

Tragedy of Nymphic Desire in Lolita

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Abstract: *In Nabokov's novel Lolita, words such as nymphet, nymphancy, nympholepsy and nymphic appear more than hundred times. They are all derive from the alluring, entrancing and bewitching deities in Ancient Greek: nymphs. In this novel, Lolita is often being described as nymphet by Humbert, but in American society at that time, she is just a typically modern American girl with beauty and energy, while not the nymphet in Humbert's own mind. That's to say, the image of the nymphet is actually the desire of Humbert himself toward other young girls. The desire, which intentionally covered by his twice marriages with Valeria and Charlotte, appears after his loss of his lover, Annabel, in childhood. Humbert tries to materialize his image of a nymphet to the real girl Lolita, and hopes to control her, but he failed, it is actually the freaky desire of a nymphet which finally destroyed him.*

Keywords: *nymphet, desire, Lolita*

1. Introduction

Lolita, as one of the most controversial books in the world, has been discussed all around since its publication. It is regarded as pornography and it has been on and off the banned book for a very long time. In this novel, Nabokov creates the term “nymphet” and defines it as a girl “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[1].” It seems that there is no wrong with this definition, however, it actually covers his abnormal desire and softens the controversial nature of Humbert's deviant and socially unacceptable love toward Lolita.

Nymphet's etymology can trace back to the Ancient Greek deity, nymph, which refers to a minor female nature deity, and is often regarded as personification of nature, typically tied to a specific place or landform, and usually depicted as beautiful maidens. But in *Lolita*, different from the nymph in Ancient Greece, nymphets do not exist in their own side. They are the product a male that projects his own image onto particular individual and the individual engaging in male's fantasy[2]. That's to say, Lolita is not a nymphet herself, she is just an ordinary American girl who grows up under the privilege popular culture, and the characteristics of nymphet that shown in her body are derived from the man who wants to possess and control her.

Nabokov first coined the term “nymphet” in 1955 in his novel *Lolita*, while the description of “nympholepsy” or the belief that certain individuals were “seized by the nymphs” in Greek literary texts has existed for a very long time. Dodd insists that many works by Euripides, Plato, and other classical authors cannot properly be understood without attention to these phenomena and to the role of the seemingly irrational has proved highly productive[3]. Within literary writers, such as William Faulkner, in his work, he avoids specifying the details of a nymph, it can only be written off as a dream or a figment of the protagonist's imagination[2]. But in Nabokov's *Lolita*, this kind of imagination, combined with his freaky desire within his childish love and sexuality, finally transposed in an abnormal way to the girl Lolita.

The desire of a nymphet to Humbert is not rooting early in his mind. This kind of desire develops along with the death of his first love and the increasing of his age. In Lacan's desire theory, he has mentioned that desire can never be absolutely satisfied, because desire is in such a scarcity, there is no corresponding relationship between desire and feeling-satisfaction, but there is a corresponding relationship between desire and anxiety[4]. For Humbert, his instinct and innocent love toward Annabel ended up accidentally in his childhood, but he fails to get over his first love and is forever haunted by the image of Annabel. As age growing, his love becomes a desire, covered by his deceptive relationship with Valeria and Charlotte, starts to strongly reflect as an image of a nymphet whom Humbert tries hard to realize in body of Lolita.

2. Nymph of Nature: Annabel

The first several parts of *Lolita* are memories of Humbert's past childhood. He describes his childhood as rather idyllic, and this description reveals many personal characteristics that make him unique among other characters in the novel. Humbert was born in a noble family with abundant materials and excellent tutoring. He himself says: "*I grew, a happy, healthy child in a bright world of illustrated books, clear sand, orange trees, friendly dogs, sea vistas and smiling faces*[1]." He was not a born pedophile, but had a happy childhood, experienced unforgettable first love, and received formal school education. Nabokov spends several pages in describing his memories of how Annabel and Humbert fell in love. "*All at once we were madly, clumsily, shamelessly, agonizingly in love with each other; hopelessly, I should add, because that frenzy of mutual possession might have been assuaged only by our actually imbibing and assimilating every particle of each other's soul and flesh.*"[1] However, they two fell madly in love with one another, but find it impossible to get away from adults. They touch each other in secret as often as possible, but cannot fully satisfy their budding desires, which instinctively came from their early love passions. Finally, they manage to escape to a cave on the beach, with nothing in it but a pair of sunglasses. The sunglasses in this scene reappear when Humbert first sees Lolita: he establishes an almost mystical link between the two girls.

Humbert's love towards Annabel is spontaneous and innocent. His initially perceptive love is not nymphic and different from the abnormal love in his later life toward Lolita. He said "*When I was a child and she was a child, my little Annabel was no nymph to me; I was her equal, a faunlet in my own right*"[1]. But if readers know the meaning of the word "nymph" in Ancient Greek myth, it is naturally to relate Annabel to the nymph, the deity in nature, because she is beautiful and enchanting, which seems that she possesses with a kind of inspiration of nature and they always meeting in some natural places such as the forest and beach[5]. Humbert describes his Annabel, "*Honey-colored skin, thin arms, brown bobbed hair, long lashes, big bright mouth...*"[1] her appearance and characteristics attracted Humbert deeply, they two from being playmates to lovers, madly and awkwardly, but they feel shameless and are sincerely enjoying their innocent love.

But unfortunately, this fanatical first love has no destiny after all. Annabel's name comes from a poem by Edgar Allan Poe, "Annabel Lee," which is also about a beloved young girl who dies early. Her early death leaves Humbert with a heavy blow and endless grief. "*I know that the shock of Annabel's death consolidated the frustration of that nightmare summer, made of is a permanent obstacle to any further romance throughout the cold years of my youth*"[1]. From then on, he has been haunted by the early love that died, he never gets over his first love and his emotions also stop grow up. He convinced that, in a certain magic and fateful way, Lolita began with Annabel. Moreover, the death of Annabel causes the disability of Humbert to develop a fully functional relationship with other women. Humbert fell in love with the image of a child and while he grew older, his memory of love remained static and perpetually stuck on his first love[2]. This kind of no longer available love deeply hides in Humbert's heart, he recalls "*in that mimosa grove, the haze of stars, the tinge, the flame, the honey-dew, and the ache remained with me, and that little girl with her seaside limbs and ardent tongue haunted me ever since--- until at last, twenty-four-year later*"[1]. Though Annabel has gone forever, her the image and the impacts on Humbert will not disappear. He cunningly represents his pedophilic love for Lolita as innocent by identifying it with his childhood love for Annabel.

With highly sensitive in sights, smells and feelings, Humbert leave a strong impression on his memory, and this fuels his desire. "*Humbert is immediately overpowered by passionate feelings. He imagines that Lolita is the reincarnation of Annabel*"[1]. Annabel, to some extends, is the incarnation of the nymph of nature in Ancient Greek Myth. She is beautiful and enchanting, but she is not the nymph that Humbert later refers to Lolita, who is more sexually active, and often seduced by gods and men alike. There is a saying for nymph in the Myth: Once a man has fallen in love with a nymph, he is never able to let go, though Annabel is dead, she is permanently existing in Humbert's mind[5]. And with his increasing age and desire, he tries to transfer his first love, with his nymphic imagination, into reality by materializing Annabel to real Lolita, and the nymph of nature changes to a kind of nymphic desire.

3. Cover of Nymphic Desire: Valeria and Charlotte

Humbert's two normal marriages with Valeria and Charlotte seem to show his willing of living an ordinary life as ordinary people, but actually he is not. After the death of Annabel, Humbert has lost the ability to develop a fully functional relationship with others women, because the image of Annabel, the young and charming teenager, and unforgettable experiences with her haunted him deeply, thus a kind of

nymphic imagination and desire formed gradually. However, this kind of desire is immoral and unacceptable by the general public, thus Humbert has to hide and cover it through some methods. And from this perspective, these two marriages can be regarded as the covers of his nymphic desire.

Valeria is Humbert's first wife, and this marriage seems that Humbert attempts to live a normal social, but what makes it hard for him here and later on is his hatred of "vulgarity," a category within which he includes trendy art, domestic life, and the sexuality of adult women[6]. Humbert describes his brief marriage to Valeria, which lasts from 1935 to 1939. Though she is in her late twenties, he is attracted to her because of her childlike behavior and looks, he said *"What really attracted me to Valeria was the imitation she gave of a little girl...her fluffy and frolicsome look, generous amount of smooth leg, and she knew how to stress the white of a bare instep by the black of a velvet slipper and shook her short curly blond hair in the cutest and tritest fashion imaginable[1]."* From Humbert's description to Valeria, what can be seen clearly is that she possesses with the characteristics of young girl in teens. Though these characteristics thrill him at first, he quickly grows bored with her. He finds that *"the reality soon asserted itself, the leached curl revealed its melanic root[1]."* Though with childish behaviors and looks, Valeria cannot satisfy his nymphic desire toward the girl of nine to fourteen years old. When getting into the core purpose of the marriage with Valeria, what Humbert hopes is that marital sex and domestic life will help him to control his desire for nymphets. But he ignores that he chooses Valeria with the idea of a nymphet, and Valeria will never be the antidote for his nymphet desire.

If the first marriage is seemingly as Humbert's attempt to start an ordinary life, while the second marriage is a barely covering of his viciously nymphic desire. When he first comes to Charlotte Haze's house, he is not interested in it at all, until she leads him outside to the piazza and garden where he sees Dolores—Charlotte's daughter. Controlled by his nymphic desire, he wants to stay, and at this moment, Charlotte's love letter becomes a chance in the series of freak accidents—or twists of fate—that allow Humbert to become Lolita's guardian. *"My first movement was one of repulsion and retreat. My second was like a friend's calm hand falling upon my shoulder and bidding me take my time[1]."* Humbert's first reaction is disgusted, because he has no good feeling to Charlotte. But when he calms down, he figures out it is a sound opportunity to stay with and close to Lolita, *"I had brought up for detached inspection the idea of marrying a mature widow (say, Charlotte Haze) with not one relative left in the wide gray world, merely in order to have my way with her child (Lo, Lola, Lolita)[1]."* And naturally, Charlotte, who used to be an obstacle for Humbert's desires. All three of them become a love triangle of sorts forms between mother, daughter and lodger. And Charlotte now becomes a stepping-stone for Lolita. And it is at this moment, Humbert's vicious and wicked desire emerges entirely, only covered by the nominal "a father's love". *"I imagined all the casual caresses her mother's husband would be able to lavish on his Lolita. I would hold her against me three times a day, every day[1]."* Humbert's pent-up pedophilia starts to swell and expand, and he is eager to incarnate his desire to an entity.

From the start to the end of this novel, Humbert tries hard to avoid that he is a pedophile, which is the same as his efforts to cover his nymphic desire. His two marriages set up a normal image of Humbert for people around him, and even portray him as the victim of the betrayed Valeria and suddenly dead Charlotte. However, the fact is that his devil's talon of nymphic desire, covered by these two marriages, directly runs out to the American girl, Lolita.

4. Realization of Nymphic Desire: Lolita

With nymphic desire deeply hidden in his heart, Humbert moves to American land. His first meet with Lolita is in the garden of Haze's house where he sees Dolores, whom she calls "Lo" for the first time. *"...A blue sea-wave swelled under my heart and, from a mat in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, there was my Riviera love peering at my over dark glasses[1]."* This is the first impression that Lolita leaves to Humbert, laying in the garden and enjoying the sunbathing with sunglasses. In this moment, he falls in love with her, and soon, Lolita becomes the center of Humbert's life. Due to a kind of invisible link between his first love and Lolita, Humbert is immediately overpowered by passionate feelings. The reappearance of sunglasses underscores what Humbert sees as the mystical relationship between Lolita and Annabel. Moreover, because of his instable life, he has no social and psychological grounding, and lives entirely on the margins of society, thus when he meets with Lolita, the loneliness and emptiness of his life makes Lolita become the center of his world[7].

Humbert's first sight for Lolita gives him the belief that she is the nymphet whom he has searching for a long time. *"She, this nouvelle, this Lolita, my Lolita, was to eclipse completely her prototype[1]."* Though he cunningly represents his pedophilic love for Lolita as innocent by identifying it with his

childhood love for Annabel, his love to Lolita is far beyond his love to Annabel. because Humbert is a man of forty, while Lolita is only twelve, in this case, his love is definitely the pedophilia, but he presents it as something aesthetic, rather than something physical, in order to beautify his evil desire. Humbert mentions many times that “she is my nymphet.” However, it is clear that the way that Humbert perceives Lolita, but what Lolita in reality is completely different. He himself also explains that “*what I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita---perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her; and having no will, no consciousness, indeed, no life of her own*[1].” It is a kind of imagination, a desire that intoxicates Humbert and causes his failing action. Even if he knows that Lolita is not completely the nymphet in his desire, he says “*Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl. Sweet hot jazz, square dancing, gooey fudge sundaes, musicals, movie magazines and so forth—these were the obvious items in her list of beloved things*[1].” However, he can tolerate or even consciously ignore these things that are not belong to a nymphet. Because he wants to continually possess Lolita, and never stop his thirst for her. He describes his desire for Lolita in a threatening way, “*My only grudge against nature was that I could not turn my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys*[1].” He can hardly even control his desire, which he believes can only be realized in the body of Lolita, thus he tries his best to satisfy Lolita’s demands and bare all her bad behaviors and emotions, because he has, at least, to give himself a moment to fulfill his desire at the aspect of sexuality.

Lolita is the nymphet for Humbert, but she is not the nymphet herself. Humbert defines the word nymphet as a girl between the age limits of nine, but not all girls of these ages are nymphets. In the description of Humbert to Lolita, he often alludes that Lolita seduces him. “*Lola the bobby-soxer, devouring her immemorial fruit, singing through its juice, losing her slipper; rubbing the heel of her slipper-less foot on my left on the sofa*[1].” Even these causal behaviors, commonly to other young girls, may awake the desire of Humbert and become a lure for him, because the image of Lolita in Humbert’s eyes is actually a girl embodies with all his nymphic features.

Humbert’s image of nymphets partly comes from his first love, Annabel, but more comes from his own imagination along with his age increasing and sexual desire extending. He wants to externalize his nymphic desire by the body of Lolita, then possesses and control her, but this is impossible. Lolita was born with Americanness, and the characteristics, innately and unchangeably, of American girls are obviously shown in Lolita’s personality[8]. Humbert knows that Lolita loves to read magazines, watch movies, wears lipstick and talks billingsgate, but he cannot figure out why she does that. Instead, he even regards these foibles as her mysterious enchants of a nymphet, but the fact is that it is Lolita’s American personality. Humbert can never get a completely blending between the nymphet in his desire and the American girl in reality.

5. Conclusions

Lolita can be regarded as the records of Humbert’s own desire. He spends the whole of his life on chasing his immoral and uncontrollable nymphic desires, and finally pays the price of his life. In Humbert’s eyes, the nymphet is a symbol of lost youth and pure love, a dream-girl, who, with romantic qualities, is virtually unattainable to the adult man. However, the romanticization of Humbert’s description of the nymphets cannot offset his pedophilia tendency[9]. Though Humbert is temporarily and physically dominating his nymphet Lolita, he does not really possess her, because he is incapable of ultimately realizing his desire and cannot possess the girl who does not really exist, and he himself finally becomes the victim of his own nymphic desire and suffers the destruction of his psyche and his life.

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