

# The Literature of Monstrosity and the Monstrosity of Literature:

## Poetry and Paedophilia in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

---

*Daniel Wood*

OF THE HUNDRED OR SO titles recently reissued as Popular Penguins, the most taboo and thus the most notorious is arguably Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. It was controversial from the moment Nabokov first tried to commit it to print. Although he completed the novel in 1953, publishers refused to go near something so deliberately provocative until a Parisian press ordered a small run in 1955; and yet, even then, another three years passed before it was at last made available in Nabokov's adopted homeland of America. It is true, of course, that the controversy subsided with the passage of time—but it has not disappeared entirely, as I learned earlier this year when I picked up *Lolita* in the Popular Penguins edition and felt the sting of its notoriety first-hand.

Reading the first few chapters in public spaces and on public transport, I soon realised that I could not open the book without attracting attention from those around me. Wandering eyes would invariably spy the distinctive white-and-orange cover of the Popular Penguins series and rise to glance at the title, in boldface, before rising further to fix on my own eyes with a squint of suspicion at best or, at worst, a glare of explicit displeasure. And just as I was halfway into the novel—and no doubt wholly engrossed in it—one onlooker even felt compelled to express her displeasure to an audience of captive commuters on a city train. Decent people had no place reading such filth, she insisted, and the decent people on that train had no obligation to sit by and watch some deviant actually reading it. Because she carried a young child in tow, a daughter of perhaps five years of age, I knew at a glance why she held a prejudice against the novel and I knew as well that I would never be able to assuage her prejudice with argument. The provocative subject of *Lolita* is, after all, paedophilia, and what makes the novel so famously controversial is the sympathy with which it approaches that subject.

As an abstract being, the paedophile is the most feared and most loathed monster to prowl the shadows of our society: an embodiment of unforgivable

perversion, the incarnation of unparalleled depravity. To read *Lolita* in public, then, is to effectively signal one's willingness to lend a sympathetic ear to a remorseless predator and thus to invite speculation as to whether one shares his predatory inclinations. So runs the logic of those whose only familiarity with *Lolita* involves some vague suspicion that it celebrates paedophilia and some equally vague notion that the novel is nothing more than explicitly pornographic filth hidden beneath a highbrow façade. Given this, it may be that I unwittingly antagonised someone who subscribed to this logic when I specifically chose to read *Lolita* as a Popular Penguin: in favouring the *pro forma* duotone cover over a cover displaying the iconic girl sucking a lollypop, I was perhaps tacitly admitting that I knew I had something to conceal from the people around me. The text itself, however, is far too subtle to contain anything explicit beneath its covers and far too sophisticated to debase itself with filth. Anyone who reads it in search of titillation is destined to be disappointed. Crucially, though, in its very refusal to be neither explicit nor filthy, it becomes something infinitely more disturbing than could possibly be imagined by those who remain only vaguely familiar with it. It is obviously wrong to assume that, deep down, readers of *Lolita* must be tainted by some predatory inclinations, but it is just as wrong to assume that reading the novel does not involve predation at all.

*Lolita* tells the story of Humbert Humbert, a professor of literature who develops an obsession with his pubescent stepdaughter Lolita Haze. When Lolita's mother dies very suddenly, Humbert steals away with the girl on a transcontinental journey during which he repeatedly indulges in his unspeakable perversions. Yet as their journey slowly unfolds, the power dynamics between them invert and the girl takes advantage of the man. He is essentially a *naïf*, a gross man-child blindly besotted with his precious "nymphet," while she is sly, lascivious, and almost as sexually depraved as her captor. Gradually she learns to manipulate his lust in order to serve her own purposes, and he is too enamoured with her to recognise her *modus operandi*. However, the novel derives its perverse power less from the story it tells than from the very *telling*—from the communicative act by which the story unfolds and from the storyteller's exacting exploitation of the aesthetic nuances that belong exclusively to the novel as an artform.

Opening with Humbert already apprehended and charged by police, *Lolita* at first takes the form of his written confession, a catalogue of his crimes addressed to

an audience that he knows will judge him harshly. As it proceeds, though, the novel ceases to take the form of a confession insofar as the confession instead assumes the form of a novel: the loquacious and jovial paedophile abandons a dispassionate recount of his crimes in order to romanticise them with repeated indulgence in the linguistic virtuositities and rhetorical extravagances that are the special province of creative literature. During his time in prison he has continually returned to his memories of the girl and now, with pen in hand, he thrusts his memories onto the page in prose of the utmost exuberance. Behind bars he has been left to marinate in his own perverse juices and now, given an opportunity for self-expression, he employs a range of self-consciously literary strategies in order to recount—in exquisite detail—his attraction to a girl not yet adolescent. Rather than using his confession to explain himself to those who would judge him or even to offer an excuse for his crimes, he uses it to revel in his own paedophiliac tendencies—and, moreover, he carefully contrives to implicate his readers in his revelry alongside him.

“Ah, my Lolita,” he exclaims: “I have only words to play with!”<sup>1</sup> So he plays with Lolita in words because he can no longer toy with the girl herself, and he plays with those words in a way that brings her vividly to life inside his lonesome cell. “I see nothing for the treatment of my misery,” he admits, “but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art”<sup>2</sup> So the very words of the novel written by the paedophile are a substitute for the girl he can no longer see or touch; and the sentiment of the words becomes ever more defiantly paedophiliac as the words themselves become more eloquent and poetic: “Lolita,” he cries, savouring the musical undertones of her name: “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth”<sup>3</sup> Even after he fails in his attempt to drug the girl and rape her while she lies unconscious, he articulates his lamentation with rhythmic grace and lyrical delicacy:

The gentle and dreamy regions through which I crept were the patrimonies of poets—*not* crime’s prowling ground. Had I reached my goal, my ecstasy would have been all softness, a case of internal combustion of which she would hardly have felt the heat, even if she were wide awake. But I still hoped she might gradually be engulfed in a completeness of stupor that would allow me to taste more than a glimmer of her. And so, in between tentative approximations, with a confusion of perception metamorphosing her into eyespots of moonlight or a fluffy flowering bush, I would dream I regained consciousness, dream I lay in wait.<sup>4</sup>

On the one hand, then, *Lolita* exemplifies the literature of monstrosity: it exposes the innermost thoughts of a moral fiend so that outside observers might somehow begin to understand his monstrous nature. On the other hand, though, it exposes the monstrosity of literature itself: it shows us that when we as readers seek stimulation from literature, we are liable to be rendered complicit in moral monstrosity if we find stimulation in the literary flourishes of a paedophile. If the paedophile's words possess a sensual beauty, then those who are struck by that beauty are placed in a morally problematic position. If every word comes from a place of depravity, and if, by design of the paedophile, every image is made startling and every metaphor is made sublime in order to satiate a despicable predilection, then to find the words beautiful and the images startling and the metaphors sublime is to stand on common ground with the monster from whose depraved mind they emerge. "[W]ith anguished amusement," he writes in one especially poetic and therefore disquieting passage,

I used to recollect... the times in my trustful, pre-[*Lolita*] past when I would be misled by a jewel-bright window opposite wherein my lurking eye, the ever alert periscope of my shameful vice, would make out from afar a half-naked nymphet stilled in the act of combing her Alice-in-Wonderland hair. There was in the fiery phantasm a perfection which made my wild delight also perfect, just because the vision was out of reach, [and] it may well be that the very attraction immaturity has for me lies not so much in the limpidity of pure young forbidden fairy child beauty as in the security of a situation where infinite perfections fill the gap between the little given and the great promised—the great rosegray never-to-be-had.<sup>5</sup>

In the hands of the paedophile, then, literature is pieced together with extraordinary expertise but for such dark and unsettling purposes that what is an outstanding example of literary craftsmanship is also, at the same time, a malformed grotesquery. Literature, here, is a monster of its own, created by a monster, that feasts on the literary pursuits of its readers in order to make monsters of them as well. As such, while the mere prospect of sympathy for a paedophile may unsettle those who are not intimately familiar with *Lolita*, that sort of sympathy has little to do with what actually makes *Lolita* so troubling. Far worse is that the novel, as an artform, has been hijacked by a monster who preys not only on children but also on *us*, gratifying our aesthetic sensibilities with the meticulous romanticisation of a perversion that in any other context would torment the soul.

*Daniel Wood is a graduate student at the University of Melbourne where he is currently researching the contemporary literary legacy of the American frontier. He also tutors and lectures undergraduate students in classic American literature from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.*

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (Sydney: Penguin, 2009 [1958]), 33.  
<sup>2</sup> Nabokov, *Lolita* 258.  
<sup>3</sup> Nabokov, *Lolita* 7.  
<sup>4</sup> Nabokov, *Lolita* 149.  
<sup>5</sup> Nabokov, *Lolita* 300.