

## Does the Enchanted Hunter Have True Love?-An Ethical Interpretation of Humbert

Tingting Zhang

Zhujiang College, South China Agricultural University, Guangzhou, China

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**Abstract:** Vladimir Nabokov, the prestigious Russian-born American writer, whose works not only represents the twentieth century Russian expatriate literature, but also is on behalf of the American contemporary literature, has established his indispensable status in literature after publishing his masterpiece. *Lolita*, the most famous representative work of Nabokov, has been attracting the attention and interest of the critics and readers all over the world. Because of its hero's abnormal immoral love affair with a 12-year-old teenage by the name of Lolita, *Lolita* has been regarded as one of the best-known and also the most controversial novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ever since its publication, *Lolita* has aroused a lot of attention at home and abroad and has gone ups and downs as a classic. However, it has attained its unique status in literary circles. Even up to now, *Lolita* has been interpreted and re-interpreted by a great number of critics from various angles, such as post-modernism, theme, feminism, aesthetic value, image, linguistic and structural features and so on. In contrast, from the perspective of literary ethical criticism, through the detailed analysis of the enchanted hunter Humbert, the writer of the paper is able to reveal that although their respective tragedy results from violating the ethic order and disregarding their ethical relationship of being father and stepdaughter, yet it should not give us the ground to announce that the enchanted hunter doesn't have the true love and it is completely immoral of him to even love Lolita, because everyone is equal before love and he/she is qualified to take the challenge or even risk to pursue his/her love.

### 1. Introduction

Since its first publication in 1955 in Paris and later in 1958 in New York, Nabokov's masterpiece *Lolita* receives a lot of scolding and sneer from the public, because it tells the story of a middle-aged professor's lust for his teenager stepdaughter and it is too inflammatory and incestuous to be published and even accepted by the public. Consequently, for a long period of time, *Lolita* was despised by a lot of readers and critics and even there are a vast majority of people who doubted the value and worthlessness of reading it for the book's "pretentious, florid and archly fatuous fashion" and its "high-brow pornography" [1]. As a result, *Lolita* was despised and even banned for its controversial theme for four years in America. However, as time is going by, *Lolita* becomes a number-one bestseller, for the critics and readers are so attracted by it that they are conquered by its charm. *Lolita* was narrated by the hero Humbert, who was a paedophile and also had strong sexual desires for nymphets. Humbert himself attributed his paraphilia to his unaccomplished sexual activities with her first lover Annabel Lee, corresponded with the image of nymphets in Humbert's mind and gave her another name named Lolita. Because of its controversial theme, it is not welcomed among the public. As a matter of fact, before Nabokov decided to write *Lolita*, he knew quite well the great risk he was taking, because he understood paedophilia taboo, that is, pedophilia is "of all human activity the most universally despised, in its nature the most inexcusably and uncompromisingly vile, beyond all dispute or discussion evil[2]". However, Nabokov boldly takes the challenge to break fixed norms and prejudices on pedophilia and employed all his talents in artistic techniques to the full extent to create *Lolita*, so that is why a lot of critics thought him as one of the most important writers since William Faulkner and even regarded him as one of the greatest literary stylist of the twentieth century. From this, we can acknowledge the fact that Nabokov indeed occupies a very important position in American literature and the researches about him and

also his works are indispensable and crucial.

Nie Zhenzhao, professor of Central China Normal University, for the first time puts forward ethical literary criticism, which is directed against the theoretical complex, preordained theme complex and term complex in the literature. With the improving of people's living standard and the increasing pursuit of material life, the moral values are beginning to lose their importance both in people's mind and in literature, which is usually referred as the so-called trend of absence of ethics. Corresponding with this phenomenon, professor Nie announces that it is necessary and urgent to explore the new critical method for literary studies by revealing and analyzing existed in art and literature critical circles in recent twenty years[3].

## **2. The Enchanted Sumter hunting of Lolita for true Love: the struggle of endless ethical consciousness**

As a crucial and indispensable phrase in the whole novel, "the enchanted hunter" has appeared for many times in the novel. The first time it appeared was in a motel in which Humbert raped her, because "The Enchanted Hunter" was exactly the motel's name. What's more, Humbert was tortured by her feelings and thoughts about Lolita just like the enchanted hunter. The second time for the emergence of "The Enchanted Hunter" was the name of the play written by dramatist Quilty and played by Lolita. Since Lolita dated secretly with Quilty in the name of rehearsal the play "The Enchanted Hunter" and even tried to escape with Quilty. In the following three years of Lolita's missing, in order to find Lolita, Humbert almost searched her everywhere just like an "enchanted hunter". If you read the novel carefully, the trace of "Enchanted Hunter" can be seen and found everywhere in the novel. Humbert was the hunter, while Lolita was just like his prey. Thus, Humbert's hunting for Lolita is equivalent of the hunter for his prey. Even though Humbert deep in his mind has acknowledged the fact that his hunting for Lolita is immoral or even evil, yet he couldn't control himself, because he was just a crazy enchanted hunter.

In his Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism, Professor Nie Zhenzhao states, "The unique coexistence of rationality and bestiality in man is determined by the Sphinx factor, which has in itself two components, the human factor and the animal factor...Within the Sphinx factor, the human factor is a higher and dominant one, the animal factor a lower and subordinate one, and therefore the former has the potential to control and restrain the latter so as to make man an ethical being"(Nie:2014:276). Different from the animals, human beings are governed and controlled by rational will instead of free will and irrational will, which will lead them to distinguish the right from the wrong, make reasonable decisions and even take responsible actions in the end.

At the beginning of the novel, when Humbert first met Lolita in the garden, he just crazily fell in love with her. In order to win Lolita's love and be with her permanently, he even married Lolita's mother Charlotte and became as her legal stepfather, which may seem ridiculous to readers. However, on the contrary, Humbert was happy about her intentional arrangement, for now he had the official excuse to stay with Lolita and qualified his legal identity in the name of step-father and daughter. Especially, after Charlotte died, instead of feeling painful, on the contrary, Humbert felt very relieved because he thought he finally had the chance to be with Lolita. In order to escape the criticism and rebuke of the people, he even took his loving Lolita to travel with him. All these absurd things he had done were out of his intense desire instead of his true love for Lolita, since he was so deeply controlled by her sexual desire that he ignored all the ethics about the relationship of step-father and daughter. At this time, the free will takes full control of Humbert, because he just took her own feelings into serious consideration. One of the best and typical examples is the beginning of the novel: "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"[4]. At last, after Humbert has realized the terrible guiltiest and the irrevocable harm he had committed against Lolita, he decided to let go of Lolita so that she could be happy finally. It is a great probability that maybe even Humbert himself didn't know how much he loved Lolita until he received the letter from her in person. Even though at the end of the novel Lolita was longer a nymphet and her appearance of nymphet has already vanished, yet Humbert still had his great

passion and love for her and we can find it through the words “I loved my Lolita, this Lolita, pale and polluted, and big with another’s child, but still gray-eyed, still sooty-lashed, still auburn and almond, still Carmencita, still mine.” At this time, Humbert has achieved “the sublime”, because Humbert’s willingness to free Lolita shows the return of his ethical consciousness and the power of the rational will. Therefore, what Humbert has done was out of his true love for Lolita instead of his sexual desires, for his love for Lolita became honest, pure and innocent and his desires for Lolita have already transited from sex to love.

### **3. The Enchanted Hunter: is it moral or immoral to love Lolita?**

In contrast with the western countries, the reason why *Lolita* is introduced and very well received in China was due to its “immoral” theme. This novel has stirred up a lot of disputes over the topic about morality and immorality. For readers, Humbert, just like “the enchanted hunter”, pursued Lolita madly and permanently, which seems unacceptable, irrational and even immoral, because Lolita is after all not an adult and on the contrary she is just an obsolescent. Therefore, from the perspective of ethics, Humbert’s pursuit or hunting for Lolita is against the order of ethics, which is irrational or even immoral in people’s mind. What’s more, he pursues the nymphet, which means that their relationship from the very beginning is unacceptable to the public on the account of their respective violation of ethics and hence their life is destined to be a tragedy. Nevertheless, no matter what Humbert thought in the whole process or what he did the the end, the conflicts between his desire and the moral standards are bound to struggle fiercely in his mind and even torture him continuously. In order to intoxicate himself and indulge himself into the feelings about Lolita, Humbert constantly convinced himself that it is nothing wrong to seduce a teenage in order to relieve his guilt and unease. However, deep in his mind, although he recognized and confessed the fact that his pursuit for Lolita is immoral and even evil, yet he just couldn’t take full control of himself and couldn’t stop his thoughts of hunting for Lolita. The best example if it in the novel is that Humbert often compares himself to an ape, such as, he calls his ear “my ape-ear” (Nabokov:1991:48). Undoubtedly, we have no right to blame him, for he is just an ordinary human being and he cannot transgress the right of individual.

Although Humbert’s behavior of hunting for nymphets is abnormal, irrational and even immoral, the readers are completely moved by his sincere, eager and even desperate pursuit for true love. Therefore, as far as the author of this paper is concerned, it can be assumed that what is immoral is that he has been constantly chasing Lolita and eventually killed Quilty in order to gain the complete possession of Lolita, while what is moral is his sincere awakening, realization and confession of his ruining Lolita in the prison. According to Sigmund Freud, anyone who cannot repress his sexual instinct may lead to two differential ends separately. The one that sublimates his sexual instinct will be a hero or great figure, for example, a famous writer, or a distinguished artist. Thus, Humbert has succeeded his transformations from a monster to a hero. From the beginning to the end of the novel, Humbert suffers not only the emotional and sexual desire about Lolita, but also the ideological and ethical struggle about their relationship. Therefore, it is not reasonable to announce that it is immoral of the enchanted hunter to love Lolita, because before love everyone is equal. After all, besides Lolita, Humbert is also a victim of their unacceptable incestuous relationship. On the one hand, it is unlikely that he could extricate himself away from Lolita, because he sincerely had true love for Lolita.; On the other hand, he frankly admitted all the physical and mental hurts brought by him to Lolita. Therefore, he has a clear definition about himself and he has never tried to deny the fact that he is despicable and what he had done is immoral. At the end of the novel, after Humbert has realized that it was him who ruined Lolita’s life, he bravely confessed all the terrible things he had done to Lolita so that he was able to ask for Lolita’s understanding and forgiveness. At last, Humbert released Lolita and set her free, since he had realized that to love anyone meant respecting his/her request and giving his/her freedom. The selfish and self-centered Humbert in the past at that period is transformed into a noble spirit with generous and honest love, who respects Lolita’s choice and blesses her with happiness, for his remorse and confession of guilt are sincere and his conscience would constantly force him suffer from the agony of his guilt about Lolita. Furthermore,

although Humbert had committed unpardonable crimes to Lolita, in the prison Humbert has tried his best to receive salvation and restore his broken relationship with Lolita and even with himself. In that case, he is not only able to come to terms with Lolita, but also reconcile with himself. At this moment, he become awakened, "I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord." (Nabokov:1991:301) Maybe even though this awakening came too late for Humbert, yet the words are heart-touching and her deeds are worthy of praises. Reading here, if we read the novel from Humbert the character's view, it is very difficult for readers to harbor more hatred for Humbert anymore, since he was also a victim on the account of violating the ethics. Even if he is despised as the enchanted hunter by a lot of readers and critics, yet we don't have the right to regard his pursuit for Lolita as immoral and even deprive him of pursuing his equal chance for true love.

#### **4. Conclusion**

All in all, *Lolita* can really be qualified as a reader-friendly piece of work, which enables readers to make a diversified exploration and interpretations of this great masterpiece. Furthermore, its triumph lies not only its outstanding artistic features in literature, but also the flexibility of the exploration and interpretation of this novel undertaken by different readers and critics. Therefore, undoubtedly Nabokov deserves the compliment in literary circles, such as "the most original writer since Joyce" given by Charles Rolo, "the most important American writer since William Faulkner" given by John Updike and so on.

From the perspective of ethical literary criticism, by analyzing the enchanted hunter Humbert, the author of this paper wants to demonstrate that even though it is the loss of ethics that contributes to his tragedy, yet we couldn't deny the fact that the enchanted Hunter didn't have true love for Lolita and accordingly regarded his pursuit for love as immoral. What's more, as time goes on and the economy thrives, the human being are going through an unprecedented accelerated decentralization of family and ethics accordingly are in the dilemma of dying out. Even though the world we are living in is constantly changing, nevertheless, the ethics about relationship represented by Humbert and Lolita are still relevant to our life and of great value in our contemporary society, because only when the ethics about relationship are normal and sound can people gain and achieve ultimate happiness and permanent harmony in the society.

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