

# Mermaids, Multiculturalism, and Misogyny in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

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**H**ans Christian Andersen's fairytale *The Little Mermaid* is a love story about a mermaid, Ariel, and her desires for love and an immortal soul. Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* deals with an incestuous, pedophilic relationship between Humbert Humbert and his stepdaughter, Lolita. Despite significant differences in the content of the two stories, many critics have noted parallels between the female protagonists. Comparing and contrasting Ariel's and Lolita's romantic relationships offers insight into both Humbert's and Nabokov's views on a woman's role in a heterosexual partnership. Nabokov evokes elements of both Andersen's mermaid and of the Russian *rusalka*—a relative of the mermaid—in his descriptions of Charlotte Haze. Nabokov uses these legends and fairytales to comment on the dangers of conservative appraisals of female sexuality and to encourage women to avoid blindly adhering to societal gender norms.

Nabokov's sole explicit reference to *The Little Mermaid* occurs during Humbert and Lolita's first road trip,

when Humbert says, "I bought Lo, for her thirteenth birthday, a de luxe volume with commercially 'beautiful' illustrations, of Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*" (Nabokov qtd. in Collins). Many fairy tales are "evoked" in the novel, including "*Bluebeard, The Sleeping Beauty, The Three Little Pigs, Snow White, the Arabian Nights, and Beauty and the Beast*" (Collins). However, only *The Little Mermaid* is directly alluded to, emphasizing its thematic relevance to the novel. *The Little Mermaid* is the only fiction book that Humbert gives Lolita; the rest are non-fiction (Collins). By grouping *The Little Mermaid* together with "*A History of American Painting . . . , The History of Dancing, Flowers of the Rockies, and Tennis*" (Nabokov qtd. in Collins), Humbert indicates that the fairytale is a twisted sort of "educational gift." By presenting *The Little Mermaid* along with other instructional texts, Humbert indicates his wish to use Andersen's fairytale to teach Lolita that pain is "a natural and necessary element of her growing up—and, moreover, [love-induced suffering] is something that [Lolita] has brought upon herself" (Collins).

Humbert compares Lolita to Ariel by calling them both "archetypal temptress[es]" (Goldman) who actively pursue sexual relationships. Both female characters take romantic interest in men who are inappropriate choices as mates – Ariel with a human and Lolita with her stepfather. However, "where the little mermaid appears, in naked human form, on the steps of the prince's palace at dawn" (Collins), Lolita is quite passive in her first sexual encounter with Humbert. Despite his use of veiled language to

downplay his role – he admits that his lust, like his diction, is “masked” (Nabokov 58) – he is undeniably the initiator. With Lolita on his “live lap,” Humbert euphemizes his erection as “the hidden tumor of an unspeakable passion” and the “gagged, bursting beast” (Nabokov 59). Similarly, rather than explicitly describing ejaculation, he refers to his orgasm as “[setting] all paradise loose” (Nabokov 60). This scene proves that – unlike “The Little Mermaid” – Humbert, not Lolita, initiates the first transgression. Humbert’s polite, non-graphic word choices convey that he does not want to be viewed as a deviant.

Humbert attempts to elude the reader’s criticism and his own guilt by presenting himself as innocent and by assigning agency to Lolita. He emphasizes Lolita’s participation in the relationship by drawing on a trope of mermaid folklore: mermaids “are known for their predatory desire for . . . men” (Collins). Humbert’s portrayal of Lolita’s actions “[insinuate] that, regardless of her ontological status, Lolita herself [chooses] and [desires] her relationship with Humbert” (Collins). Humbert continues to characterize Lolita as “predatory” when he picks her up from Camp Q and she says, “you haven’t kissed me yet” (Nabokov 112). This is the first time they discuss sexual activity, even though it has already taken place; Humbert’s plain, straightforward description of the event (in contrast with his roundabout, metaphor-heavy language in the first orgasm scene) suggests that he sees vocal confirmation as a stronger initiator of romance than sexual contact.

Both Ariel and Lolita “[endure] silence, mutilation, and suffering for the [man’s] sake” (Golden 98), thereby forming “nearly perfect parable[s] of masochism” (Golden 174). In order to win the human prince’s love, Ariel “obtains” a magic potion that changes her tail into a pair of legs (Golden 17). However, “drinking [the potion] . . . [makes Ariel] feel ‘as if a sword were going through [her] body.’ And once she does have legs, ‘every time [her] foot touches the ground it [feels] as though [she] were walking on knives so sharp that [her] blood must flow’” (Golden 17). Just as Ariel’s magic comes at a cost, Lolita’s relationship with Humbert “causes her to make ‘a weeping grimace’ . . . and requires sanitary pads to soak up the blood” (Nabokov qtd. in Collins). Though the pads may be for menstrual blood rather than for the blood associated with sexual inexperience, it is still telling that the mention of Lolita’s vaginal bleeding occurs immediately after Humbert informs her of Charlotte’s death. The blood comes from her reproductive organs and may, therefore, be a sinister, ironic reference to the fact that Lolita – a product of Charlotte’s sexuality – engages in a sexual relationship that causes Charlotte’s death. Because Lolita later states that she is “sure [Humbert] had murdered her mother” (Nabokov 205), it is possible that Lolita – as the object of Humbert’s affection – views herself as an accessory to the “murder.” Given these potential feelings of guilt, the vaginal bleeding may further symbolize Lolita’s desire to purge Humbert from her body.

Ariel and Lolita both decide to surrender their voices. The sea witch demands Ariel's voice as payment for the potion that will give her legs (Golden 100), and Lolita gives Humbert silence and sexual favors in exchange for gifts and money – "knowing the magic and might of her own soft mouth, she [manages] – during one school year! – to raise the bonus price of a fancy embrace to three, and even four bucks" (Nabokov 184). While both characters technically choose silence, neither Ariel or Lolita has a viable alternative if they wish to be happy; the sea witch's potion is the only means by which Ariel can get legs and, without Humbert, Lolita would be impoverished and alone. For example, when Humbert and Lolita pack up to leave the Enchanted Hunters hotel for the first time he writes, "except for my poor little gifts, there was not much to pack" (Nabokov 138). This line emphasizes that Humbert is Lolita's sole benefactor and reminds the reader that he is her only family. She is not in a position to support herself as an individual: "she [has] absolutely nowhere else to go." (Nabokov 142).

Nabokov expands upon the theme of silencing when Lolita participates in a production of William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. Shakespeare's drama tells the story of an outspoken woman, Kate, who becomes docile and silent at the hands of her manipulative, controlling husband, Petruccio. Depending on one's interpretation, Kate's silence can be attributed to "a crude form of male dominance" (Greenblatt 179) or to her understanding of the "advantages of outwardly conforming to society's

expectations." Partners (supposedly) avoid conflict when they adhere to genders role in a relationship, and the female is subservient to the male (Greenblatt 181). Nabokov's inclusion of this play – which is thematically relevant to both *The Little Mermaid* and *Lolita* and is known for its ambiguous approach to female agency – suggests that Humbert and Lolita have differing conceptions of Lolita's silence: Humbert sees silence as a necessary aspect of their partnership, but Lolita sees it is a strategy to avoid argument. Fittingly, when Lolita does argue – admitting that she "loathe[s]" Humbert and threatening to "sleep with the very first fellow who [asks] her" – Humbert grabs her "by the knobby wrist . . . and in fact [hurts] her rather badly" (Nabokov 205). This assault is the price that Lolita pays for failing to remain silent, but the pain is eventually advantageous. In order to reconcile with Lolita after the violent argument, Humbert agrees to take the road trip that allows Lolita to escape to Quilty, "the only man she [is ever] crazy about" (Nabokov 272). For both Ariel and Lolita, therefore, suffering allows them to get close to the men that they want to be with.

Humbert's parallels between Ariel and Lolita prove that he is familiar with Western conceptions of mermaids, but he subtly alludes to the *rusalka* legend as well. The term *rusalka* translates to *water nymph* in Russian (Connolly 20) and, in Slavic folklore, *rusalki* are creatures that, like mermaids, are "half-fish, half-woman" (Hubbs 29). Mermaids and *rusalki* have much in common physically, but their reputations are different. Western mermaids are

sometimes sexualized and assertive, but they are mostly commonly portrayed as beautiful, benevolent creatures (such as Disney's Ariel). In contrast, *rusalki* have a more notorious reputation as aggressors (more closely aligned with the German Lorelei and the Greek Sirens, both of which are "destructive" and infamous for "[luring] men to [their] watery home[s]" (Hubbs 29)). However, *rusalki* are only violent towards those who "disrespect" them (Hubbs 32). Nabokov focuses on this conditional aspect of the wrath of *rusalki* - namely, the fact that these spirits are the "souls of . . . of women who had died prematurely, perhaps because they had committed suicide, primarily because of unrequited love" (Connolly 20). These hurt feelings, developed as a result of perceived disrespect, give *rusalki* "motive[s] for revenge on [their] seducers" and cause them to be "malevolent" (Collins).

As "several readers have noted [,] . . . after [her] death, [Charlotte] becomes an avenging spirit" (Connolly 21). This theory is supported by the events preceding Charlotte's death; Humbert's poor treatment of her is reminiscent of the type of relationship that would cause a *rusalka* to seek revenge. When Charlotte reads Humbert's diary and discovers that her love is unrequited, her face is "disfigured by her emotion" and she, with "venom," tells him "the Haze woman, the big bitch, the old cat, the obnoxious mamma, the—the old stupid Haze is no longer your dupe" (Nabokov 95). Her body language shows that she perceives a tone of disrespect in the diary entry, and it is the emotional state brought on by that disrespect that

causes her to make the fatal decision to run into the street. Though Charlotte does not die by drowning, it is possible that her death is a suicide because, in an explanation of the accident, Frederick emphasizes “his absolute innocence and [Charlotte’s] recklessness” (Nabokov 102). At the very least, her death – which Humbert refers to as a “monstrous mutation” (Nabokov 103), much like the change from a lovelorn woman into a *rusalki* – is catalyzed by a lover’s rejection.

Emily Collins suggests “Andersen’s little mermaid is a kind of mirror image of the older *rusalka*, a benevolent virgin whose transition is from water to land rather than vice versa.” Collins is not referring to the age of *rusalki* when she writes that they are “older” than mermaids, she simply means that the *rusalka*’s history in folklore is longer. In *Lolita*, however, the *rusalka* figure is associated with an elder generation. Humbert establishes an analogy: *rusalka* is to mermaid as mother is to daughter. Lolita parallels Ariel while her mother Charlotte is a *rusalka*. This use of regional and generation-specific folklore highlights Nabokov’s “[movement] from his Russian to his English career,” where “the vengeful *rusalka* gives way, in Nabokov’s English works, to watery women more familiar to his new audience, including Andersen’s little mermaid” (Collins).

Lolita is her mother’s daughter, so it is fitting that she is a derivative form of the water spirit her mother represents. At the same time, however, Lolita is an individual; it is important that she is not exactly the same as Charlotte. Humbert’s use of animal imagery to describe



both Haze provides an astute commentary on their similarities and differences. Throughout the novel, Humbert often refers to Charlotte as a “cow” and, when he goes to the beach with Lolita, he writes that he “[has] as little desire for her as for a manatee” (Nabokov qtd. in Collins). Manatees are also known as “sea cows” and so, again, Charlotte and Lolita are established as closely related and yet distinct. Ironically, “the manatee is one of the ‘favourite . . . contenders’ among the real animals likely to have been mistaken for mermaids” (Philpotts qtd. in Collins) and this layer of irony implies that Charlotte is a far more realistic partner for Humbert than the fantasy that is Lolita.

Perhaps the most significant difference between Charlotte and Lolita is that, while Charlotte succumbs to her fate as a spurned lover, Lolita redirects the twisted fairytale by refusing to participate in the happy ending that Humbert desires. Technically, if the relationship between Humbert and Lolita were to properly follow “Andersen’s prescription,” Humbert would be the one to reject Lolita – not vice versa (Collins). By the end of the novel, Humbert realizes that Quilty is Lolita’s true prince. Ariel and Lolita both “[regain their] li[ves] autonomously, having been enabled to do so by [a] lack of [requited] love” (Collins). They realize that there are limitations to what they will do for love *because* they love – Ariel “chooses to die herself rather than kill [the prince]” (Golden 100) and Lolita “[refuses] to take part” in Quilty’s “drink and drugs” and “complete[ly] freak[ish] sex” acts because “she [loves] him”

(Nabokov 276). The choice to sacrifice, when “made freely,” is “transformative . . . [and] deepens and solidifies [one’s] sense of self” (Pearson qtd. in Golden 265): Ariel’s and Lolita’s stories are pictures of maturation.

Humbert’s traditional views are further exemplified in his “[embrace of] European romanticism . . . as a literary model for his fantasies” (Collins). His idealism explains his attraction to *The Little Mermaid* – a generic female “coming-of-age” story (Collins). Nabokov, however, as a modernist, was interested in the realistic bildungsroman; through *Lolita* he rebels against the male-domination of the subgenre – bildungsroman “novels are full of Huck Finns, and Nick Carraways, and Holden Caulfields, but no one cares about their sisters” (Twitchell 272). James Twitchell points out that, when female characters *are* written into coming-of-age stories, their maturation tends to be focused on “the rupturing of the hymen” and a loss of virginity “usually leads to a life of sin and moral depravity” (273). This is the view that Humbert takes: he believes “the whole ‘growing up’ of Lolita centers around the night in *The Enchanted Hunters*, where Lolita is ‘made a woman’” (Twitchell 274). Therefore, Lolita’s final “anti-climactic and anti-romantic appearance as an ordinary housewife shows up Humbert’s allegories of Lolita for the false myths they are” (Goldman). Her sexuality is irrelevant to her prospects in life because “although she has matured, she is neither slut nor saint” (Goldman). Similarly, at the end of Ariel’s story, she “learns that . . . she can shape [an immortal soul] for herself by three hundred years of good deeds” – a decidedly religious moral

lesson. Ariel's coming-of-age story is far more traditionally feminine: her spirituality makes her easily classifiable as either a "whore or . . . nun" (Twitchell 273).

*Lolita* has earned Nabokov a fair amount of notoriety, with "critics . . . sometimes [conflating] Humbert's view of *Lolita* with Nabokov's" (Goldman). However, the differences between *Lolita* and Charlotte suggest that Nabokov's view is that women do not need to conform to societal expectations in order to be happy. Charlotte and *Lolita* exemplify two types of women: *Lolita* is able to exist outside of stereotypes, but Charlotte feels compelled to fulfill a specific role. Charlotte is associated with the traditional *rusalka* and an older generation, so she is a tragic example of what conservative, sexist values can do to a woman. Heterosexual love is Charlotte's motivation in life, but also the cause of her death. Further, Nabokov's distortion of Andersen's classic fairytale suggests that "'actual events and persons do not always fit these folkloristic fabrications,' especially the prospect that the fairy tale couple 'lived happily ever after'" (James qtd. in Connolly 21). When they die, *Lolita* is a wife and a mother while Humbert is an imprisoned murderer and rapist. This ending is optimistic: Nabokov "exposes the complicity of myth and romantic literature in the sexual exploitation of innocents like *Lolita*" (Goldman). *Lolita*'s ability to move beyond cultural expectations is a testament to Nabokov's successful "[deconstruction] of Humbert's mythologizing of *Lolita*" (Goldman) and suggests that Nabokov has more faith in women than does his misogynist protagonist.

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