

A Brief Analysis of *Lolita* from the Perspective of Gaze Theory: Intersections of Power and Gender

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Abstract

Lolita, a novel that has been controversial since its publication, depicts the seduction and obsession of a middle-aged man with a young girl. Many people criticize the novel for containing patriarchal ideas, and numerous researchers have studied it from various perspectives, such as feminist perspective, psychoanalytic perspective, and postmodernist perspective. However, most of the researches tend to unfold from a macro perspective, and fewer of them analyze in depth from specific perspectives. Therefore, this thesis intends to study *Lolita* from the perspective of Gaze Theory. By analyzing how Humbert gazes at Lolita and the hidden power relationship behind this gaze, this thesis points out that Humbert's gaze is not just a gaze on Lolita's body, but a manifestation of power, and that it reveals the unequal power relationship between him and Lolita.

Keywords

Lolita; Gaze Theory; Vladimir Nabokov.

1. Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) is one of the most important writers in American literature, whose most acclaimed and controversial novel, *Lolita*, has sparked much controversy and debate in society. *Lolita* depicts the story of a middle-aged man, Humbert, who becomes obsessed with and seduces a 12-year-old girl, Lolita, whose real name is Dolores Haze. Humbert becomes a tenant of her mother Mrs. Haze and marries her in order to get close to Lolita. Mrs. Haze dies unexpectedly when she discovers Humbert's obsession of Lolita, and Humbert then takes Lolita on a road trip, and seduces her by material temptation. As Lolita grows up, she eventually escapes Humbert's control. The novel ends with Humbert's remorse and death. *Lolita* has been highly controversial due to its exploration of taboo themes. Many researchers study it from different perspectives. L. R. Hiatt studies the novel from the perspective of psychoanalysis, and he argues that Nabokov gives Humbert an Oedipus complex and a set of defenses against self-understanding. Despite his professed antipathy to psychoanalysis, he knowingly but surreptitiously endows Humbert with classical symptoms of the Oedipus complex.[1] He exposes the hidden structure and discuss why Nabokov has taken such pains to camouflage it. Peng Guodong and Peng Shu analyze the novel from the perspective of postmodern. Peng Guodong conducts his study from the issue of *Lolita*'s deconstruction and subversion of marriage ethics and so-called sexual morality, which relentlessly deconstructs and subverts the traditional ethical norms and moral order, as well as deconstructs the moral ideals and life pursuits of modern people with ironic discourse." [2] While Peng Shu analyzes postmodernist writing characteristics of *Lolita* in terms of genre, narration characteristics, and artistic techniques. There are other researchers explore *Lolita* from other perspectives such as feminism, narrative strategies, writing techniques literary ethical criticism. However, these studies are of a more macro perspective, and few have examined the novel from a specific

theoretical perspective. Thus, this thesis aims to analyze *Lolita* from the perspective of Gaze Theory, so as to enrich the study of this novel.

2. Organization of the Text

This thesis falls into three parts. The first part is the introduction, which includes a brief presentation and literature review. The second part is an introduction of this thesis. The third part is divided into three sections. The first section analyzes how Humbert gazes Lolita, and the second section analyzes the results of that guided by the gaze from Humbert's and Lolita's perspectives separately. The last part is conclusion, in which the thesis concludes that Humbert's on Lolita is not just a gaze on Lolita's body, but a manifestation of power.

3. The Gaze in Lolita

Lolita is a first-person narrative about the prohibited affair between a middle-aged man, Humbert, and a 12-year-old girl, Lolita. The novel is set in the United States in the mid-20th century, a time when society was more conservative about sexuality and morality, and shunned the issue of minors' sexual behavior. Nabokov depicts a world full of complex emotional and moral dilemmas from Humbert's point of view. Humbert's gaze on Lolita is an important theme in the novel, and the gaze is both visual and psychological, full of objectification, power control and desire projection. The gaze is not just the act of watching, but an act with power and control. Gaze theory reveals the power relations and ideology behind the act of watching, and this relationship is vividly demonstrated in *Lolita*.

3.1. The Gaze: Humbert's Projection of Desire

The unique narrative structure of *Lolita* makes the reader's perception of Lolita's image almost entirely dependent on Humbert's narration. With the exception of the foreword, which is a compilation of Humbert Humbert's diary entries, written by John Ray, Jr., Ph.D., the main body of the novel is narrated by Humbert from a first-person point of view. The readers see Lolita through Humbert's eyes, and her appearance, character, behavior and interactions with Humbert are presented to the reader through Humbert's subjective descriptions. And this narrative gives Humbert absolute power to shape the image of Lolita.

Humbert's narrative is full of emotional bias, psychological distortion, and the gaze at Lolita's body. His language and descriptions portray Lolita as a "little fairy" that fits into his fantasies. In Humbert's detailed descriptions of Lolita's appearance, and he sees Lolita as an idealized object rather than an individual. He describes Lolita "it was the same child — the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair." [3, p] This description not just shows Humbert's obsession with Lolita's appearance, as well as his view of Lolita as an object to be viewed and possessed. "What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita — perhaps, more real than Lolita." [3, p41] Through the gaze, Humbert transforms Lolita into his inner fantasy "little fairy" rather than a real girl with thoughts and feelings.

"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. Lo. Lee. Ta." [3, p5] This is the opening line of the novel and directly portrays Lolita in Humbert's mind, highlighting his fascination and desire for her. With this delicate description, Lolita is idealized as an irresistible object. Humbert's obsession with Lolita is rooted in his teenage love affair with Annabel. The death of Annabel from typhoid fever left Humbert in a state of deep grief and trauma, and he viewed this incomplete first love as an enduring memory, which becomes the root of his later fascination with the "nymphets". According to Lacan's theory of mirroring, individuals gain self-awareness through external mirrors during the mirroring stage. Humbert may have

experienced excessive self-absorption during the mirror stage, forming unrealistic and primitive fantasies. This fantasy influences his obsession with Annabel, which in turn influences his pursuit of Lolita. His subjectivity is in crisis during the mirror stage of identification, resulting in his inability to relate normally to women in adulthood, instead focusing his desires on adolescent girls.

Every time he sees Lolita he cannot help but be thrilled. When he first met Lolita, he observed Lolita in detail, from her clothing to her body.

“A polka-dotted black kerchief tied around her chest hid from my aging ape eyes, but not from the gaze of young memory, the juvenile breasts I had fondled one immortal day. And, as if I were the fairy-tale nurse of some little princess (lost, kidnaped, discovered in gypsy rags through which her nakedness smiled at the king and his hounds), I recognized the tiny dark-brown mole on her side. With awe and delight (the king crying for joy, the trumpets blaring, the nurse drunk) I saw again her lovely indrawn abdomen where my southbound mouth had briefly paused; and those puerile hips on which I had kissed the crenulated imprint left by the band of her shorts—that last mad immortal day behind the ‘Roches Roses.’” [3, p25]

The mad immortal day implies his romantic love with Annabel when he was in mirror stage. Humbert sketched the profile of the “little fairy” in his head with his own fertile imagination, and “the vacuum of my soul managed to suck in every detail of her bright beauty, and these I checked against the features of my dead bride.” [3, p26] He compares Lolita to his dead lover Annabel one by one projecting the shadow of Annabel, the “little fairy”, onto Lolita’s body and deeply infatuated with her. Such detailed visual gazes of Lolita’s body appear more often in Humbert’s diary and he confides his desire for Lolita through his diary. The lust in Humbert’s heart is growing, and he spent the whole day swooning over Lolita and kept pouring out his mad fascination for her in his diary. “She wore a plaid shirt, blue jeans and sneakers. Every movement she made in the dappled sun plucked at the most secret and sensitive chord of my abject body.” [3, p26] In Humbert’s diary, he keeps meticulous records of Lolita’s everyday moments, from her dress and appearance to her behaviors. These records reflect his intense fascination with Lolita and reveal an almost pathological obsession. He unabashedly confessed his love and desire for Lolita in his diary, revealing every nuance of his heart without reservation. These words are witness to his gaze on Lolita. Humbert’s gaze is not only to fulfil his desire for Lolita, but also to construct his own self-identity. By associating Lolita with Annabel, Humbert attempts to psychologically repair his trauma and construct a complete self-image. With his gaze on Lolita, he connects himself to Annabel’s past, thus constructing his self-identity and gaining a sense of continuity and completeness in his psyche.

In *Lolita*, Humbert’s gaze on Lolita is not just reflected in his daily records of her, but also culminates in a series of tragic events. Humbert’s diary details his every gaze and sexual fantasy about Lolita, and these entries serve as an outlet for his inner desires, as well as a means of controlling and possessing Lolita. His diary eventually leads to the unexpected death of Mrs. Haze, an event that changes Lolita’s fate. Lolita loses her mother and Humbert takes the opportunity to use this to take Lolita away from her familiar surroundings. Lolita loses her mother, and Humbert seizes the opportunity to take Lolita away from her familiar surroundings. He takes advantage of Lolita’s loneliness and helplessness, and gradually leads her into the trap he has set for her by way of material seduction and emotional manipulation.

“In the gay town of Lepingville I bought her four books of comics, a box of candy, a box of sanitary pads, two cokes, a manicure set, a travel clock with a luminous dial, a ring with a real topaz, a tennis racket, roller skates with white high shoes, field glasses, a portable radio set, chewing gum, a transparent raincoat, sunglasses, some more garments—swooners, shorts, all kinds of summer frocks. At the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go.” [3, p94]

Behind Humbert's promises of material fulfillment and indulgence lies a darker reality: his sexual possession and emotional control over Lolita. Humbert is the dominant force in their transition from a stepfather-stepdaughter relationship to an incestuous one. He writes that among those methods of persuasion, "the reformatory threat is the one I recall with the deepest moan of shame" [3, p98] in diary. Lolita is young, naïve and inexperienced, and Humbert takes advantage of her innocence and her homesickness for her mother to portray himself as a trustworthy "father", and to make Lolita rely on him through material fulfillment and emotional manipulation, thus Lolita gradually falls into this incestuous relationship.

"My chère Dolorès! I want to protect you, dear, from all the horrors that happen to little girls in coal sheds and alley ways, and alas, comme vous le savez trop bien, ma gentille, in the blueberry woods during the bluest of summers. Through thick and thin I will still stay your guardian, and if you are good, I hope a court may legalize that guardianship before long." [3, p98] Moreover, during the road trips that Humbert takes Lolita on, he strictly controls Lolita's daily activities, including what she wears, what she eats, and what her daily routine is. He does not allow her to socialize with her peers or even participate in any group activities. Humbert used psychological threats to better control Lolita, and he often relies on three other methods to control his "pubescent" concubine, Lolita, in his submission and passable and to make her control her temper. Humbert warns Lolita that "she would dwell with me in exile for months and years if need be, studying under me French and Latin, unless her present 'attitude changed'." [3, p98] Then the simple Lolita, "would scream no! and frantically clutch at my driving hand whenever I put a stop to her tornadoes of temper by turning in the middle of a high way with the implication that I was about to take her straight to that dark and dismal abode." [3, p98] Humbert succeeds in menacing Lolita by rubbing in following words:

"Finally, let us see what happens if you, a minor, accused of having impaired the morals of an adult in a respectable inn, what happens if you complain to the police of my having kidnapped and raped you? Let us suppose they believe you. A minor female, who allows a person over twenty-one to know her carnally, involves her victim into statutory rape, or second-degree sodomy, depending on the technique; and the maximum penalty is ten years. So, I go to jail. Okay. I go to jail. But what happens to you, my orphan? Well, you are luckier. You become the ward of the Department of Public Welfare — which I am afraid sounds a little bleak. A nice grim matron of the Miss Phalen type, but more rigid and not a drinking woman, will take away your lipstick and fancy clothes. No more gadding about! I don't know if you have ever heard of the laws relating to dependent, neglected, incorrigible and delinquent children. While I stand gripping the bars, you, happy neglected child, will be given a choice of various dwelling places, all more or less the same, the correctional school, the reformatory, the juvenile detention home, or one of those admirable girls' protectories where you knit things, and sing hymns, and have rancid pancakes on Sundays. You will go there, Lolita — my Lolita, this Lolita will leave plainer words, if we two are found out, you will be analyzed and institutionalized, my pet, c'est tout. You will dwell, my Lolita will dwell (come here, my brown flower) with thirty-nine other dopes in a dirty dormitory (no, allow me, please) under the supervision of hideous matrons. This is the situation, this is the choice. Don't you think that under the circumstances Dolores Haze had better stick to her old man?" [3, p, 99]

From approaching Lolita under the pretense of marrying Mrs. Haze, observing Lolita as well as mental masturbating Lolita's body, to later successfully seducing and controlling Lolita. This whole process is dominated by Humbert. Gazing is not just a visual behavior, it is a means of projecting power and control, and through the gaze, the observer is able to exert influence over the observed. Humbert's gaze is an expression of power, and it also embodies the unequal power between Humbert and Lolita. By controlling and possessing Lolita through the gaze, Humbert places her in a position of being observed and defined. This power relationship is referred to in Lacan's theory as the "gaze of the object on the subject", whereby the observed (Lolita) becomes the object of the observer's (Humbert's) desire. Through the textual analysis

of the novel, which is mainly narrated in Humbert's perspective, the author of the thesis is able to glimpse how he shapes and controls Lolita's image through the gaze that reveals the complex relationship between desire, power, and fantasy.

3.2. Tragic Fate: Results of the Gaze

Humbert "molds" Lolita with his gaze, and gets and controls Lolita through the hidden psychological mechanism behind the gaze. The gaze leads to his ultimate tragic fate, and also causes Lolita's childhood tragedy, and profoundly affects Lolita's future destiny. Humbert's gaze on Lolita can be seen as a Mirror Relationship: a projection of Humbert's self and the other, and Lolita's disorientation.

3.2.1. Humbert's Tragic Destiny

Humbert's gaze on Lolita sends him into a vortex of uncontrollable desire that ultimately leads to his mental breakdown and physical destruction, and his gaze on Lolita's body is often tinged with idealization. He regards Lolita as an object to satisfy his desires, and how he sees Lolita is "absolutely optical replica of a beloved face, a little ghost in natural colors." [3,p7] Humbert's gaze is in fact an interaction between the "self" and the "other", and he is convinced that "in certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel." [3, p8] According to Lacan's theory of Mirror Stage, the individual acquires self-consciousness in Mirror Stage through an external mirror image. Humbert experiences excessive self-absorption during the Mirror Stage, forming unrealistic and primitive fantasies that impact his fascination with Annabelle. Thus, after twenty-four years Humbert "broke her spell by incarnating in another." [3, p9] According to Lacan, the Mirror Stage is the basis for the formation of subjectivity, which affects the psychological structure of the individual, and it has a profound impact on social behavior. The Ideal-I emerges during the Mirror Stage, shaping the individual's future identifications and self-perception. The Mirror Stage involves a *mé-connaissance*, where children misrecognize their reflected image as their true self. Humbert's subjectivity is in crisis during the mirror stage of identification, resulting in his inability to relate normally to women in adulthood, instead focusing his desires on adolescent girls. By gazing at and imagining the body of a young girl, Humbert attempts to compensate for the incompleteness in self-identity caused in the Mirror Stage, hence gaining a sense of psychological fulfillment. Humbert strives to construct a self-image that conforms to his desires through the Gaze on Lolita. In his adult disguise, which is "a great big handsome hunk of movieland manhood" [3, p26], Humbert meets "all the characteristics which, according to writers on the sex interests of children, start the responses stirring in a little girl: clean-cut jaw, muscular hand, deep sonorous voice, broad shoulder." [3, p28] Moreover, he believes that he resembles some crooner or actor chap on whom Lolita has a crush. Humbert's "ideal self" is closely related to his obsession with Lolita. He projects his desires onto Lolita in an attempt to make up for his childhood trauma caused by the untimely death of his first love, Annabel, and to fulfill his unfulfilled wishes. Such behavior is considered as a kind of psychological mechanism of "mirror compensation", in which the individual makes up for the incompleteness or lack of self-identity through external reflection. Humbert's fixation on Lolita serves as a means to compensate for the deep-seated trauma he experienced in childhood due to the early death of his first love. This behavior is not merely a pursuit of an idealized self but also a mechanism to address his own psychological deficits. By gazing at and controlling Lolita, he attempts to reconstruct a self-image that aligns with his desires, thereby achieving a sense of psychological fulfillment.

However, such gaze puts Humbert in a state of self-contradiction: he both desires to possess Lolita and realizes the moral wrongness of such an act. In the novel, Humbert repeatedly emphasizes that he is an "educated European" and tries to rationalize his criminal behavior through this social identity. But this disguise cannot hide his inner conflicts and guilt. His self-image constantly swinging between his "ideal self" and his moral "social role", which is the

direct cause of tragedy for the rest of his life. "I shall probably have another breakdown if I stay any longer in this house, under the strain of this intolerable temptation, by the side of my darling — my darling — my life and my bride" [3, p30], says Humbert in his diary. Humbert realizes at certain moments, such as the moment he looks at the anesthetized and sleeping Lolita, that his actions are wrong. "She was again fast asleep, my nymphet, but still I did not dare to launch upon my enchanted voyage." [3, p86] Here he does not "dare" to unleash his lust for Lolita, but in fact he is suffering from the struggle between his morality and desire. He knows exactly what he wants to do, and how to do it, "without impinging on a child's chastity." (p36) "I am even prepared to tell my tormentors that perhaps once or twice I had cast an appraiser's cold eye at Charlotte's coral lips and bronze hair and dangerously low neckline, and had vaguely tried to fit her into a plausible daydream." [3, p46] Humbert makes an attempt to prove that he is not purely a pedophile by admitting his interest in Charlotte, but this effort instead highlights his internal struggle. But he cannot escape his obsession with Lolita, thus his desires trump his moral restraints. "I was not unduly disturbed by her self-accusatory innuendoes. I was still firmly resolved to pursue my policy of sparing her purity by operating only in the stealth of night, only upon a completely anesthetized little nude." [3, p82] Humbert's desire for Lolita goes through the process of fantasizing, testing, and finally carrying it out. At first, he views his desire for Lolita as a pure fantasy, believing the emotion to be aesthetically pleasing and harmless. However, as the story progresses, he begins to try to get closer to Lolita by anesthetizing her, and even though he has not yet committed a sexual act at this stage, this act already hints at his deep-seated impulses and moral conflicts. He seeks to alleviate his inner guilt by reasoning out his actions, and he attributes this obsession with Lolita to an unattainable vision of perfection that is bound by a sense of taboo. Then he breaks the taboo for that it is Lolita who seduces him. "I had thought that months, perhaps years, would elapse before I dared to reveal myself to Dolores Haze; but by six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers. I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me." [3, p88] Such rationalization is not a mere self-justification, but a complex psychological mechanism. On the surface, he seems to be trying to convince the jury to find excuses for his behavior, but in reality, he is trying to convince himself to relieve his inner guilt and moral remorse. This process of rationalization reflects his deep-seated obsession with desire, and also reveals his endless struggle between desire and morality.

3.2.2. Lolita's Miserable Experience

Lolita also experiences the conflict between the "self" and the "other" under Humbert's gaze, where she is forced to accept the role of the "nymphet" and loses the opportunity for self-identification. Lolita is forced to accept the role of "nymphet" under Humbert's gaze and loses the opportunity for self-identification, and she is driven to live with Humbert after the death of her mother. Her dependence on Humbert is not out of love, but out of helplessness and materialistic pursuits. According to Humbert, in the middle of the night Lolita comes sobbing into his room and they become reconciled, for that Lolita has absolutely nowhere else to go. It shows Lolita's ambivalence towards their relationship. She is both unable to escape Humbert's control and somehow accepts the relationship because she is dependent on Humbert's material commitments. Humbert gives her the name "Lolita", along with other names and endearments such as "Lo", "Lola", and "Dolly". These names are a blurring of the identity of Lolita, whose real name is Dolores Haze. His gaze on Lolita is not based on the real self of Dolores, but rather on the overlapping of her reflection with Annabel's, making Lolita a "nymphet" in his fantasy which constructed in the Mirror Stage, rather than a conscious individual. Lolita lives in a reflected world dominated by Humbert's desires, and the self-identity gained through the mirrored self-image in the Mirror Stage is often based on a dislocation and fantasy. Humbert's dislocated gaze leads to a distortion of Lolita's self-identity, as she is forced to accept the fantasy image that Humbert constructs for her and loses her grasp on her true identity. His gaze robs Lolita of her

childhood, forcing her from an innocent girl-child into an adult world. Lolita is forced to experience the complexities of sexual and emotional relationships in advance, and this twisted interplay plunges her immature mind into the ethical dilemma of having an incestuous relationship with her stepfather.

This bad experience distorts her self-perception while traumatizing her morally and psychologically; her childhood is stripped away, her innocence is tainted, and her future is blurred by this dark past. During her travels with Humbert, Lolita is bound by Humbert's material control and emotional manipulation, and in Humbert's shadow, Lolita loses hope and plans for her future. Even after escaping Humbert, she still cannot rid herself of the shadow of the experience. Lolita loses her innocent joy as a normal girl under Humbert's gaze and learns to cope with Humbert in a mature way, which causes her to be overly precocious psychologically. This precociousness is reflected not only in her perceptions of sexuality, but also in her distorted understanding of relationships, so that Lolita escapes Humbert's control and then proceeds to fall into Quilty's seduction. Five years after Humbert learns of Lolita's whereabouts, she is married and has a family of her own. With complicated feelings, Humbert finds Lolita and offers to bring her back to him with the promise of material security. But Lolita calmly and firmly refuses Humbert in the face of his temptation. "He broke my heart. You merely broke my life." [3, p186] The words when Lolita rejects Humbert clearly reflect the long-term consequences Humbert's gaze has on her.

To summarize, Humbert's misidentification of his self-identity in the Mirror Stage leads to his gaze on Lolita, through which he compensates for his self-identity. This gaze leads to his eventual tragedy, as well as contributing to Lolita's childhood tragedy and profoundly affecting her fate later on.

4. Conclusion

Humbert's gaze actually is constructed in the Mirror Stage for the death of his first love, which affects the incorrect perception of his self-identity. By gazing at Lolita's body, Humbert transforms Lolita into an object to fulfill his desires. Through material seduction and psychological manipulation, Humbert establishes absolute control over Lolita. His gaze and control over Lolita reveals the inequality of power relations which ultimately leads to his own tragic fate, as well as creates the shadow of Lolita's tragic childhood and future.

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