Giving Lolita a Voice

A feminist reading of *Lolita* and *My Dark Vanessa*

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Abstract

This study examines patriarchal ideology and traditional gender roles in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* and Elizabeth Russell’s *My Dark Vanessa*. Using feminist literary criticism, the essay investigates the ways in which the female characters, Dolores, and Vanessa, are affected by the patriarchal assumptions and patterns that the male characters promote. The study also analyzes how the female characters are objectified through and internalize the concept of the “Male Gaze”. It is evident that Vanessa and Dolores are harmed both physically and psychologically by the patriarchal beliefs of their abusers, even as various narrative techniques show how they struggle to break free.
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1. Introduction

“My belief is that art should not be comforting; for comfort, we have mass entertainment and one another. Art should provoke, disturb, arouse our emotions, expand our sympathies in directions we may not anticipate and may not even wish.”

(Carl Oates 22)

Without a doubt, the themes of abuse and perversity in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* have have provoked readers since its publication in 1955. However, the subject matter is sometimes overlooked, mainly because of the novel’s language, which is often praised for its eloquence and beauty. The divided reactions and responses to *Lolita* are the main reason I have chosen to write about this novel.

*Lolita* has inspired not only strong responses from readers, but also inspired literary works. One such work is Kate Elizabeth Russell’s *My Dark Vanessa*, which was published 65 years after *Lolita* and concerns such similar themes as abuse, perversity and obsession. Russell confirms the strong reactions that many readers of *Lolita* have when first reading the novel. When Russell first read the novel at fourteen years old, she completely fell in love with the language and the prose. In the afterword of *My Dark Vanessa*, she declares that she loved the language, not the story. In 2017, in the middle of the MeToo-movement against sexual abuse, Russell finished writing the final draft of the novel. Three years later, in March 2020, her debut novel was published.

This essay will compare *Lolita* and *My Dark Vanessa*. Though written decades apart, they contain similar issues and themes, such as abuse, grooming and obsession. The afterlife of *Lolita* and the amount of attention it has continued to receive since its release are remarkable. The more recently published *My Dark Vanessa* shows the themes remain relevant 65
years later. In both stories, the two female characters are young teenage girls, who are abused by much older men.

Because the female characters are placed in submissive roles by their abusers, feminist literary criticism is suitable for analyzing the two novels. To help analyze and compare the two novels, concepts such as traditional gender roles, the Male Gaze, and internalized patriarchal ideas will be discussed in this essay.

1.1 Frame of Study

The aim of this study is to explore how the young female characters are affected by patriarchal ideology and gender roles in *Lolita* and *´My Dark Vanessa*. The contrasting narration, with a male narrator, the perpetrator, in *Lolita* and a female narrator, the victim, in *My Dark Vanessa*, will be significant in the analysis. By applying feminist psychoanalytic theory to *Lolita* and *My Dark Vanessa*, this essay examines how the female characters’ individual psyches are affected by patriarchal ideology. Lastly, the Male Gaze will be used to explore how the female characters are objectified and sexualized in the texts and how they both participate in and resist their objectification.

1.2 Research Questions

- How are the characters of the two novels affected by patriarchal ideology and the gender roles they are assigned?
- How do Lolita and Vanessa internalize patriarchal ideology and why do they?
- How is the Male Gaze visible and employed in *Lolita* and *My Dark Vanessa* and how does it affect the characters?
2. The Fictional Works

2.1 Lolita

Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* begins with the fictional character John Ray receiving a manuscript entitled *Lolita* or the *Confession of a White Widowed Male* from an author called Humbert Humbert, who has died in jail awaiting a trial for murder. The manuscript follows the story of thirteen-year-old Humbert who first falls in love with twelve-year-old Annabel Leigh, who dies four months after they meet. As Humbert grows up and becomes a teacher of English literature, he holds on to the picture of the late Annabel and becomes sexually obsessed with young girls, whom he refers to as “nymphaets”. When Humbert moves into the household of widowed Charlotte Haze, he falls in love with her twelve-year-old daughter Dolores Haze, later given the name “Lolita” by Humbert. Humbert then proceeds to marry her mother to stay close to Dolores. After Charlotte dies, Humbert abducts Dolores. At a motel, Humbert claims Dolores seduces him and not the other way around, which reveals his controlling and exploitative treatment of her and of the narrative. Meanwhile, Humbert becomes increasingly obsessed with Dolores. For nearly a year, Dolores is in Humbert’s thrall, and is kept in his car while driving across the country. While on the road trip, Dolores becomes ill and is taken to a hospital. When Dolores disappears from the hospital, Humbert claims she has been kidnapped by a stalker. For the next two years, Humbert searches for Dolores. The two reunite after Dolores, now married and pregnant, reaches out and asks for money, and Humbert learns that a man named Quilty, kidnapped Dolores from the hospital. The novel ends with Humbert killing the man who took Dolores away from him.

When it was first published in 1955, *Lolita* became a nearly-instant bestseller in the US. Without a doubt, *Lolita* has caused many debates and in Julian Connolly’s article “Lolita’s Afterlife: Critical and cultural responses”, such reactions and responses of the novel are discussed. Connolly states that early debates over whether *Lolita* should even have been published were common. Early reviewers of the novel often used words like “taxed” “outraged” and “puzzled” to describe the emotions it provoked (Connolly
Even though there have been ongoing debates regarding *Lolita*, the novel has attained a canonical status in the literary world (Connolly 141).

### 2.2 *My Dark Vanessa*

Kate Elizabeth Russell’s debut novel *My Dark Vanessa* was published in early 2020. Russell was an unknown author before the novel became a national bestseller. Critics described *My Dark Vanessa* as both extremely unsettling and thought-provoking because of the amount of abuse portrayed in the novel. It was named the most controversial novel of the year by *The Guardian* (2020), and, similar to *Lolita*, there have been many debates and clashing opinions about the novel. The *New York Times* describes *My Dark Vanessa* as a clever but unsettling novel that offers a creepy account of abuse and an overwrought teenage love story at the same time (Rophie 2020). Sophie Gilbert, who writes for *The Atlantic*, states that the story is about damage, not love (2020).

The novel, set in 2017 during the #MeToo movement against abusive men, is the narrator Vanessa’s recollection of what happened to her as a teenager, and how she was abused by her 42-year-old English teacher. Perhaps the most obvious difference between *My Dark Vanessa* and *Lolita* is the narrator. *My Dark Vanessa* is narrated through first person-narration by the victim, Vanessa, who suffers similar abuse to Lolita. At 15 years old, when Vanessa first meets her abuser, Mr. Strain, she is a lonely but typical teenage girl attending an elite boarding school in Maine. He reads her poems and gives her a copy of *Lolita*. As they get to know each other, Mr. Strain becomes bolder and makes his first move by touching her thigh under the table in a lecture hall. As time goes by, Vanessa becomes near to obsessed with the copy she was given of *Lolita* and even confuses her own experience with that of Dolores, as she cites a scene when Humbert buys a pair of strawberry pyjamas for Dolores, when it was Mr. Strain who bought them for her.
In 2017, the adult Vanessa watches as young girls accuse Mr. Strain of abuse and carefully protects him and promises him not to come forward with her own story. As she retells the sexual abuse that she suffered at 15, the reader quickly becomes aware that she is an unreliable narrator. However, Vanessa is precise when describing moments of abuse, like when 42-year-old Mr. Strain continues to have sex with her for the first time even though she is crying. As more of Mr. Strain’s students come forward on social media in 2017, adult Vanessa starts to face what she has been through. Even though she struggles with her insights and goes back and forth between denying and understanding the abuse she has experienced, she ultimately accepts that she has in fact been abused.

2.3 Literary Review

Much of the research on Lolita since its release has taken feminist approaches. However, studies with plenty of contrasting critical approaches have been applied to the novel. For example, in A Readers Guide to Nabokov’s Lolita, Julian Connolly states that a few masculinist readings of the novel have been made. Some of the masculinist readings were done by Lionel Trilling and Thomas Molnar, who clearly disagree with the feminist approaches. According to Connolly (2019), masculinist readings seem to replicate Humbert Humbert’s pattern of overlooking Dolores and her sufferings (152).

The most common theme of criticism applied to the novel is feminism. During the 1980s, when Linda Kauffman’s article “Framing Lolita: Is There a Woman in the Text?” was published, feminist approaches to Lolita became more common. The aim of Kauffman’s study is to criticize the masculinist readings of the text and bring light to the female character, Dolores Haze, instead of Humbert. Kauffman argues that Humbert’s narration frames the female character and therefore it is up to the reader to resist the misogynic traits of the text. Kauffman’s article inspired other feminist critics and was followed by other feminist readings concerning the same issues.
One of them is Elizabeth Patnoe’s article “Lolita Misrepresented, Lolita Reclaimed: Disclosing the Doubles” The aims of Patnoe’s study are to raise awareness of abuse and address its personal and cultural implications. Patnoe tries to give Dolores a voice by picking apart the few scenes and small details that reveal her character visibly resisting Humbert’s narrative in the text. Patnoe points out how the completely muted and violated Lolita has affected readers’ experience and relationship to Humbert’s behavior and actions. Additionally, Patnoe declares Humbert an unreliable narrator and discusses how the text possibly manipulates readers of both genders.

Sarah Herbold’s article, “(I have camouflaged everything, my love) Lolita and the Woman Reader” also highlights feminist approaches of Lolita. Herbold adds to Patnoe’s argument about how readers are manipulated by the narrator and adds contrasting perspectives of how the female reader is affected by Lolita. Herbold points out that critics often discuss gender issues related to Lolita and but suggests that the gender of the reader is rarely addressed. She analyzes how the reader’s gender determines the novel’s meaning when most critics assume a universal reader whose gender is irrelevant (Herbold 71). In Lolita, readers are often addressed in a manner that is not gender-neutral and Herbold suggests that Humbert imagines readers as middle-aged men (71). Herbold further argues that Lolita “privileges male readers at the expense of female readers” (84). According to Herbold, Humbert frequently directs his narrative towards male readers, by using “all-male context” in the text (74). It is argued that the targeted audience for Lolita is male, and a consideration of possible reactions and response from female readers has not been imagined by Nabokov (74). Lastly, Herbold suggests that “it is the women readers who ultimately occupy a more powerful position, because the mirror and are ultimately the source of what is most potent and subtle about the novel” (84), and this is not considered by Nabokov.

Lastly, Robert T. Levine’s article “My Ultraviolent Darling: The Loss of Lolita’s Childhood” (1979) is relevant to this essay when analyzing the psychoanalytical perspective of how the young victims are affected by the
trauma they suffer. Levine discusses the age gaps between Humbert and Lolita, which can also be used to analyze the age gap between Vanessa and Mr. Strain. Levine also considers Humbert’s behavior towards Lolita and in what ways he manipulates and control her. Levine highlights that Humbert imprisons Lolita and keep her as a captive in every way and discusses how that affects her right to a good and safe childhood (477).

Russell’s *My Dark Vanessa* has not yet received as much scholarly attention as *Lolita*. Since it was released in 2020, it is a relatively new novel, which might explain the lack of studies. So far, only a few bachelor’s theses have discussed *My Dark Vanessa*. These studies concern topics like child grooming, sexual abuse, and psychological manipulation. Because the three sources that referenced throughout this essay discuss themes that are relevant to both *Lolita* and *My Dark Vanessa*, and because the two novels have similarities in both plot and character, the articles described above will be used to analyze both novels. To summarize, Herbold, Levine and Patnoe consider the female audiences, gender issues and the victims of male perpetrators in *Lolita*. By comparing the similar themes of *Lolita* and *My Dark Vanessa*, a new perspective to the already researched feminist approaches will be added.

### 3. Theoretical Background

#### 3.1 Traditional Gender Roles and Patriarchy

Feminist criticism, broadly defined, examines the ways in which literature reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women (Tyson 79). Lois Tyson states that all feminist activity, such as feminist theory and literary criticism, has as its ultimate goal to make a difference in society by promoting women’s equality (88). A way of undermining women is by casting non-profitable gender roles and stereotypes upon them. In Linda Brennon’s book *Gender: Psychological Perspectives*, it is explained that “a gender stereotype consists of beliefs about the psychological traits and characteristics of, as well as the activities
appropriate to, men or women” (160). Brennon argues that traditional gender roles have been used to successfully justify inequities between men and women and have laid the foundation for the inequalities between the sexes. With the 19th century idealization that cast women with less profitable qualities, such as passivity, dependence, purity, refinery and delicacy, women were given submissive roles in society, and thus also in literature (Brennon 162). Tyson highlights that such inequities have been promoted through history and are relevant even today (81). Further, it might be worth pointing out Brennon’s statement about the difference between gender roles and gender stereotypes is that gender roles are defined by behaviors and the latter are beliefs and attitudes about femininity and masculinity (160).

The belief that women are innately inferior to men is defined as the 
*patriarchy*. By casting men with qualities such as strong, rational, protective, and decisive, the belief that men are superior is promoted (Tyson 81). Harris Mirkin argues in “The Passive Female; The Theory of Patriarchy” that the theorists of patriarchy view males as Marxists view the ruling class, which means that men are seen as the controlling access to institutional power and women, regardless of their economic status, are perceived as an oppressed class (41-42). Furthermore, Mirkin discusses the stereotype of the passive female. He states that theorists of patriarchy adhere to the patriarchal vision that the traditional woman is weak and passive (54). This is the way in which men saw – and see – women (54). According to Mirkin, men have believed that women are passive by nature, but current theorists of the patriarchy believe that women have been psychologically and institutionally enslaved by dominant males (54). In addition, Tyson argues that “patriarchal thinking believes that women are born to be passive while men are born to be active because it is natural for the sexes to be different in this way” (96). If a woman does not act in a passive way in relation to men, she is not “really” a woman (Tyson 96). As a consequence, women are naturally treated as submissive to men who, contrastingly, are considered natural leaders.
Traditional gender roles and assumptions are constructed by norms in society. Such assignment of gender roles often suggest that women are not born feminine, and men are not born masculine. Such assumptions are assigned by society and by the patriarchal ideology. Tyson states that in every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is other: “she is objectified and marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values, defined by what she lacks and that men have” (87). With patriarchal ideology come patriarchal assumptions. An example of this is that “patriarchal ideology suggests that there are only two identities that a woman can have” (Tyson 85). This idea can often be found in literary works when female characters are characterized either as “good girls” or “bad girls”. The “good girl” role is given to women who accept the traditional gender roles they are assigned. Meanwhile, the “bad girl” role is given to women who do not accept the gender roles and obey the patriarchal rules. However, if a woman does not accept any of the assigned patriarchal gender roles, “the only role left her is that of a monster” (85). Traditional gender roles and patriarchal ideology are visible in both society and literature, and are not only embodied by men, but also by women. Such gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production and experience, which also includes the production of literature, consciously or unconsciously (Tyson 88). The idea that women internalize patriarchal ideology is also stated by Mirkin, who declares that “theorists of patriarchy view the traditional woman as a mental slave. For the most part, she had adopted the perspective of her male rulers - a version of "false consciousness"” (54).

3.2 Psychoanalytic Feminism and Internalized Patriarchal ideology

Psychoanalytic feminist criticism examines in what ways literature undermines or reinforces the psychological oppression of women. This can be used to help understand internalized patriarchal ideology and its psychological effects. Internalizing beliefs and values that are harmful to oneself is a psychological experience that can occur either consciously or unconsciously. When women agree, even unconsciously, with patriarchal
assumptions, such as the idea that men are superior to women, they have internalized patriarchal ideology. Tyson states that French feminist psychoanalytic theory is interested in patriarchy’s influence on women’s psychological experience, creativity, and individual psyche (95). Because women have been ignored and forgotten for such a long time in history, women fail to recognize their own subjugation (Tyson 93).

By applying a feminist psychoanalytic perspective, it is possible to analyze how women’s individual psyches are affected by patriarchal ideology, as well as how women psychologically react to the oppression they experience. Luce Irigaray argues in *The Sex Which Is Not One* that most of the psychological oppression women experience occurs in language because it is in language the applied differences between the sexes have been defined. Much of women’s subjugation transpires unconsciously in everyday language (Irigaray 29). The way both men and women speak and write is based in a patriarchal culture, which leads to a patriarchal language that affects women in a non-profitable way. Therefore, by using patriarchal language, women imitate previously expressed ideas rather than create their own. This can be used as an example of how women unconsciously internalize the patriarchal ideology in the medium of language (Irigaray 29-31).

Similar to Tyson’s point about “good” and “bad” girls, Irigaray states that women only have two choices, in this case when interacting with patriarchal language. The first choice given is to keep quiet, because anything a woman says will not correspond to the patriarchal ideas, and the second choice is to imitate patriarchal ideology in her language (Irigaray 29-31). Patriarchal language is often significant in words used for occupations, such as fireman and chairman, which suggests that the job is primarily held by men and not women. The habit of using “he/him” instead of a gender-neutral pronouns in a generalized text, is another example of how language gendered language enforces patriarchy.
3.3 The Male Gaze

A major consequence of internalized patriarchal ideology is the way women are looked at from a male point of view, the so-called “Male Gaze”. In her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, Laura Mulvey argues that because of the sexual imbalance in society, the pleasure of looking has been split between the active male and the passive female (808). The Male Gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure, and the female figure is there to serve the function of being looked at. Mulvey suggests that coding women’s appearance for erotic impact and strong visuals in cinema objectifies and sexualizes female characters and a woman displayed as a sexual object is the “leitmotif of erotic spectacle” (809).

The Male Gaze is not only visible and actively used in cinema, but also in literature. By using male narrators who characterize and describe female characters in a way that pleases a male audience, the female figure is constantly objectified. In literature, objectification become visible when a male characters, or narrator, recast the female characters as objects of male desire and dominance.

Another important voice when discussing the Male Gaze is John Berger and his work Ways of Seeing. Berger simplifies the complex idea of women’s appearance by the saying “Men act, and women appear” (Essay 3). He argues that men look at women and in response, women watch themselves being looked at. Berger suggests that the Male Gaze determines not only the relationship between men and women but also women’s relationship to themselves. Because of the way men look at women, women turn themselves into the most particular vision of an object: a sight (Essay 3). Further, Berger discusses how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated. To acquire control over this process, women must contain and interiorize it. He suggests that every action made by a woman is read as an indication of how she would like to be treated by men.

Acknowledging and analyzing the Male Gaze and women’s responses to it can increase understanding of how the female characters are sexualized and objectified in Lolita and My Dark Vanessa.
4. The Present Study

4.1 Traditional Gender Roles and Patriarchy in *Lolita* and *My Dark Vanessa*

There are strong links between *Lolita* and *My Dark Vanessa*, and perhaps the most obvious one is how the female characters, Vanessa, and Dolores, are portrayed their relationships with the male characters. The presence of patriarchy becomes visible in both novels when analyzing the male characters’ behaviors, in which Humbert and Mr. Strain are the most active participants and the female characters are rendered passive. This section examines how Humbert’s and Mr. Strain’s treatment of Dolores and Vanessa is formed by patriarchal ideology and traditional gender roles. It will also analyze how these concepts affect the female characters.

Dolores is assigned a submissive role by Humbert early in the novel. Even if it is hard for the reader to understand what Dolores is thinking and feeling because of the narration, glimpses of her suffering can be found in various ways. Patnoe suggests that Dolores experiences great pain because of Humbert’s treatment of her and argues that this can be seen in her crying every night after she thinks Humbert is asleep (82). Humbert describes “[…] her sobs in the night, every night, every night the moment I feigned sleep” (176). It also should be noted that Humbert describes Dolores crying during the time he keeps her captive by driving across the country. Additionally, even though Humbert acknowledges her pain, he continues to harm her by keeping her captive. This suggests that he is somehow aware of Dolores’ pain, yet he chooses to ignore it for his own satisfaction.

Patnoe adds to the argument that Dolores is trying to resist Humbert’s abuse. This is manifested during Humbert’s narrative in “The Enchanted Hunter” chapters, which are, according to Patnoe, “completely manipulative and double-voiced” (84). Humbert’s narrative describes “an event that is countlessly described as “love-making” and seduction but can only be interpreted as rape” (82). That Dolores is a victim of rape is clearly
demonstrated by the scratches she leaves on Humbert’s back, which suggest that she is resisting sex with him.

Moreover, since Dolores is below the age of consent, what is happening to her is considered “statutory rape” in any case. Dolores is thirteen years old when the act transpires and by law, a child at that age is not able to refuse and clearly state what she desires and not. Patnoe compares this sexual violation that Dolores suffers to double-dramas that often play out in girls’ and women’s real lives, dramas which are generated by the patriarchal ideology in society (84). By double-drama, Patnoe means that females “are caught in a culture that bifurcates them into characters who are or are supposed to be both compassionate and lethal, asexual and hypersexual” (84), and states that this is a common perception of “evil Lolita” and “bad female sexuality” (84). Considering the fact that Dolores is raped, this argument contributes to double-dramas and contradiction in the novel.

Levine adds to the statement that Humbert abuses and undermines Dolores, stating that he has “destroyed her joy for living: he has induced in her a cynicism alien to the world of childhood, where magic and hope should prevail” (Levine 472). According to Levine, one of the most wounding acts Humbert commits against Dolores is taking away her childhood and the childish mindset she is supposed to have at her age (Levine 472-473). Levine suggests that the loss of her childhood begins the day Humbert first has sexual intercourse with her, (472) which indicates that the abuse is in progress for a long time.

Patnoe’s description of events that are described as “love-making” and seduction but are in fact an act of sexual abuse and rape can also apply to My Dark Vanessa (Patnoe 85). When Strain has sex with Vanessa for the first time, Vanessa states that he asks for permission. However, whether Vanessa actually gives consent is never stated. Rather, she states that “after a while he starts asking permission after he’s already done the thing he’s asking about” (99). This reveals that Vanessa has not consented for Strain to touch her and have sex with her. Vanessa also states that she does not “understand what he is doing until he starts doing it” (99), which reveals that Vanessa has been put in such an uncomfortable situation that she
freezes and does not comprehend what is happening to her. This is one of the things that both Vanessa and Dolores have in common; both become victims of rape at a very young age. Both of them are below the age of consent when their perpetrator performs sexual acts with them. Strain’s sexual violation of 30-years-younger Vanessa shows that he seizes control over her and thereby suppresses her in much the same way as Humbert controls and manipulates Dolores. Both Humbert and Strain use their power and take advantage of Dolores and Vanessa.

Additionally, in *Lolita*, readers might quickly notice that Humbert has a habit of being complacent of his own abusive behavior and has an overriding need for power over other people, and especially over Dolores. It can be argued that he often characterizes women around him as submissive by elevating himself. This is revealed when he exclaims “I was, and still am, despite *mes malheurs*, an exceptionally handsome male” (25), and continues to describe his most flattering features. The passage ends with Humbert proposing that he “could obtain at the snap of my fingers any adult females” (25). This passage shows how Humbert assigns himself flattering and traditionally masculine qualities.

In contrast to Humbert’s elevation of his masculinity, Dolores becomes a victim of gender roles that demand women adjust to fit the patriarchal narrative of feminine passivity. Patnoe cites Linda Kauffman’s argument that “Lolita is as much the object consumed by Humbert as she is the product of her culture. And if she is “hooked”, he is the one who turns her into a hooker” (Kauffman 160). In addition, Patnoe declares that patriarchy imposes sexual responsibilities and faults on females at the same time as it deems them unnatural and evil for expressing sexual desire (84). Patnoe suggests that this patriarchal assumption that validates male sexuality and punishes female sexuality, has led to misogynist claims about Dolores as a character in the literary world (84). Even though the text frequently offers evidence of the disastrous effects of Humbert’s behavior, it is presented with such beautiful language that readers sometimes overlook his misogyny (Patnoe 83).
When comparing the two female characters, Dolores, and Vanessa, it becomes clear that they have been exposed to similar abuse and traumas by men who assign them submissive roles. The abuse of the female characters reveals that this assignment of submissive and passive roles occurs through physical violation.

Additionally, it is interesting to consider the vision of the passive female and how that relates to *Lolita* and *My Dark Vanessa*. Undoubtedly, Dolores’ lack of voice in Humbert’s narration reveals that she is assigned the role of a passive and weak woman. Patnoe states that Dolores is muted and violated in *Lolita* (83) and with Humbert’s skillful rhetoric it becomes hard for the reader to identify what Dolores is feeling. However, it should be noted that there are moments in the text when the narration gives Dolores a voice and reveals how she is fighting back. This does not necessarily mean that she is given a voice, but rather that Humbert is losing control over her, and thereby fails to hide his knowledge that his actions are hurting her. In contrast to Dolores, Vanessa does have a voice since she is the one narrating the story. However, Vanessa chooses not to use it and therefore also becomes passive. This suggests that society and patriarchal assumptions have forced her into the passive and silenced role that she has internalized and chooses to perpetuate.

### 4.2 Internalized Patriarchal Ideology

It was previously examined how the characters in *My Dark Vanessa* and *Lolita* are affected by patriarchal ideology and how the male characters, Humbert, and Strain, assign female characters submissive gender roles as they groom them into sexual objects. However, the values of the male characters and society in general affect Vanessa’s and Lolita’s way of thinking and cause them to internalize patriarchal ideology.

In *Lolita*, the analysis of internalized patriarchy is complex. Since Humbert is the narrator, Dolores’ thoughts cannot be fully accessed, considering that she is always portrayed through Humbert’s eyes. In the following paragraph, Dolores’ expression suggests that she might imitate patriarchal ideology in her language. “‘You chump’, she said, sweetly smiling at me.
‘You revolting creature. I was a daisy-fresh girl and, look what you’ve done to me. I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me. Oh, you dirty, dirty old man’ “(141). Here, Dolores expresses the truth: Humbert did in fact rape her and she should call the police and report him. However, because of Humbert’s unreliable narration it is hard to determine if Dolores is serious or if this is a case of irony to scare or trick Humbert. If interpreting Dolores’ tone in this paragraph as playful and ironic, it suggests that she understates her own rights and the trauma she has suffered by internalizing Humbert’s mindset and patriarchal ideology. If Dolores herself is understating her trauma, it can also be expected for readers of the text to do the same. Readers might interpret Dolores tone as irony and therefore fail to take the abuse seriously. Because, if even Dolores herself has internalized Humbert’s mindset, it is not impossible that readers will do the same, and by doing so Humbert’s actions are forgiven and overlooked.

It can also be argued that Dolores’ expression is an attempt to gain agency from Humbert. Considering Patnoe’s arguments about misreadings of *Lolita*, this paragraph can instead be interpreted as one of Dolores’ cries for help. Patnoe suggests that once readers disconnect themselves from the text and ignore interpretive systems and assumptions, they “will be more receptive to Lolita’s covert, intratextual messages that are frequently overlooked” (Patnoe 85).

Taking that into account, it should be considered that the previous paragraph might be one of Dolores’ intratextual messages in Humbert’s narration. Consequently, there are two different ways of understanding Dolores’ character. If blindly trusting Humbert’s descriptions of everything she says and does, the internalized patriarchal ideology becomes visible. For instance, Humbert claims that Dolores is the one who seduces him and is arguably flirting and leading him on. In contrast, if readers choose not to trust Humbert’s narration, Dolores’ expressions and actions can instead be seen cries for help, or even survival strategies. When comparing Dolores and Vanessa, it becomes clear that they both internalize patriarchal ideology, but in different ways, and with different strategies.
In *My Dark Vanessa*, Vanessa’s dismissal of other young women experiencing the same trauma reveals that she has internalized the patriarchal ideology. Irigaray’s argument that women only have two choices when embodying patriarchal language is useful when analyzing Vanessa’s actions. Irigaray declares that the first choice given to women is to keep quiet, and the second choice is to imitate patriarchal ideology in her own language (29-31). Arguably, this is something that Vanessa does throughout the novel. She does not tell anyone about the abuse that she was exposed to as a teenager, until 17 years later when speaking to her therapist about it. Vanessa’s silence suggests that she makes the first choice that Irigaray has identified, to keep quiet, arguably because she is afraid that her story will not fit the patriarchal narrative when exposing and accusing a man of sexual abuse.

Vanessa often resorts to the second choice, by imitating patriarchal ideology in language. This is manifested early in the novel when other female students accuse Strain of sexual assault 17 years after Vanessa was exposed to the same trauma. When Vanessa is on the phone with Strain shortly after the allegations have been published on social media, she says that “[e]verything she wrote is a lie” (3), and thereby accuses the girl who has reported Strain of assault. Vanessa also points out that Strain “barely touched her”, while the victim has stated that he has assaulted her (3). This is an example of how Vanessa adjusts her narrative to patriarchal one, rather than creating her own (Irigaray 29). Although Vanessa did not witness what happened between Strain and the other girl, she automatically agrees with Strain’s narrative. Even though Vanessa herself is a victim of assault and abuse by Strain, she sides with him instead of the other girl. This can be recognized in Irigaray’s example of how women internalize the patriarchal ideology in the medium of language (31).

Moreover, Vanessa parrots Strain’s words. Vanessa claims that she “was the first student who put the thought in his head” (5), which implies that she has embodied Strain’s words and now believes that is true, which also can be considered as an example of Vanessa blaming herself instead of Strain. She also states that “there was something about me that made it
worth the risk. I had an allure that drew him in”, which is something that Strain has persuaded her to believe, rather than her body or vulnerable youth. She claims that it was rather because he loved her mind (5), which is also something Strain states to justify his actions.

At one point, Vanessa is discussing the “Me- too movement”, and a film director who sexually assaulted his female coworkers, with her therapist. She expresses the view that “I don’t know what to think of all the women who worked with him over and over” and “Did they have no self-respect?” (9). This expression reveals how she imitates patriarchal values by blaming the victims instead of the perpetrator. Even though she often denies her trauma, at one point, Vanessa admits to what she has been subjected to by stating that she sometimes uses the word abuse to describe it. However, she explains that abuse in someone else’s mouth turns the word “ugly and absolute” (51), which suggests that she might not agree with the meaning the word carries in society and therefore avoids identifying it with her own experience.

Yet another example that highlights how Vanessa internalizes patriarchal ideology occurs when she remembers her classmate Jenny calling Strain a misogynist (72). In relation to that, Vanessa names Jenny as “narrow-minded” and “ordinary” and declares that she does not want to be any of that herself (72). Later, when Vanessa and Strain have become more involved with each other, Jenny tries to reach out again. Jenny claims that she has seen Strain touching Vanessa on a school-trip, but Vanessa simply denies it (162). Jenny also states, “I know that he is abusing you” (162), which Vanessa again disagrees with. Vanessa declares “I blink trough the shock of her words - fired, a creep, harassing, girl. How horrible it is to hear her call him Strain” (163), which implies that she does agree with the rather accurate description of Strain that Jenny produces. This act of denial suggests that Vanessa has internalized the patriarchal ideology by believing that Strain’s actions are justified and protects him by denying what she has suffered.

The similarities in victimhood and differences in responses between Dolores and Vanessa are clear. An interesting point to discuss when comparing
Vanessa and Dolores’ behaviors is how Dolores threatens Humbert with reporting him to the police for rape, but Vanessa responds to Strain’s rape allegations by protecting him. This reveals that even though the two female characters are similar in many ways and are exposed to similar traumas, their reactions and responses are different. This will now be further explored when investigating how the Male Gaze works in the two novels, both in terms of how the male characters deploy it and how the female characters respond.

4.3 The Male Gaze

The Male Gaze is one way that internalized patriarchy manifests itself in culture. This part of the essay examines how the Male Gaze is used to objectify Vanessa and Dolores and how the two respond to it.

The Male Gaze in _Lolita and My Dark Vanessa_ is turned on Dolores and Vanessa. However, other female characters in these two novels are also objectified and sexualized through the Gaze. Undoubtedly, objectification of the female body is often on display in Nabokov’s _Lolita_. Herbold suggests that Lolita “aims to provide eroticoliterary pleasure for specifically male readers” (71), which may explain the constant objectification and use of Male Gaze in the text. In _Lolita_, the main gazer is Humbert, who regularly objectifies Dolores, and the female body in general, through gazing. With Tyson’s statements “the man looks; the woman is being looked at.”, and “it is the one who looks who is in control” (97), in mind, Humbert’s habit of naming young girls’ “nymphets” and describing their “nymph-like” features reveals how Dolores is objectified and sexualized. In the beginning of the novel Humbert explains to the reader that “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” (16), and proceeds to state that “these chosen creatures” he “propose to designate as “nymphet.”” By referring to these young girls as nonhuman and assigning them the role of nymphets, Humbert dehumanizes them. Consequently, this agrees with
Mulvey’s statement that the Male Gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly (808).

In addition, a concrete example of how Humbert gazes at and objectifies Dolores is the journal he keeps. When he moves in with Charlotte and Dolores, he starts journaling and writes down his encounters with Dolores every day. Humbert’s diary reveals how he constantly looks at and sexualizes Dolores. This is visible when Humbert writes: “There my beauty lay down on her stomach, showing me, showing the thousand eyes wide open in my blood, her slightly raised shoulder blades, and the bloom along the incurvation of her spine, and the swelling of her tense narrow nates clothed in black, and the seaside of her schoolgirl thighs” (42). Humbert’s descriptions of Dolores’ body are a way of taking non-sexual features of women and sexualize them for a man’s pleasure, which relates to Herbold’s argument that Humbert frequently directs his narrative toward a male reader, at the expense of women (Herbold 84).

Humbert’s diary not only reveal how he views Dolores, but exemplifies Berger’s idea that men act, and women appear (Essay 3). The extract from the diary suggests that Humbert believes that Dolores’ only function is to be looked at by a man, and that she is actually “showing” herself to him. This is revealed in the statement that she is “[s]howing me. Showing the thousand eyes wide open in my blood” (42) sentences. Humbert’s way of viewing Dolores and his belief that she exists for his gaze relates to Berger’s statement about how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated. (Essay 3). Arguably, because Humbert perceives Dolores as someone who wants to be looked at and someone who exists for him to enjoy, his treatment of her becomes hurtful. Humbert does not consider Dolores as her own person, but rather someone who exists only for his pleasure.

Furthermore, Humbert’s description of thirteen-year-old Dolores shows how male narrators can take non-sexual features of girls and sexualize them to please themselves and other men. Humbert’s fear of Dolores growing up and leaving the “nymph-age” reveals how he objectifies her. In Levine’s
article it is underlined how Humbert takes away Dolores childhood by his way of viewing and treating her. Levine states that “Humbert is caught up in the Sophoclean irony of being an agent against his happiness”, by acknowledging that Lolita will grow up and become a woman (Levine 476). As an example, Levine brings up the quote “I knew I had fallen in love with Lolita forever; but I also knew she would not be forever Lolita” (Nabokov 67). Humbert then proceeds to describe Dolores’ development from young girl to “college girl” as the “horrors of horrors” (67). This demonstrates how Humbert sexualizes and objectifies Dolores by equating her (as Lolita) with her youthful age and body. In addition, Levine declares that by doing so, Humbert also deprives his favorite girl-child of her childhood (476).

Perhaps the most visible illustration of the Male Gaze in Lolita is the name Humbert assigns Dolores. Humbert gives her various names, “Plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms, she was always Lolita” (Nabokov 9). Even though her real name is Dolores Haze, Humbert most frequently describes her as Lolita. Humbert giving Dolores a new name might suggest that he turns her into a fantasy that only exists in his mind, to justify his actions. By turning Dolores into a fantasy that only exists in his head, he also turns her into an object he possesses.

The Male Gaze might seem harder to observe in My Dark Vanessa than in Lolita, since it is not narrated from a male perspective. Readers do not have full access to Strain’s thoughts since Vanessa is the narrator. However, there are still glimpses of Strain’s way of looking at Vanessa and objectifying her from Vanessa’s narration. When Vanessa tells the story of how she and Strain were introduced to each other, she recalls one of the first things Strain says to fifteen-year-old Vanessa. “That’s a nice dress” and “I like your style” (Russell 27). Not long after that, Strain again focuses on Vanessa’s appearance by comparing her hair color to a maple leaf. Vanessa describes that “He holds the maple leaf a beat longer, its point brushing against my hair” (Russell 33). These are early examples of how Strain finds pleasure and a sense of control in looking.
Now, these are some straightforward examples of how the young female character is objectified early in *My Dark Vanessa*. However, Strain’s way of looking at and objectifying Vanessa is visible in most parts of the novel. When Vanessa is sleeping over at Strain’s house for the first time, he has bought pyjamas for her to wear. Vanessa suggests that he picked that specific one because he might have liked the pattern and how the colors match her hair. When Vanessa has put the clothing on, she describes how “his eyes move over me, he sighs and says, “Oh no”, like he’s already sorry for what he is about to do” (96). As they lie down together, Strain proceeds to have sex with underage Vanessa without her permission. Afterwards, Vanessa states that she replays the way he said “Oh no” when he saw her in the pyjamas, in her head. Strain’s expression on seeing Vanessa dressed in the pyjamas proves that his treatment of her depends on her appearance, and that he is trying to form her according to his gaze. Strain’s behavior in this scene relates to Berger’s argument that “every woman’s presence regulates what is and is not ‘permissible’ within her presence” (Essay 3). This means that Strain uses Vanessa’s appearance to gage how he should treat her. Berger further illustrates this by explaining that “every one of her actions - whatever its direct purpose or motivation - is also read as an indication of how she would like to be treated” (Essay 3). As Vanessa herself describes it, he already knows that he is going to have sex with her when he sees her in the pyjamas.

Another example of the Male Gaze in *My Dark Vanessa* is Strain’s habit of objectifying and sexualizing Vanessa’s age and young features. As previously stated, the two remain in contact with each other 17 years after they first met. At this point, they are also sexually active with each other, often by talking on the phone. During these sexual acts, Strain remind Vanessa of what she used to be, and what she used to look like, instead of what, and who, she is now. Strain remarks “Vanessa, you were young and dripping with beauty. You were teenage and erotic and so alive; it scared the hell out of me” (7). By stating that Vanessa was “young” and “teenage” Strain reveals that he objectifies her childish and teenage features and reveals that he may prefer that over her now adult looks. Similar to
Humbert, Strain takes non-sexual features of a child and sexualizes them and in doing so absolves himself of responsibility for his actions. Thus, Strain’s need to focus on Vanessas teenage features instead of adult clearly reveals that he used to, and still does sexualize her.

The main difference between the Male Gaze in *Lolita* and *My Dark Vanessa* is the narration. Because Strain is not the narrator, the objectification of Vanessa can be harder for the reader to spot. However, Vanessa’s narration reveals that she sometimes appropriates the Gaze and applies it to herself and other women, which shows how Vanessa has internalized patriarchal ideology. For instance, 32-year-old Vanessa deploys the gaze when sending flattering pictures of herself as a seventeen-year-old to Strain. She picks out a picture where she lifts the skirt of her dress “flashing pale thighs” and sends it along with two other photos of her teenage self to Strain (59). In the text she writes: “Not sure if I ever showed these to you. I think I’m 17 here” (59). Vanessa further narrates that she wishes for Strain to wake in the middle of the night to find the pictures of her on his phone. This behavior reveal how Vanessa has deploys and internalized the Male Gaze. By purposely choosing pictures of her young self that has attractive features, she objectifies herself to please Strain and receive his approval. This is an example of how women, who are victims of the Male Gaze, can also adopt the Gaze, and therefore reinforce their own objectification and that of other women.

### 5. Conclusion

This essay has conducted a feminist reading of *Lolita* and *My Dark Vanessa*. The essay was divided into three parts which answers three different research questions. The first part examines how the two female characters are affected by the patriarchy and the gender roles they are assigned. Humbert’s narrative in *Lolita* reduces Dolores voice and character, which complicates the idea to analyze how Dolores is affected by the patriarchal ideology and gender roles.
However, details demonstrate that Dolores is undoubtedly hurt by the submissive role given by Humbert. This part of the analysis also reveals that Dolores show signs of resistance towards Humbert and patriarchal control, and the reader can catch small glimpses of her resisting Humbert’s narrative control. This can be seen through cracks in Humbert’s narration, where he fails to fully control and manipulate the narrative. The sexual abuse Dolores is exposed to, is also analyzed as an example of how she is affected by patriarchal premises that Humbert embodies. Likewise, Mr. Strain’s sexual abuse of Vanessa is used as an example of how Vanessa is afflicted by her assigned submissive role, which highlights the similarities between the two female characters and how they are treated.

The second part explores internalized patriarchal ideology and in what ways Vanessa and Dolores embody it. This is most frequently present in My Dark Vanessa and can be noticed in Vanessa’s view of other women, who are not only victims of sexual abuse, but also have been exposed to the same perpetrator. Vanessa’s protective behavior of her abuser is an example of internalized patriarchal ideology. Furthermore, it is concluded that internalized patriarchy is difficult to acknowledge in Lolita, because of the lack of Dolores’ voice. However, there are examples of patriarchal language and how Dolores uses it with Humbert is used as conformation of internalized patriarchy in Lolita.

The third part approaches the objectification of the female body deployment of the Male Gaze in the literary works. Humbert is confirmed to be an active participant in the Male Gaze when viewing Dolores. It is stated that the “nymphet” expression used by Humbert to describe young female bodies and behaviors is a sign of objectification and sexualization. Following, in My Dark Vanessa Mr. Strain’s way of looking at Vanessa prove that he is an active user of the Male Gaze as well. However, compared to Dolores, Vanessa has more of her own voice in the text and as she grows older, she can reclaim the narrative and free herself from Strain’s gaze.
It is evident that both Vanessa and Lolita suffer from the patriarchal assumptions and gender roles they are assigned. In many ways, the story of Dolores repeats itself in *My Dark Vanessa*. *Lolita* is presented as an actual novel that Vanessa admires and relates to so much that she becomes one of the many readers to misread and misunderstand Dolores and *Lolita*. In doing so, she allows herself to be turned into a modern version of Dolores. However, the most important, but also most devastating, difference between Dolores and Vanessa is that only one of them can take control of this harmful narrative and story and free herself from it.
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