

Confessional Realism versus Gothic Fiction in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and Sylvia Plath's "Daddy"

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The 1950's and 60's were an era in which confessional poems, like Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," captured the popular imagination, but it is often forgotten that one of the most famous prose works of the time was also presented as an act of confession, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, containing Humbert Humbert's manuscript *Lolita*, or *Confession of a Widowed White Male*. Inspired by this parallel, Ellen Jamieson makes an insightful argument that both works can be read as revised Gothic tales, in which a vulnerable young girl is victimized by an oppressive patriarch. The difference, of course, is that in the case of *Lolita*, it is the villain Humbert who tells the story, while in "Daddy" the victim speaks for herself. However, as Jamieson notes, in both instances the situation is complicated by the fact that each account is seriously unreliable, compromised as it is by the turbulence of the speaker's emotional condition.

-Dr. David Evans

The postmodern era in America was wrought with experimentation in all forms of art. Unconventional and controversial themes in literature were often employed in order to explore the human psyche and to attain a sense of authenticity and reality. Personal experience expressed through confessional writing exemplifies postmodern depiction of fact versus

imagination within the human mind. This technique focuses on capturing extreme emotions and reactions to personal thoughts and experience. As confessional works, Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* and Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" both capture the postmodern confusion between reality and fiction through the use of gothic conventions including the unreliable narrator, the repressed heroine and supernatural or foreign metaphors.

Nabokov and Plath both write of father-daughter relationships in their respective works *Lolita* and "Daddy". Both present a singular point of view narrated in the first person. This form of narrative creates a tension between the genuine and the imaginary experience through the biased perspective of an unreliable narrator.

Lolita is a memoir written from the point of view of Humbert Humbert, describing his pedophilic relationship with his adoptive daughter Lolita. Given his grotesquely inappropriate behaviour, the narrator is undoubtedly mentally unstable and thus unreliable. As a confession, Humbert's memoir admits to sin, thereby establishing a distrust of the narrative. The foreword of the novel solidifies Humbert's erratic nature as it is written from the psychoanalytic view of the fictional editor of the memoir, Dr. John Ray Jr., who explains the circumstances of the novel's creation. Ray explains, "'Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male', such were the two titles under which the writer of the present note received the strange pages it perambulates" (Nabokov 3). By admitting the pages to follow are "strange", Ray confirms Humbert's

abnormality. Furthermore, Ray comments, “Viewed simply as a novel, ‘Lolita’ deals with situations and emotions that would remain exasperatingly vague to the reader had their expression been etiolated by means of platitudinous evasions” (Nabokov 4). Ray’s observation suggests Humbert’s memoir is evasive and untrustworthy in its descriptions.

You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine (oh, how you have to cringe and hide!), in order to discern at once, by ineffable signs – the slightly feline outline of a cheekbone, the slenderness of a downy limb, and other indices which despair and shame and tears of tenderness forbid me to tabulate – the little deadly demon among the wholesome children; *she* stands unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power. (Nabokov 17)

Humbert portrays his lack of humanity and his inability to recognize the emotions of others by transforming Lolita into an object of admiration, a work of art. He also admits to being controlled by his desire for Lolita. This power she holds over him demonstrates his psychological weakness, in the imaginary relationship he perpetuates with Lolita. Grogan observes that “Nabokov chooses a narrative strategy that, at best, grants him the luxury of ambivalence about father-daughter incest and one that, at worst, celebrates the actions of Humbert as it glosses over how much this affair causes trauma to Lolita” (54). Humbert’s subjective memoir blurs distinctions between reality and

illusion: despite his monstrous actions, Humbert incites sympathy due to his mental instability.

Similarly, Plath's poem "Daddy", although not explicitly autobiographical, deals with a father-daughter relationship analogous to Plath's relationship with her father Otto, whose death left her traumatized (Sabrina Rab 3). Addressing his absence with anger and frustration, Plath's memorial to her dead father epitomizes her unreliability as the poem's speaker. The hysterical repetitions, "You do not do, you do not do" (1), "Of wars, wars, wars" (18), "Ich, ich, ich, ich" (27) and "An engine, an engine" (31) suggest an emotional and unbalanced mind unable to control its outbursts of expression or properly enunciate its thoughts. These repetitions add mounting momentum, to the uncontained and unpredictable energy of an erratic and impulsive speaker. In her thesis, Rab argues, "In her personal life Plath's emotion, fear and inability to get the love of the father created a complex image of father in her mind. That is why the poem mainly holds Plath's rage and frustration against the image of father" (26). Thus Plath's speaker is confused and isolated and generates an illusory vision of her father. Her instability is apparent in her impassive and ambiguous opinions of death and suicide: "Daddy, I have had to kill you" (6). The speaker takes on the role of a murderer and imagines she has been forced to kill her father. She then solidifies her instability in describing her attempted suicide: "At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you" (59). Treating both her father's life and her own as disposable,

the speaker's, emotional erraticism reveals her unreliable nature and her distortion of reality.

Nabokov's *Lolita* and Plath's poem "Daddy" invite comparison. For instance, they both illustrate the gothic convention of the repressed heroine, where "a virtuous and idealistic young woman" is threatened by "a villain, normally portrayed as a wicked, older but still potent aristocrat" (Douglass H. Thomson 22). Nabokov's heroine, *Lolita*, is oppressed, with her innocence violated by an act of incest, another convention in gothic fiction. In Plath's poem "Daddy", the father-daughter relationship is obscured, but it is apparent in Plath's language that the father has been a repressive force on the speaker. .

For Nabokov, Humbert's subjugation of *Lolita* acts as a way for the past to suppress the future. Humbert's attraction to young girls is a fantasy where he remains immortal by abusing youth and innocence. Transforming intimacy into confinement and oppression, his acts of pedophilia physically restrict *Lolita*: "But in my arms she was always *Lolita*" (9). Furthermore Humbert forces an identity onto *Lolita* by altering her name to satisfy his illusion. As Grogan explains, "Trying to reclaim the past and his childhood love, Humbert imposes his relentless fiction on *Lolita*" (58). Thus, reliving his past at the expense of his victim's life and innocence, Humbert traps *Lolita* in a fictional world, denying her future: "I might have her produce eventually a nymphet with my blood in her exquisite veins, a *Lolita the Second*" (Nabokov 174). This extreme imprisonment highlights Humbert's distortion of

reality as his power over Lolita adopts crazed proportions. He fantasizes about making himself immortal by repeatedly committing incest with future generations, continuing his current role in perpetuity. To escape the inevitable consequences of his criminal actions, Humbert i deludes himself into seeing Lolita's imprisonment as dependency: "You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go" (Nabokov 142). . He therefore takes advantage of Lolita's emotional and physical vulnerability in order to justify his domination..

Likewise, in her poem "Daddy", Plath relates a young woman's repression. Both the title and the poem's content signal the oppressor as the father. . Plath's speaker uses metaphors of confinement to convey this oppression and parodies the nursery rhyme: "There was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe" describing the "black shoe / In which I have lived like a foot / For thirty years, poor and white, / Barely daring to breathe or Achoo" (2-5). By subverting repression into the childish form of a nursery rhyme, the speaker fictionalizes her suffering. The imprisonment in a shoe reinforces her oppression's weight, as she feels stomped on and suffocated by her father. This metaphor further embodies Plath's dissent towards a patriarchal system, referring to a shoe "which is reminiscent of the ancient Chinese tradition in which the girls' feet were bound tightly to constrict their growth" (Hassanpour and Hashim 125). Plath's heroine represents a history of female oppression -- and resistance as she directs her anger towards the dominant male in her life, her father. The

Heroine not only feels physically restricted but also limited in her freedom of expression: "I could never talk to you. / The tongue stuck in my jaw. / It stuck in a barb wire snare" (24-26). This hyperbolic metaphor, in its violent and unrealistic imagery, reflects the extent that the speaker feels repressed. Female oppression is further emphasized through the speaker's admission: "I made a model of you" (64), referring to her marriage to a man just as repressive as her father. Plath comments not only on the authoritative presence of the father but also on the restrictions society places on her heroine and other women (Rab 4). Despite the broader context of female oppression that Plath depicts, her poem "Daddy" maintains the gothic ideal of the repressed heroine; that is, she initially accepts her restraints, yet "progressively become[s] more active and occasionally effective in [her] attempts to escape this pursuit and indict patriarchy" (Thomson 22). In this way the protagonist of the poem takes on a persona that surpasses the reality of her oppression.

Although, Nabokov's *Lolita* and Plath's "Daddy" both portray realistic worlds and events, they dramatize their experiences through the use of either magical or historical metaphors. Nabokov and Plath's respective diction transforms their narratives into media with both fictional and realistic elements. For example, throughout *Lolita*, Humbert describes Lolita in supernatural terms and creates a fantastic creature. In other words, he generates a fairy-tale with Lolita and him as the sole characters. He introduces his pedophilic tendencies by subverting them

into a fictional diagnosis: “Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as ‘nymphets’” (Nabokov 16). Humbert alludes to the nymphs of Greek mythology to justify his obsession with Lolita. Despite this intellectual tone, his fantastical projection onto Lolita demonstrates an illogical sense of reality, as “nymphs in the classical tradition are ambiguous, and this nebulous nature makes the nymph attractive yet unattainable” (Bouilly 21). Humbert blames his criminal acts on the magical qualities of his ‘nymphet’ Lolita, creating a fictional world wherein he is not the villain but the victim of her enchantment. Therefore, he not only transforms Lolita into a fictional product of his desires, but also idealizes and embellishes every aspect of her life, creating a false image of perfection. For example, Humbert poetically describes Lolita’s class list: “A poem, a poem, forsooth! So strange and sweet was it to discover this ‘Haze, Dolores’ (she!) in its special bower of names, with its bodyguard of roses – a fairy princess between her two maids of honor” (Nabokov 52). Humbert thus fetishizes Lolita in a fashion reminiscent of the Romantic Coleridge, focusing on the beauty and confining characteristics of nature as in Coleridge’s poem “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison”. In doing so, Humbert fabricates an alluring story surrounding the banal attendance list. In her critical reading of *Lolita*, Laura Penny argues, “Humbert’s perversion is resolutely,

utterly aesthetic, not neurotic" (90). His visionary treatment of Lolita is an idolization, treating her in his mind like a work of art – but in reality, it reduces Lolita to an object void of emotion. "Humbert le Bel" (Nabokov 41) therefore transcends reality into an imaginary world, where he is a figure of masculinity and chivalry, and where Lolita, his 'nymphet,' is a prisoner to his own distorted views of actuality.

Plath, in contrast, employs more realistic metaphors by referring to actual historical events, primarily the Holocaust. Plath's speaker embellishes her suffering by likening her father to a Nazi and herself to a Jew. This use of the Holocaust to express feelings of oppression calls into question the reality of the speaker's situation. She transforms her personal conflict into social and religious conflict by imposing the image of "A man in black with a Meinkampf look" (65) onto her father and insisting he had been "Chuffing [her] off like a Jew. / A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen" (32-33). By alluding to this event of human suffering and oppression, the speaker transcends reality into an exaggerated misrepresentation of repression. She conveys her aptitude for self-oppression by admitting, "Every woman adores a Fascist" (Plath 48). In doing so, the speaker employs these metaphors to blur the distinction between her true oppression and the descriptions of her relationship with her father. Although her main focus is comparing the men in her life to Nazis, Plath's speaker, similar to Humbert, alludes to the supernatural to emphasize her oppression. She describes her husband as,

CONFESSIONAL REALISM

“The vampire who said he was you / And drank my blood for a year” (72-73). This symbol adds to the gothic dimension of the poem as the supernatural merges with the genuine. The result of these allusions to both the Holocaust and the paranormal is a sense of surrealism that persists throughout the poem, confusing fiction and reality.

Writers use imagined introspection as a way of expressing true emotion and genuine experience. *Lolita* represents the means through which Humbert confesses the history of his pedophilic behaviour. Plath’s poem “Daddy” is a declaration of the confused relationship between the speaker and her father. Both works capture the psychological tension within their narrators’ relation to the truth. Nabokov and Plath both adhere to the gothic formula of the erratic narrator, the victimized female, and allusions to the extraordinary; and in doing so depict a blurred distinction between the real and the surreal

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ELLEN JAMIESON

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