DID YOU FALL FOR IT?

Sympathy and Empathy in Nabokov's Lolita and The Enchanter.

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DID YOU FALL FOR IT?: Sympathy and Empathy in Nabokov’s *Lolita* and *The Enchanter*.

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to examine if, how, and why sympathy and empathy was created in Nabokov’s two narratives dealing with pedophilia; Lolita and The Enchanter. A large amount of research did exist on this subject regarding Lolita, but not on The Enchanter. Since Nabokov has referred to The Enchanter as a kind of pre-Lolita in the “Authors Note One” in The Enchanter, I thought it would be interesting to see what similar techniques he used to generate sympathy and empathy from the reader in the two books, and to examine if they had any differences regarding the subject. After a close reading of the books, some defining features could be found to be connected to sympathy and empathy. These features had to do with the narration, the form, and the language. The protagonists used these different feature to create a bond with the reader, a bond that is then used to make the reader feel for or/and with the protagonists. Lolita is a longer, more developed, and more comprehensive story than The Enchanter which gives Humbert more time to create and use this bond with the reader. Therefore, Lolita is more likely to generate empathy and sympathy from the reader. If a reader experiences those emotions though, depends on the individual reader. All I have presented in this essay is related to how Nabokov invite empathy and sympathy from the reader when reading Lolita and The Enchanter. That does not mean all readers experience these emotions since it is an individual process that depends on how each reader interprets the narrative.

Keywords

English literature, Lolita, The Enchanter, Nabokov, Empathy, Sympathy
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Introduction

Nabokov’s *Lolita* is a famous and celebrated story that received mixed reviews when it was first published because of its controversial subject. Since then it has become one of the most important pieces of literature from the 20th century due to its unique theme and style. This has resulted in that it has also become a well-researched book, especially regarding the relationship between the reader and the protagonist. That Humbert creates a bond with the reader, and that he uses this bond to generate sympathy and empathy is an observation made by many researchers. There is not as much research however, on Nabokov’s *The Enchanter*, even though both novels deal with pedophilia. The goal of this essay is therefore to discuss if, how, and why sympathy and/or empathy are created in the two novels, as well as to examine if there are any differences between the two in the way these emotions are invited. The goal is also to create a better understanding of the concepts ‘sympathy’ and ‘empathy’, what they really entail, and how they differ from each other in relation to reader’s response.

After a close reading of both books, some defining features relating to narration, form, and language can be shown to have a connection to how sympathy and empathy are created. All these features will be discussed in detail in the analysis. It is important to have in mind when reading that not all readers experience sympathy and/or empathy for the protagonists´ – at least not all the time. The reader’s state of mind when reading *Lolita* or *The Enchanter* is based on that personal reader’s interpretation of what is told in the novel. It is therefore an individual process if a reader experiences sympathy and empathy or not. This essay will present and discuss narrative techniques used in the texts to invite these emotions even if every reader does not experience them. These techniques have to do with the narration and differ significantly in *Lolita* and *The Enchanter*. They also have to do with the form, which also differs between the novels but not to the same extent as the narration. I will also look at the language, and argue that it is used similarly in both novels.
Previous research

Empathy and sympathy are two concepts that have been studied considerably in psychological and philosophical circles. In 1988, Douglas Chismar wrote a paper where he tries to differentiate the terms from each other in hopes of “encourage[-ing] the study and development of what is truly empathy” (257). He explains that historical factors revolving around the usage of the terms has given the concepts multiple meanings, and that they therefore have numerous theoretical definitions. For example, the Greek philosophers Poseidonius and Epictetus used the term ‘sympathy’ when referring to a “mutual interaction’ of the organic and inorganic on a cosmic level,” while the British, 19th century, philosopher Shiftesbury used the term to describe feelings of moral approval and disapproval (Chismar 258). Lauren Wispé argues that psychological concepts, such as sympathy and empathy, evolve over time to have new meanings. This happens because the concepts develop through redefinitions, reinterpretations, and even the neglect they go through over time (17).

Amy Coplan and Suzanne Keen’s articles are central to this essay since they have approached sympathy and empathy from a literary angle, and not from a psychological or philosophical one. Both Coplan and Keen characterize empathy as when a person takes up the psychological perspective of another person and imaginatively experiences what they experience, while they characterize sympathy as the emotional response one experiences for another person in certain situations. Empathy is feeling with another person, while sympathy is feeling for another person.

The unique style and themes in Lolita have, like I stated before, made it a well-researched book. Scholars including Leland de la Durantaye, Kasushal Kishore Sharma, Joseph Gold, and many others have studied the morality, narration, and reader’s responses to the novel, including empathy and sympathy, in Nabokov’s novel. They all make important observations and arguments that are relevant for this essay. I have chosen however, to mainly
work with Leona Toker’s article since she, in detail, presents different techniques the text uses to generate sympathy and empathy in the reader. Toker’s arguments also demonstrate my own reflections and findings in a good fashion. I do not always agree with Toker’s arguments though, which is another reason why I chose to mostly work with her text.

Although most of the research on *Lolita* also mentions *The Enchanter*, is it all they do. They make a brief connection to *The Enchanter* when analyzing *Lolita* since they both deal with pedophilia. To my knowledge, no extensive research on *The Enchanter* exist. That is why it was important to find sources that could be applied to both novels. Such sources include Tamar Yacobi’s text on the unreliable narrator. Wayne Booth was the first to define the term “unreliable narrator” in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1994). Since his definition though, new theories on the idea have been developed; Yacobi’s is one of these. Her theory revolves around the reader’s interpretation of the narrative’s inconsistencies. She argues that if the text contains conflicting information, the reader will interpret the narrator as unreliable. *Lolita*, especially, include many such inconsistencies. In Phelan’s article “Estranging Unreliability, Bonding Unreliability, and the Ethics of ‘Lolita’,” he applies Yacobi’s theory on *Lolita*. Further, he explains how Humbert creates a bond with the reader, and how he uses this bond to diminish the reader’s judgement of him (225). Since this process is relevant for my study, will his findings, as well as Yacobi’s theory, be important sources for this essay.

**Background**

Vladimir Nabokov was born 1899 in Russia, but he and his family had to flee the country after the February Revolution in 1917. They moved to England, where Nabokov graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge. He later relocated to Germany where he became a recognized writer and poet under the pseudonym V.Sirin. In 1937, Nabokov, his wife, and their son moved to Paris, France, but in 1940 they decided to leave for America because of
Nabokov has written many recognized and celebrated novels and short-stories. His most famous work is Lolita, which was first published in 1955. While living in Europe he mostly wrote in Russian, but while living in America, most of his work was written in English; Lolita was one of these. The novel has been referred to as “a love affair between the author and the English language,” and Nabokov became famous worldwide after it got published (Nabokov, D 148). The novel deals with a middle-aged man’s inappropriate love and desire for a twelve-year-old girl named Dolores, or “Lolita” as the narrator calls her. The narrative begins with the editor John Ray receiving a manuscript from his friend who works as a lawyer. The manuscript was written by one of his clients who had just died of coronary thrombosis while incarcerated (although there is no mentioning of what he is in prison for). The client has given himself the pseudonym “Humbert Humbert”, and he has requested that his story is sent to Ray for editing and potentially publishing after his and Dolore’s death. The story that follows is Humbert Humbert’s story. It is a detailed and comprehensive tale that begins the year 1923 when Humbert fall in love for the first time, and ends the year 1952 when he is arrested. His story is a memoir where he is trying to explain and justify his actions and feelings towards the young Dolores. As Toker states, through a graceful writing style and alluring sentences a cathartic effect is created which helps Humbert, throughout the narrative, to lull some readers into a span of sympathy for him, although he clearly is a pedophile (200).

Lolita was not Nabokov’s first work dealing with pedophilia though. While living in Paris, he wrote The Enchanter, or Volshebnik as it was first named in Russian. Just like Lolita, it portrays a middle-aged man’s obsession for a twelve-year-old girl. The man, or “the enchanter” as he is often referred to, marries the girl’s terminally ill mother to get closer to her, and, after the mother’s death, he gains custody of her. They then go to a hotel where “the
enchanter” decides to give in to his passion by touching himself and the girl inappropriately while she is asleep. She wakes up screaming and the neighbors bang on the wall because of the noise. “The enchanter” panics. He runs out of the hotel, throws himself in front of a moving car, and presumably dies.

Nabokov showed the script to a few close friends in 1939. He decided however, not to publish it because he was not fully satisfied with it. After he moved to America in the 1940s, he thought he had lost the script in the move. However, he found it a few years later while living in Switzerland and decided, after the success of Lolita, that it was worth translating into English and publishing it. Sadly, he died before this happened. Instead his son Dmitri Nabokov translated and published it in 1986, nine years after Vladimir Nabokov’s death.

In the “Author’s Note One” in The Enchanter is a section of Nabokov’s article “On a Book Entitled Lolita,” which was written while he still thought the script to The Enchanter was lost. In it, he refers to The Enchanter as a pre-Lolita. He also explains how the two works are connected:

The first little throb of Lolita went through me late in 1939 or early in 1942 in Paris, at a time when I was laid up with a severe attack of intercostal neuralgia. As far as I can recall, the initial shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature’s cage. The impulse I record had no textual connection with the ensuing train of thought, which resulted, however, in a prototype of my present novel, a short story some thirty pages long. (8)

The “some thirty pages long” short story he is referring to are actually the fifty-five typewritten pages of Russian prose that now has been translated into English by his son and published under the name The Enchanter. However, both Vladimir Nabokov and his son Dmitri Nabokov argue that although Lolita and The Enchanter share a lot of similarities regarding themes and events, are the two works very different. Dimitri points out that the
works differ in length, but most importantly in setting and tone (148). Vladimir further explains in “On a Book Entitled Lolita” that even though Dolores and the nameless girl in The Enchanter are “much the same lass,” and the idea that the protagonists’ marries the girl’s mothers to be closer to them is the same, that “otherwise the thing [Lolita] was new and had grown in secret the claws and wings of a novel” (9).

**Theory and Terminology**

Amy Coplan differentiates the three terms empathy, emotional contagion, and sympathy in her article “Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions,” published in 2004. She argues that empathy is an imaginative process where a person takes up the psychological perspective and imaginary experiences of another person (144). Coplan stresses that while doing this, the empathizers still maintain their own identity, so although they are deeply engaged in what the second person is undergoing, they preserve a representation of themselves that is distinct from their representation of the other. This awareness of their own identity has many important effects. First, it helps them to understand that they are not obtaining the empathized’s experiences, but just takes on their psychological perspective. Secondly, it helps them facilitate their own separate experience at the same time as they are empathizing with someone else. Lastly, it enables them to detect their boundaries, as well as the empathized’s boundaries, and thus “respect the singularity of the other’s experience as well as his or her own” (Coplan 144). Further, Keen explains that “although psychological and philosophical studies of empathy have tended to gravitate towards the negative, empathy also occurs for positive feelings of happiness, satisfaction, elation, triumph, and sexual arousal” (209). She furthermore argues that empathy towards positive feelings is of equal importance since it also affects readers’ pleasure. It is therefore an important argument for this essay.

   Emotional contagion is when emotions are transferred from one individual to another.
This transfer happens automatically, unintentionally, and uncontrollably. The distinction between emotional contagion and empathy often confuse people, but unlike empathy, emotional contagion does not involve self-othering differentiation, it is not an imaginative process, and no perspective taking occurs. When emotional contagion does occur, and someone “catches” the emotions of someone else, they experience the emotions as their own, and therefore lose their own identity (Coplan 145).

Sympathy differs from empathy although both involve self-othering differentiation. Sympathy focuses on feeling for another individual, and does not involve sharing the individual’s experiences as empathy and emotional contagion do. Coplan writes that she defines sympathy as “an emotional response that consists of feeling sorrow or concern for the distressed or needy other (rather than feeling the same emotion as the other person)” (145). Coplan’s point is an important one because, just as we can sympathize with another individual without taking on their psychological perspective, we can empathize with another without feeling concern for that person (145). Keen gives the following examples to help distinguish empathy and sympathy:

**Empathy:**

I feel what you feel.

*I feel your pain.*

**Sympathy:**

I feel a supportive emotion about your feelings.

*I feel pity for your pain.*

(209)

Having these definitions in mind when analyzing Nabokov’s two novels, in this essay I argue that no emotional contagion takes place because the reader has a clear self-othering differentiation. The reader may empathize or sympathize with the protagonist’s desire toward the girls, but they do not experience the desire as their own. I also argue that it depends on the individual reader if they are empathizing or sympathizing with Humbert and “the enchanter,”
if they do both or if they do neither. Some readers may momentarily take on the protagonist’s perspective, choose to see the world through his eyes, and therefore empathize with him in different situations. Coplan points out that, when empathizing with someone we can imagine that person’s feelings and suffering, yet we can disregard it if we think he/she deserves his/her punishment (145). For example, the reader may somewhat understand Humbert’s feelings because they can imagine the passion and suffering he feels in the novel. However, although they may understand it by taking up his psychological perspective, they may still think he deserves to die in prison. Therefore, they are empathizing with him. Some readers, on the other hand, may not imagine Humbert’s feelings, but rather create their own emotional response from what is told in the story. For example, it is very likely that some readers feel sorry for Humbert after his last meeting with Dolores when she tells him she will never come live with him again (208). The reader is then sympathizing with him because they do not take on his perspective or imagine the sorrow he feels when he is losing Dolores, but they feel their own emotion of sorrow for him.

As argued above, if a reader experiences empathy or sympathy depends on the individual reader. I believe however, that most readers experience a combination of both emotions when reading Nabokov’s novels. What makes Lolita and The Enchanter so successful are the unique tools and techniques used to accomplish this. In the following sections, I will present and discuss different ways the texts use these tools and techniques to invite these emotions in the reader.

Analysis

Narration

In comparing Lolita with the earlier work, The Enchanter, Toker explains:

*The Enchanter makes good reading, but it is much more limited in scope than Lolita.*
The books differ in length, setting, and tone. Moreover, unlike *The Enchanter, Lolita* produces a cathartic effect. It lulls us into long spans of sympathy for Humbert and then punishes us for our temporary suspension of judgement, whereas *The Enchanter* fails to "enchant" us out of our consistent disapproval of the protagonist, a disapproval punctured by only brief touches of compassion. (200)

Although I argue that it depends on the individual reader if *Lolita* “lulls us into long spans of sympathy for Humbert,” or not, I do agree with Toker’s argument that *The Enchanter* is more likely to only generate “brief touches of compassion”. A major difference between the novels is the narration. *Lolita* is written from a first person perspective which makes the protagonist internal journey all the more compelling and conducive to inviting sympathetic self-projection from the reader while *The Enchanter* is written from a third person perspective (Toker 201).

As previously stated, *The Enchanter* is a sort of prototype to *Lolita*. It is therefore not surprising that Nabokov has developed the “touches of compassion” in *The Enchanter* to the more comprehensive provocation of empathy and sympathy in *Lolita* (Toker 201). With that being said, some readers of *The Enchanter* may still experience sympathy and empathy when reading the earlier story because it all depends on how the individual reader interprets the narrative. I would argue that one of the reasons why *Lolita* generates more sympathy and empathy from the reader than *The Enchanter* is because of the first person narration. Humbert is allowed to tell his own story and therefore he is able to impose his sense of what is normal on the reader. This normalization helps him distance himself and thus the reader - or “the ladies and gentlemen of the jury” as Humbert often refers to them – from his crimes. In consequence, they are more likely to feel empathy and sympathy for him. This ‘normal’ that Humbert creates relates to his need for ecstasy in life. The reader is encouraged to sympathize with this need. They are not, however, encouraged to sympathize with Humbert’s source for ecstasy: namely, pedophilia (Toker 202). Throughout the narrative the metaphorical line between what is wrong and what is right begins, for some readers, to blur, which makes
Humbert’s desire not seem so bad anymore. Toker writes:

Eventually, however, the audience is entrapped: it begins to derive a pleasure from the account of the pursuit of ecstasy and to ignore the price of this pursuit, the suffering that Humbert causes to others. This is precisely the effect Humbert wishes to produce on the "Gentlemen of the Jury"[…]. His narrative strives to turn the jury's attention into an aesthetic contemplation and then to subject the latter to the rules of visual perspective: the greater the distance, the less distinct the features of the represented scene. (202)

According to Toker, the reader does not only empathize and sympathize with Humbert’s negative feelings, but also with his positive feelings regarding his pursuit for ecstasy, and they “derive a pleasure” from this pursuit. Toker’s theory thereby relates to Keen’s point that empathy can occur in relation to positive emotions. I agree with Toker. I argue however, that not all readers accept Humbert’s ‘normal’, and therefore not all readers experience the “long spans of sympathy” that others do (200). Personally, I never did “derive a pleasure from the account of the pursuit of ecstasy” when reading Lolita, although I have no doubt some readers would. Nevertheless, I still believe that the first person narration of Lolita affects the reader’s thought processes regarding Humbert even if they do not accept his ‘normal’. Everything the reader is told, is told from Humbert’s perspective. He can therefore distance himself from his crimes and soften his actions by arguing that everything he did, he did for his love for Dolores, and even claim that it was she who seduced him (132). Although the reader may not believe or trust him, is it the only perspective on the events that they are given access to, and there is no narrator there to judge him. In The Enchanter on the other hand, the story is told from a third perspective narrator. Even though “the enchanter’s” thoughts are uncensored and detailed, the book’s narrator is evidently critical of the protagonist’s obsession with the girl’s beauty: “Superimposed on all his still-vivid past despairs, there was now a new and special monster…” (24). This results in less empathy and sympathy from the reader (Token 201).

What makes Nabokov’s two novels unique though, is that they both force the reader to
experience the protagonist’s thoughts and feelings throughout the narrative. By letting Humbert narrate his own story and by letting “the enchanter’s” thoughts be uncensored, the reader has no choice than to see, understand and experience the world through the protagonist’s perspective. Since the protagonists are pedophiles, this may seem unsettling to some readers, but that is how literature works – it makes the reader see, understand, and experience the world in a different way that may disturb them, but that takes them out of their routine and habitual ways of understanding the world.

Unreliability

“Unreliable narrator” is a term Booth first introduced in 1961 in his work The Rhetoric of Fiction. Booth argues that the unreliability, or reliability of a narrator is created in the context of the text and that it is dependent on its framework. He explains that the narrator and the implied author are not the same person and that the distance between these two determines a narrator’s reliability, or lack thereof. When the narrator is unreliable the distance between narrator and the implied author’s norms grows, which means the distance between the implied author and the reader closes. Thereby “the implied author carries the reader with him in judging the narrator” (Booth 158). Much like how Token argues that the narrator of The Enchanter is critical of the protagonist’s obsession with the girl. Since the narrator is a third person though, and thus not a character in the narrative, the narrator in The Enchanter remains reliable (201).

Since Booth’s definition of the “unreliable narrator”, new theories regarding the concept have been developed. Yacobi for example, does not agree with Booth on how unreliability is created. She argues that instead of the distance between the implied author and the narrator, is it the reader’s interpretation that determines if a narrator is unreliable or not, and that the interpretation is based on the text’s inconsistencies. If a text is inconsistent, that is,
it does not match the reader’s previous knowledge (real-life knowledge, or knowledge created by the author), it will cause the narrator to seem untrustworthy (110). This definition is applicable to the narration in *Lolita* where Humbert often describes an event, and then later comments on that event with conflicting information. An example of this is when Humbert is telling the reader about his and Dolores first time together. He argues that Dolores seduced him, took all the initiative, and that he was just a passive player in the act. He writes:

> While eager to impress me with the world of tough kids, she was not quite prepared for certain discrepancies between kid’s life and mine. Pride alone prevented her from giving up; for, in my strange predicament, I feigned supreme stupidity and had her have her way – at least while I could still bear it. But really these are irrelevant matters; I am not concerned with so-called “sex” at all. (134)

Here, Humbert argues that it was Dolores who had “her way” with him and that he himself is not “concerned with so-called ‘sex’ at all”. He also points out that he was not Dolores first lover (135). By doing all of this he presents Dolores as more sexually active than him, and he is therefore able to imply that the guilt should be transferred from himself to her. This information however, is not consistent with information the reader receive later when Humbert refers back to the event:

> This was a lone child, an absolute waif, with whom a heavy-limbed, foul-smelling adult 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 – plunged into a nightmare. (140)

Here, what really happened is shining through Humbert’s narration. He openly admits that a “heavy-limbed, foul-smelling adult” had sex with a “lone child”. What he really is describing is rape, even though he would never call it that. He also admits that it has been a “lifelong dream” to fulfill his desire towards pubescent girls, which does not correspond with his previous statement that he is not “concerned with so-called ‘sex’ at all”. It is inconsistencies like these throughout the narrative that reveal Humbert as an untrustworthy and unreliable
narrator.

Form

In *Lolita* is it not just the narrator that is of importance, but also the implied author, the implied reader, and the narratee. The text works with multiple dimensions to make the story seem as authentic as possible. The foreword for example, is e.g. not a paratext at all but the start of the narrative because it has a fictional implied author, unlike most books where the author of the foreword is a non-fictional character and therefore not a part of the narrative. The implied author of *Lolita*’s foreword is the editor John Ray, and by letting him narrate the foreword the reader gets a feeling that he exists in reality (since authors of forewords are typically non-fictional). This makes the reader experience a sense of realness when Ray is telling the reader about the manuscript he received for editing by his lawyer friend. This feeling is then strengthened by Ray’s reassurance that all the character’s “real” names in the manuscript have been changed to protect their identity, and by the short summery of what the “real” characters are doing now (4). Before Humbert even starts his story, there is, therefore, already a deeper dimension working on the reader to make the narration feel more credible and authentic.

The text keeps working with this by letting Humbert take the role as both narrator and implied author (much like how authors of actual memoirs takes on the same roles). Humbert is describing his own story from his own point of view, which makes him the narrator. However, he is also the implied author because his story is written by himself. At least, that is the perception the reader experiences. In the foreword, Ray explains that he received the manuscript and that he did little to no editing on it; “this remarkable memoir is presented intact” (3). The reader then gets to read this “remarkable memoir” that is written by Humbert in jail. Since it is written by Humbert he is the implied author, which is visible in the way he
distinguishes between the past and the present, even though his present is not the same as the reader’s present. The first chapter takes place in Humbert’s present, while chapter two and three are in the past, just to return to the present in chapter four. Humbert also leaves comments from the present while he is narrating the past; “There was a tendency for cabins to fuse and gradually form the caravansary, and, lo (she was not interested but the reader may be), a second story was added […]” (210). These jumps back and forth in time are temporal features that make the reader perceive Humbert as the implied author, as well as the narrator.

In most fictional novels, the protagonist and/or narrator is not the same as the implied author, but in non-fictional narratives this is a recognized feature, so by letting Humbert take the role as both narrator and implied author the reader’s feeling of authenticity is intensified.

Furthermore, Nabokov adds another dimension by having a clear narratee and implied reader for Humbert’s story whom Humbert calls “the ladies and gentlemen of the jury” (6). By talking directly to them Humbert invites the reader to become more involved in the story, and to judge him for his actions. What Humbert consciously also does, that he never explicitly declares, is that he invites the reader to forgive him for his faults and errors; “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns” (6). With the help of all these dimensions Humbert succeeds in creating a bond with the reader, which he uses to generate more sympathy, empathy, and understanding from the reader.

_The Enchanter_ is, like discussed above, narrated from a third person perspective. It also lacks several of the dimensions of _Lolita_. This means that, “the enchanter” is neither the narrator, nor the implied author, and he does not create a bond with the reader like Humbert does, which results in less sympathy and empathy from the reader. _The Enchanter_, however, works in a different way to engage the reader. Two interesting features in the story are the lack of names, and the unspecified geographical and temporal setting. As proclaimed above,
the protagonist’s name is never mentioned, instead he is simply referred to as “the enchanter,” “the man,” “the traveler,” and so on. The same is true for the girl. She is mostly referred to as “the girl,” but occasionally she is also called “the innocent” or “the enchanted”. In fact, the only character who is mentioned by name is a minor character; a woman named Maria, who does not add anything to the plot (88). Time and place is likewise purposely left imprecise, which successfully makes the story timeless and placeless (Nabokov, D 141). The result of this is that *The Enchanter* is a universal piece of literature, which means the story is relatable to most people in most places. By keeping the time and place unspecified the reader can relate it to their own familiar environment, which makes them more engaged in the story and thus makes them more likely to feel compassion, and maybe even sympathy and empathy for “the enchanter”.

**Language**

The style of the language in the novels affects the way the reader interprets and perceives the narrative and the protagonists. In *Lolita*, although the language is ambiguous, there is not as much implicature as in *The Enchanter*, where the protagonist never directly states that he wants to have a sexual relationship with the girl. Nonetheless, the reader understands, even though it is never stated, that the protagonist desires the girl. This understanding is created by the use of language. An example is how “the enchanter” describes the girl he so often fantasize about, especially the first time he sees her in the park:

[…] he had appreciated all of her from tip to toe: the liveliness of her russet curls (recently trimmed); the radiance of her large, slightly vacuous eyes, somehow suggesting translucent gooseberries; her merry, warm complexion; her pink mouth, slightly open so that two large front teeth barely rested on the protuberance of the lower lip; the summery tint of her bare arms with the sleek little foxylike hairs running along the forearms; the indistinct tenderness of her still narrow but already
The word “appreciated” gives the reader a sense of subtle unease. The emotionally charged word indicates the protagonist’s mentality while looking at the girl – he does not just see a twelve-year-old girl with russet curls and two large front teeth on roller skates; he takes it a step further and actually appreciates her looks. With this simple word, the author has hinted at the protagonist’s inappropriate desire towards the girl. This is then emphasized by the detailed description of her, especially in comparison to the simple description of her nanny on page 21. The physical description of her chest is another indication towards the protagonist’s mentality; “but already not quite flat chest.” The word “already” gives the sentence a negative tone, which illustrate the protagonist’s opinion that girls who have not yet entered puberty and therefore not developed breast yet, are preferable to more mature girls/women. It is these simple word choices and sentences that makes the reader see the world through different eyes. The text forces the reader to experience the protagonist’s desire for the girl by using words and phrases that are not typically applied on the subject. Defamiliarization is thus a key linguistic tactic.

The language in Lolita is similar to the one used in The Enchanter. The difference is that in Lolita is it the protagonist himself that gets to tell the story, and thus use the language to his advantage. Humbert tries to distance himself from ‘normal’ pedophiles by arguing that his actions and desire come from love, not lust. He stresses that he does not feel desire towards every young girl, but only to the ones he calls “nymphets” (17). According to Humbert this desire is so common that it should have its own name. Thereafter, he supplies the term “nympholepsy” (17). The word is much more flattering than the word pedophilia, and by using it Humbert succeeds in softening its significance. He also rationalizes his
obsession with “nymphets” by saying that it is something natural, and by providing historical examples of marriages between young girls and older men to prove this (17). He further argues that in the United States it is legal to marry at fifteen years old, but that there is a place in Cincinnati where girls mature about the end of their twelfth year and that it is then legal for them to marry. Humbert explains that Dolores was born less than three hundred miles from this place, and by doing so he emphasizes that it is not his desire that is deficient because it is a natural thing, but rather it is the law and the social convention of his desire that are amiss. He is simply following nature because he is “nature’s faithful hound” (135). Humbert then strengthens this argument by reminding the reader that he was not Dolores’ first lover, and by saying that it was she who seduced him (134-135). All these arguments are delivered in a persuasive way, which may momentarily make the reader trust and sympathize with Humbert. That Dolores was the one who seduced him may be his strongest argument. As stated earlier, according to Humbert, she was the one who initiated sex, not him. Still, even though Dolores is portrayed as a (stubborn and vulgar) child that has a crush on Humbert, the reader understands that Humbert is the adult in the situation and that he therefore bears the responsibility.

Another argument Humbert uses to justify his desire towards Dolores is that she would never take any harm as a result of his actions. He would preserve her innocence and she would be happier in his care than in her mother’s. This argument is strengthened by the portrayal of Charlotte Haze, Dolores’ mother. She is not particularly kind or loving towards her daughter. Humbert’s argument is therefore that, since he loves Dolores so much more than her mother, he would be a better caregiver. However, what the reader must keep in mind is that Humbert is in control of the story. By portraying Charlotte Haze as a bad mother and person, he gets the reader to diminish their judgement of his actions because the implied assumption is that it would be beneficial for Dolores to live with him. As I said before, these
arguments are delivered to the reader in a very persuasive way. Although the reader is aware of Humbert’s unreliability, he probably still manages to generate sympathy and empathy from some readers, and maybe even succeeds in getting some readers to agreeing with him.

Towards the end of Lolita, Humbert shows remorse for his actions towards Dolores. This remorse is described with language that is aimed at making the reader feel bad for him:

> Alas, I was unable to transcend the simple human fact that whatever spiritual solace I might find, whatever lithophanic eternities might be provided for me, nothing could make my Lolita forget the foul lust I had inflicted upon her. 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 Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac, unless this can be proven (and if it can, then life is a joke), I see nothing for the treatment of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art. (282-283)

Humbert’s express his self-hatred which is evident in the text; “[…] whatever spiritual solace I might find,” “[…] the foul lust I had inflicted upon her,” “I see nothing for the treatment of my misery […]” Although he is saying he will never forgive himself for ruining Dolores childhood, he is essentially asking for the reader’s forgiveness. His description of his own misery is designed to make the reader feel sorry for him and to undermine their negative judgement of him. His extravagant and lavished language is used to present himself as intelligent, mature, well-educated, and sophisticated, which are all qualities that make the reader more inclined accept his faults more than if he were to be an ignorant, immature, uneducated, and unrefined person. His remorse originates from him having ruined Dolores childhood though, not from his obsession with “nymphets” itself, so even though the reader is tempted to ‘forgive’ Humbert for his actions, they need to keep in mind that he has not changed his view on pedophilia (Toker 222). As a result of this, he does not, in my opinion, deserve the reader’s sympathy or empathy. However, although I do not believe he deserves it, I still think some readers ‘fall’ for Humbert’s charm and self-criticism which makes them
experience these emotions for him.

_The Enchanter_ also uses self-criticism to create compassion for the protagonist. The novel begins with an inner monologue where “the enchanter’s” internal conflict is evident:

“How can I come to terms with myself?” he thought, when he did any thinking at all. “This cannot be lechery. Coarse carnality is omnivorous; the subtle kind presupposes eventual satiation. So what if I did have five or six normal affairs—how can one compare their insipid randomness with my unique flame? What is the answer? It certainly isn’t like the arithmetic of Oriental debauchery, where the tenderness of the prey is inversely proportional to its age. Oh, no, to me it’s not a degree of a generic whole, but something totally divorced from the generic, something that is not more valuable but _in_ valuable. What is it then? Sickness, criminality? And is it compatible with conscience and shame, with squeamishness and fear, with self-control and sensitivity? (1)

The quotation above demonstrates the internal conflict the protagonist struggles with throughout the narrative. He is trying to understand his desire by unsuccessfully defining it; “What is it then?”. He understands that his desire is not socially accepted and he is trying to understand why he is experiencing such a strong desire towards a young girl when he has had “normal affairs” before. He does experience shame, squeamishness, and fear because he knows his desire is wrong, but he is contemplating if, with the help of self-control and sensitivity, it is manageable. What set’s “the enchanter’s” and Humbert’s self-hatred apart though, is that “the enchanter” struggles with understanding and accepting his pedophilic desires because he knows it is wrong from the start, while Humbert’s self-hatred comes first after he has lost Dolores and “deprived her of her childhood” (283). I would argue that it is in the last chapter that “the enchanter” discovers the answers to the questions he asks himself. He comes to the realization that his passion for young girls, and specifically for the girl he now has custody of, is not “compatible with conscience and shame, with squeamishness and fear, with self-control and sensitivity” (1). He may not fully understand what is wrong with
him, but he realizes that he cannot come to terms with what he has done or with himself. That is why he throws himself in front of a speeding car (112). “The enchanter” realizes as soon as he acts on his lust that he cannot live with himself because of his actions and his forbidden yearning. Because of this remorse, some readers may experience compassion for him, and maybe even sympathy and empathy.

Humbert, on the other hand, does not experience remorse until he has lost Dolores. He had a sexual relationship with her for almost two years where he never showed any significant signs of guilt or regret. Instead, he repeatedly tried to justify their relationship. It is first when Humbert has lost Dolores, is in prison, and is trying to get “the Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury” to forgive him that he expresses his self-hatred and remorse. Like argued above, this remorse is not based on his desire for young girls though, but rather for his actions towards Dolores. Therefore, I do persist with the opinion that this display of remorse is neither genuine, nor makes him worthy of the reader’s sympathy or empathy. Although, I believe some reader’s do fall for his sophisticated and intelligent ways which makes them experience these feelings for him.

**Conclusion**

Whether empathy or sympathy are experienced while reading *The Enchanter* or *Lolita* depends on the individual reader. It is most likely however, that *Lolita* will generate more empathy and sympathy from the reader since it is a longer, more developed, and more comprehensive story than *The Enchanter*. Toker argues that Humbert “lulls” the reader into long spans of sympathy for him, and although I argue that is the case for some readers, it is far from all readers that experience these “long spans of sympathy” (200). Some readers may not feel any sympathy or empathy towards Humbert at all, some may feel it throughout the whole narrative, and some may have moments when they experience these emotions. It all
depends on how the individual reader interprets the narrative.

The narrator in *The Enchanter* fails to create as strong of a bond with the reader as Humbert creates. Therefore, empathy and sympathy are not as easily provoked. Some readers may still experience these feelings towards him though, and the text uses a number of tools to accomplish this. The self-hatred and the internal conflict the protagonist is struggling with are designed to make them feel sorry for him. The unspecific setting and time, as well as the basically nameless characters makes the story a universal piece of literature, which result in more compassion, empathy, and sympathy from the reader since they can relate and apply the story on their own familiar environment. The language is probably the most important and most effective tool the text uses to make the reader feel with, or for “the enchanter” though. By applying terms and phrases that are typically not used when talking about pedophilia the subject is defamiliarized. Nabokov thereby reduce the reader’s judgements of “the enchanter” since the book never explicitly states that he wants to have a sexual relationship with the girl, his desire is only implied.

Language in *Lolita* is used in a similar way, although it is not as implicit as in *The Enchanter*. The major difference is that Humbert is the narrator which means he can use the language to his advantage, which “the enchanter” cannot since his story is told from a third person perspective. Humbert is able to present his own arguments for having a sexual relationship with Dolores, he can narrate and manipulate the events, and he makes the reader experience the events from his point of view. All this happens while using extravagant and refined language. He thereby presents himself as an intelligent, mature, well-educated, and sophisticated person which makes the reader more inclined to be receptive of his arguments.

The form is another important feature that affects the reader’s interpretation of the narrative. The text works with different ‘dimensions’ to make the story seem as real and universal as possible. By letting Humbert take the role as both narrator and implied author, as well as
having a clear narratee and implied reader that Humbert ‘talks to’, a bond between Humbert and the reader is created. Humbert then uses this bond to make the reader experience understanding, sympathy, and empathy for him and his actions toward Dolores.

All I have presented so far has been related to if and how sympathy and empathy is created for Humbert and “the enchanter”, not to why it is created. To answer this question, I would like to go back to the argument that literature disturbs and makes the reader see, understand, and experience the world in a different way than what they used to. By letting Humbert narrate his own story and by letting “the enchanter’s” thoughts and feelings be uncensored, thus making the reader more probable to experience compassion, sympathy, and empathy for the protagonists, Nabokov has succeeded in all of the above, and he has therefore created two unforgettable novels.

**Literature**

**Primary Sources**


**Secondary Sources**


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