far from the pre-set image of a perfect and pure Lolita in the mind, very different, the reality of the 13-year-old Lolita is a sexy girl, aggressive, temperamental, fussy, vulgar, and will even take the initiative to put her legs into Humbert's lap to tease him. In the "Enchanted Hunters" in bed, Humbert is very restrained, dare not have the slightest transgression, while Lolita seems very sophisticated, "You never did this as a child?" At this point, the readers realize that he or she has been deceived, the readers' previous expectations have been subverted, the author is by constantly undermining the readers' ability to judge the way to frustrate the readers' horizon of expectations, the readers can be in the whole process of reading, their own horizon of expectations constantly revised and reconstructed, the readers' psyche is firmly captured by the plot of the story, without a moment of relaxation

Finally, the major setback to the readers' horizon of expectations for Lolita's characterization is their moral judgment of her. The reason for Mrs. Haze's death is that she saw Humbert's diary in which he revealed his feelings for Lolita and died in a car accident. But through the previous description, Humbert is actually a literary

figure bound by traditional ethics and morality, which is why he chooses to marry an adult woman of his own age on both occasions. His character is indecisive, and his pursuit of Lolita is very subtle and “restrained”, even if he is more madly in love with her. Although, he feverishly fantasized countless times to show Lolita various details of love, but still did not act decisively, Lolita even commented that he “talk like a book”. But after living together, Lolita’s behavior reveals that she is not a simple, heartless little girl, she repeatedly seduces Humbert in order to meet her various requirements for living expenses, and lies in front of Humbert, and it is her lust for Humbert that gradually makes a middle-aged man turn from desire to deep love for her. At this point, the reader is no longer sympathetic to Lolita’s death of both parents and her abduction by a middle-aged man, but feels that although she is at a young age, she has no self-respect or self-love and is self-indulgent, and her image is very different from that of a perfect and pure lily. But when Humbert receives Lolita’s letter of help and rushes to Lolita’s residence, Lolita reveals the truth to him, the reader’s moral evaluation of her as a “bad girl” begins to waver again. Humbert learns from Lolita that she was seduced by Quilty at the age of 12 and was deeply infatuated with him, but was played by Quilty and coaxed into making pornography. After Lolita escaped from Humbert, she was abandoned by Quilty for rebelling against Quilty’s control and absurd demands, and had to wander around, in order to survive, she met Dick and married him, so that her life could be relied on, but the small family can barely get by after Lolita’s pregnancy, it is almost difficult to maintain the basic life, Lolita had no choice but to write to Humbert to seek his help. After learning of these hidden circumstances, the reader becomes confused and bewildered, wondering whether the moral assessment that Lolita was to blame was pertinent and correct, and pondering in shock and silence what was the cause of Lolita’s tragic and unpleasant experience (Patnoe, 1995, p. 85). Was it entirely personal? Or are family, school and society all to blame? At this point, the reader not only gains a further aesthetic experience, but also is inspired to read with a deeper expectation—whether Lolita’s experience is a vivid example of the idea intended to be expressed in the last paragraph of the foreword, and whether Lolita’s experience is a true mapping of the chaos of American society at that time.

In this kind of expectation compliance and expectation frustration, the readers are either happy or painful to keep revising and reconstructing their own expectation horizons along the way, and in the textual labyrinth created by the author, the readers become the creators of the second text.

### **Response-Inviting Structure**

The textual reading of any literary work is characterized by indeterminacy (what aesthetic response calls “gaps” or “frame structures”). The blank or frame structure is an “unspoken invitation to seek to connect the missing” (Iser, 1980, p. 11). The indeterminacy of the text’s interpretation induces and stimulates the reader to receive, understand, experience, process, add to, and create new structures, making the text more attractive to read, more evocative. The evocative nature exists in the overall structural system of the text, which is thus called the evocative structure of the text. According to Iser’s argument, the vacancy factor and the suggestive effect of the summoning structure itself will negate the reader’s habitual vision, thus arousing the reader’s psychological gap and the expectation of knowing the meaning, thus stimulating the internal motivation of reading and prompting the reader to examine and explore the work again and again. In the process of reading, the reader realizes or changes the expected horizon based on his or her existing experience, and thus forms a new aesthetic horizon.

The response-inviting structure of *Lolita* manifested in two points:

The first point is the sudden disappearance of Lolita. While Humbert was driving with Lolita, Lolita was admitted to Elfiance Hospital with a fever, but on the third day of her stay, Humbert came to the hospital in the morning and was told that Lolita had been taken to her grandmother's ranch the day before by a man who claimed to be her uncle. And Humbert searched in vain for years afterwards. The reader is left to wonder why Lolita suddenly disappeared and who the man was that took her away. The author left this plot gap to the reader to fill, with Humbert in the search for a variety of speculation, the reader already vaguely know that Lolita's disappearance may have a great connection with the man who had followed them, and this person is likely to be Quilty, but these are the reader and the main character's various speculations, not confirmed. Although these problems in a few years later Humbert found Lolita from the mouth of Lolita confirmed their suspicions. However, before that, the sudden disappearance of Lolita still leaves a great deal of room for the reader's imagination.

The second point is the real end of *Lolita*, which is also an unsolved mystery for the reader. At the end of the novel, Humbert left Lolita and was arrested and imprisoned, and then there was no mention of Lolita's future life situation. Only in the introduction does the author mention "Mrs. 'Richard F. Schiller' died in childbed, giving birth to a stillborn girl, on Christmas Day 1952, in Grey Star, a settlement in the remotest Northwest" (Nabokov, 2000, p. 3). The reader deduces from this that Lolita may end up dying in childbirth. However, careful readers will find that Lolita and Humbert's last separation once said she was going to fly to Juneau with her husband, and in the previous chat with Humbert when she also said they were going to Canada. So, in the introduction mentioned in the "Richard F. Schiller" wife died in childbirth is not Lolita, the reader cannot confirm. Because whether it is Juneau or Grey Star Town, these two places are fictional and do not exist. Readers go through the whole novel, trying to find traces from the novel to find out about the end of Lolita, but still nothing. The story is finished, but the audience is left with endless space for thought and imagination.

Hemingway's theory of the tip of the iceberg suggests that the reader can only see 1/8 of the content in a shallow reading, while the narrative of the text is based on the simple and superficial story revealed by the author, and the reader becomes interested in the work and continues to discover the depth of the story in the process of reading, eventually revealing the 7/8 hidden in the horizontal plane (Cui, 1987, p. 168). Lolita's characterization becomes clear and tangible as the reader goes through a complex series of consciousness-analysis, reasoning, and imagination.

## Conclusion

In the past, critics have mostly focused on the work itself, generally analyzing the social and personal fate of the work from the work, ignoring the reader's attention to the work. Thus, the reader's inquiry into the analysis of the characters in the work is abandoned, and no attention is paid to exploring the influence of the work on the readers at that time and later (Guerin, Labor & Morgan, 2004, p. 69). This paper seeks to change the work-centered approach to reader-centeredness from the reader's perspective. By exploring the meaning of the work from the reader's perspective, the reader is no longer the recipient of the writer's moral preaching, but the determiner and filler of the text as a fixed point and gap, and the reader and the text together constitute the work. Nabokov's characterization of Lolita, the heroine of the novel, is a good example of this. It is in the process of

reading that the reader thinks, knows, rethinks, and knows again about *Lolita*, “dissolving the contradictions between different points of view that appear in the text or filling in the gaps between different points of view in different ways” (Seldon & Widdowson, 1985, p. 27).

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