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Research Article



## Fiction Undermining Theory: Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and Freudian Psychoanalysis

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### Abstract

The present article aims to show how this modernist novel resisted and actively undermined the overwhelming critical discourse of Freudian psychoanalysis that has dominated the critical and theoretical world of literary studies at the time. Although much has been said and written about the antipathy of Vladimir Nabokov to Sigmund Freud, very little has been written on what the novel has actively done in respect to reversing the epistemological power discourse that dominates the relationship of literary works to critical "theory." The contribution of this paper is reading *Lolita* as an example of "applied literature," i.e., a literature that anticipates, challenges, revises and undermines the critical theory that is supposed to read/analyze it.

Theoretically, the paper benefits from contributions of scholars such as Shoshana Felman and Piere Bayard. The paper is sectioned into an introduction, a “classic” psychoanalytical reading of *Lolita*, a section that reviews and assesses the problems with such a reading, and a conclusion that sums up the findings of the study.

**Keywords:** Literary Theory, Psychoanalysis, Applied Literature, Text/theory binary, Aesthetics, Discourse, Power/knowledge, Consumerism, Subversion, Dialectical

## 1. Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov’s (1899-1977) antipathy to Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and his theory of Psychoanalysis is well known (Bloom 3; Shute 1-3; Field 262-3; De La Durantaye). Theories have been elaborated on this hatred attributing it mostly to a kind of intellectual craving for fame and recognition (Green). Some interpret the affair in Freudian terms as a kind of intellectual Oedipus Complex between the two writers as representing early and late modernism (Holt 51) Others read the affair in light of what Harold Bloom calls “the anxiety of influence” (Sæverot 88). It is important to mention that psychoanalysis per se is beyond Nabokov’s area of expertise, i.e., the claims he makes are rhetorical rather than scientific. This means that his subversive attack on Freud is cultural and ideological. However, Nabokov’s expertise in literature and literary theory gives him the right (and the means) to undermine the claims of psychoanalysis on interpreting literature and the human psyche. Nabokov’s famous and most controversial novel is one of the most influential episodes in this antipathy.

*Lolita* was denied publication in the United States because of its shocking and controversial theme, it was published in Paris in 1955 (and had to wait until 1967 to be published in the U.S.A.). Because of the controversy it has generated, because of the combination of erotic elements with the tradition of a novel of manners, and because of its unique style the book has soon become a classic in American literature.

In addition to its great aesthetic and literary value, *Lolita* holds a great potential theoretical value as a creative reaction that shocks the contemporary literary circles and shakes the growing faith in psychoanalytical criticism. In this paper I read *Lolita* as a creative subversion of the discipline of Freudian psychoanalysis. The novel challenges the modernist assertion of understanding and representing the human psyche. By creating an open-ended, multiple layering structure of meanings and interpretations, *Lolita* refutes the Freudian claim to reach the “truth” or *the* “meaning” of the human psyche. Since its publication in 1955 the novel has become a cultural and media phenomenon, developing a “Lolita complex” in psychology (Bernal). Influenced by his Russian aristocratic background, Nabokov essentially ascribed to the then-dominant paradigm of New Criticism and/or Russian Formalism holding that a literary author must avoid symbolic and metaphorical language (*The Annotated Lolita* 314), and stick instead to what can be called the “transformative aesthetic experience” (Darling) in literature, that s/he should not invest in contested meanings or hidden messages but merely in the work of the imagination (Shute 6) whose main focus is on style, form and the aesthetic value of the written text. This makes his attack on psychoanalysis not an attack on power, but

an exercise of it. However, this attack is a form of resistance to a rising cultural and ideological paradigm. The novel destabilizes the reader's expectations by using psychoanalysis as a symptom of a pretentious culture that thinks too much of itself. It defies easily-reached meanings and ready-made allegorical interpretation.

To show this, I start by applying a traditional Freudian interpretation to *Lolita* to see the problems of such reading, and what potential alternative the novel offers. The goal is not to reach a specific "meaning" hidden somewhere in the text but to show how the novel undermines psychoanalytic claims to reach for hidden meanings. The theoretical frame of the paper relies on a direction in post-structural literary criticism that attempts to deconstruct the binary relationship of theory-text by revising that relationship: having literary texts read and analyze critical theory and discourse. The idea of applying literature to theory developed in the context of post-structural critical approaches that use criticism to subvert the roles of the interpreter (theory)/ the interpreted (text), to deconstruct the dichotomy of master/slave in the conventional structure of knowledge exchange between the literary work and the critical enterprise. Before going further in this argument, here is a short synopsis of the story of *Lolita*.

*Lolita* tells a story of Mr. Humbert Humbert, a middle-aged intellectual writer, professor of literature who becomes obsessed with his twelve years stepdaughter. The fictional foreword, the frame narrative, presents the story as a prison memoir confession of the protagonist villain. The memoir starts years before Humbert's move to Ramsdale, a small town in America where the novel starts. He rents a room at a house with a family of a single mother and her young daughter. He develops a sexual attraction to the young girl who playfully mesmerize him. To make sure he stays near Lolita (the nickname of Dolores Haze), Humbert marries her mother. When the wife finds out about his secret feelings for her daughter, she confronts him before running away angrily. As she leaves the house crying, the woman gets hit by a car and then dies. Humbert collects their belongings and leaves the house. He goes to the summer camp where Lolita is staying and takes her into a journey through the United States. They travel through different American cities and towns. The journey presents American life in the early twentieth century as driven by consumerist culture. During the journey, Humbert takes advantage of the girl, bribing and spoiling her constantly with sweets and other commodities in exchange for sexual favors. Followed by a mysterious man named Clare Quilty, who is later revealed to be a pornographic movie director trying himself to take advantage of the girl, Humbert keeps moving away to avoid getting busted. They continue to do so for some time until the girl started to feel tired of the kind of life she is forced to have. Tempted by the director and celebrity Clare Quilty in addition to her disgust of her pervert stepfather, Lolita escapes and chooses the glamorous life of appearances that Quilty offers her. She leaves Humbert for two years. He then receives a letter from Lolita who is now 17 years old telling him that she has married, is pregnant and in desperate need for some money. At the end of the novel, Humbert finds Lolita who has become a grown woman, not the young nymphet he adores. She tells him that it was Quilty who has tempted her to leave him. She refuses to go back with him. Humbert settles his account with Quilty by murdering him in a surreal scene. He gets arrested, finishes his memoir in jail and asks for it to be published only after the death of his beloved Lolita.

### 1. Literature and Psychoanalysis: A Dialectical Relationship

Shoshanna Felman (5-10) argues that literature and psychoanalysis can be seen as dialoguing bodies of language and frameworks of knowledge, that they are equally interrelated and interdependent, not in the traditional pattern of interpreter/interpreted. This pattern suggests a kind of one-direction power-relation structure in which a source of power, i. e., a science studies and interprets a subservient literary text. The subversion of literature to psychoanalysis results in the “fight for recognition,” between the two. It results in the deterioration of the value and role of literature under the tools of psychoanalysis. It turns literary works into mere proofs and explanations of psychoanalytical theory. The conflict is a result of a kind of power-relation conception which sees things in a polar way. According to this polar conception there is no exchange of meaning or knowledge, power or authority. There is always a subject that is the source of knowledge, the authority; and an object where this knowledge is applied. Felman suggests a method to deconstruct this pattern of power structure. This method perceives literature and psychoanalysis as different but “enfolded within” each other. Each one of the two is “the unconscious,” “unthought-of” part of the other (10). She proposes a vision that sees literature as a subject, not merely an object of knowledge, a vision that satisfies the wish of the literary critic to “engage in a real dialogue between literature and psychoanalysis” (6). In this productive dialogue both disciplines produce meanings and insights to the human life. Felman’s article does not take for granted the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis but opens the question for new approaches. Instead of applying psychoanalytical theoretical questions to analyze the literary text, it shifts the current to the other way around. This view allows a counter reading to the relationship between *Lolita* and Freudian psychoanalysis. *Lolita* does dialogue with psychoanalysis on many levels. In the foreword, it anticipates a psychoanalytical reading; on a deeper level, Humbert’s journal mocks this sort of reading. Reversing the reductive use of psychoanalysis to literature as merely a proof, *Lolita* uses psychoanalysis as a proof of how easily the reader can be fooled.

Developments in psychoanalytical approaches included the idea of “applied literature” suggested, among others, by French writer and psychoanalyst Pierre Bayard (b.1954). Bayard argues against traditional psychoanalytic readings of literary texts. He contends that “the psychoanalytical approach to texts places knowledge on the side of psychoanalysis and not that of literature...it risks diminishing literature and understanding literature’s own ability to produce knowledge” (207). According to Bayard, a Freudian psychoanalytical reading is a hermeneutic attempt to find a meaning that is already there. It is an attempt to discover an “inscribed” and hidden meaning in the text. But the assumption that the text has a hidden and an apparent meaning misrecognizes the fact that this “discovered” meaning is merely a selective construction of the reader herself. The risk in this hermeneutic reading, says Bayard, is the confidence of having reached *the* “true meaning” of a text, a truth that is a subjective construction of the critic’s mind, a false epistemological “claim to have captured and colonized truth” (Shute 6). Another risk in Freudian criticism is that it treats fictional characters as real human beings. By applying the therapeutic mode of dream analysis to literary texts it diminishes the literary text into a network of symptoms, confusing the fictionality of the literary work with

the much more complex world of the human psychological and social reality. Bayard moves all the way to the opposite and calls for a reversal of the Freudian model. He says that literature could be applied to psychoanalysis, since literature “has consequential means by which to help to think about the psyche and its theories... (Bayard 217). It is the ability of great literary works to enhance our knowledge of the human life and psychic phenomena that makes literature the infinite reservoir of psychoanalytical writing. Freud’s writings are the best examples of how works of literature such as *Hamlet* and *Oedipus Rex* can be effective means of communicating psychoanalytical knowledge (*Interpretation* 155-159). However, the application of works of literature as sources of knowledge and insight to the human psyche depends on two factors according to Bayard: their position in time in relation to the development of psychological knowledge; and the degree of theorization in them. Creative literary works written in different points of time influence psychological knowledge differently; the way they contain or produce theory affects their applicability to be informative sources of knowledge. Bayard contends that theory can be constructed from works of literature, that it is possible to formulate theory imaginatively. What is most important is that literary texts have theoretical possibilities. The ideal of applied literature is the kind of literature that has theoretical potential (216). Theories here are not given, they have to be constructed from the text and the tensions it generates. Bayard continues: “the strength of literature lies precisely in the fact that it is not theory, it is not a monologue, but ungraspable, multiple, contradictory, always able to surprise and to unravel itself...” (217). The “richness, complexity, resistance to meaning”, and the plurality of this meaning teach us more and more about the psychic life than does the theory of psychoanalysis itself. Seen in this light, *Lolita* is an original work of literature with a rich theoretical potential. It was published at a time when Freudian psychoanalysis has become dominant in American culture. By constantly reminding of the fictiveness of the story *Lolita* opposes and exposes the Freudian confusion of real human beings and fictional characters. The novel epistemologically undermines Freudian psychoanalysis by approaching it as a symptom of the superficiality of the modernists’ claim to know the “truth” of the human psyche. It narratively argues that the “science” of psychoanalysis is just another cultural commodity for public consumption. Examining the ways *Lolita* undermines psychoanalysis is necessary not only to expose the theory’s shortcomings and/or unscientific generalizations, but especially for the insights it provides about the ability of fiction to engage in a dialogue with critical theory, to revise traditional claims of critical discourse that used to be taken for granted.

Before applying *Lolita* to psychoanalysis, a conventional psychoanalytical reading of the novel is quite necessary as the text invites the reader to start the dialectical engagement with the novel by doing so.

### 3. A “Psychoanalytical” Reading of *Lolita*:

The novel tempts the common reader of the psychoanalysis-stricken culture to read it this way. Freud’s theory assumes, among other things, that anxieties arise from “unconscious desires and unresolved childhood conflicts” (Heller 183). John Ray Jr., the fictional editor of the memoir and writer of its foreword, emphasizes this connection when he announces that *Lolita* will be a classic case in the field: “As a case history, *Lolita* will become, no doubt, a classic in psychiatric



circles” (4). Psychoanalysis applies its ideas and models for interpreting human behaviors, desires, and dreams. In most cases, psychoanalytical terms and conceptions are developed metaphors and insights borrowed from great works of literature (Bayard 216). Along with other psychoanalysts, Freud combines these ideas and patterns together to create a model structure for the human psyche. Central among these ideas is the threefold division of the psyche into the unconscious, or the *Id*; the conscious or the *Ego*, and moral that corresponds to what Freud calls “super-morality” or *the Super-ego* (*Interpretation* 397; 145). A conventional Freudian critic can happily psychoanalyze *Lolita*. It perfectly fits the novel’s main characters: the (anti)hero or the protagonist-villain Humbert Humbert, his step-daughter and main object of his pervert desire: Lolita. Additionally, a psychoanalytic interpretation makes perfect sense as a face-value interpretation of the problematic relationship between Humbert and the obscure character of Clare Quilty.

According to Freud, the unconscious part of the human psyche influences much of what the conscious part experiences (*Origin* 189). For him, most psychological disorders stem from the failure to negotiate the childhood’s Oedipus complex which he held to be “a universal pattern and the origin of all angst” (Heller 180-2). This failure prevents psychological maturity. It distracts the “patient” who constantly seeks to project his/her complex onto others. In this light, *Lolita* has a clear oedipal-drama pattern. On one hand, Humbert, the protagonist, has lost his mother when he was a child. Her replacement was a relative Aunt Sybil whom he was fond of. He reports that his father has taken advantage of Sybil sexually (6). Humbert’s oedipal complex finds its solution in the character of Quilty. The name itself indicates the guilt that Humbert ascribes to his late father. Humbert thinks Quilty responsible for his loss of Lolita. At the first encounter between them, Humbert notices the man staring at Lolita. The man was about Humbert’s age. The latter describes him as “a broad and thickish man of my age, somewhat resembling Gustave Trapp, a cousin of my father’s in Switzerland” (144). This connection with the father creates a narrative trap for the reader to interpret the character as a father figure in the oedipal structure of the novel. Killing Quilty (physically or imaginatively as it might have been) symbolizes the killing of the father. Thus, this pattern of analysis makes Humbert into a fallen oedipal tragic hero. Humbert’s desire for the “nymphets” is to be explained through the displacement of a repressed sentiment because of the premature death of a childhood love, Annabel Leigh (alluding to Edgar Allan Poe’s famous poem about a childhood unrealized love) and his inability to have sex with her when they were young. Humbert’s loss turned Annabel into a repressed childhood sexual fantasy. This repression stifled his psychosexual growth and maturity. He eventually turned his loss and inability to negotiate his Oedipal Complex into a lifelong infatuation with nymphets. In Freudian psychoanalysis, the origin of all angst and psychological problems is due to this complex (Heller 182). The frustration this loss causes results in a repressed sexual desire for attractive young girls or what he calls nymphets. Humbert is irrecoverably attracted to girls of this kind. Since the object of his repressed original desire was a young girl like these, his vision, his unrealized desire of her will always stay the same. We see that through scenes where the older Humbert takes Lolita to

beaches, desperately trying to revisit and re-live the scene of his unachieved desire (Annotated *Lolita*, part 2, Ch.3).

Lolita, on the other hand, would be an example of the feminine oedipal complex or what followers of Freud call an “Electra Complex” (Heller 94-5). Having no “real” father, Humbert is the only alternative father figure in Lolita’s life. Her attraction to him, according to this reading, is substitutive for the loss of her real father and a sexual revenge on her mother whom she detests—a sentiment that indicates the premise of the attraction/desire to the parent of the other sex and the competition/ rivalry with the parent of the same sex that is stressed in Freud’s writing about the Oedipus complex (Freud, *Interpretation* 150). The same thing can be said about Lolita’s infatuation with the celebrity Clare Quilty who is similar to Humbert but more sensual and less conservative. Although her character was not as sophisticated and developed as Humbert’s, Lolita shows an inner conflict between her id and superego. She occasionally calls Humbert “Dad” (74, 75). Her attraction to Clare Quilty can be seen as a superegoic tendency to repress her sexual desire and stop flirting with her “father” and look for an alternative father-figure that she can engage with sexually without feeling guilty—a conscious gratification for an unconscious, repressed desire.

Freud’s ideas of the “Id,” the “Ego,” and the “Superego” can be easily applied to Humbert as well. Humbert’s inner conflict is applicable to this threefold Freudian model of the structure of the human psyche. He describes his attraction for “nymphets,” acknowledging that his desires are morally wrong. Before meeting Lolita, he tries to fight these taboo desires by marriage, travel, writing and some other activities. He also tries to justify his desires by negotiating and rationalizing them, by looking for examples in literature and life that supports his viewpoint. His sense of the immorality of his desires and their unacceptability is a superegoic, manipulative attempt to influence the readers’ judgment both on the fictional level (as of the jury) and the metafictional level of the actual reader of the novel. He says:

“the majority of sex offenders that hanker for some throbbing, sweet-moaning, physical but not necessarily coital relation with a girl-child are innocuous, inadequate, passive, timid strangers who merely ask the community to allow them to pursue their practically harmless, so called aberrant behavior, their little hot wet private acts of sexual deviation without the police and society cracking down upon them” (88).

Trying indirectly to justify his desires; Humbert asks readers to admit them as suitable for consideration. He admits throughout the book that they are wrong, but still, he feels the need to defend them with the reader, denying their severity. His attempt, in a Freudian reading of the novel is an attempt to reconcile his id with his superego.

In his essay “On a book entitled *Lolita*” Nabokov states that he detests symbols and allegories (*Strong Opinions* 66; *the Annotated Lolita* 314), rejecting the very premise of symbolism that an external hermeneutic discourse would exercise an interpretive authority over the literary text (Shute 12). Nevertheless, a Freudian analysis would definitely claim many motifs and references in the novel to have phallic and sexual psychoanalytical significance. However, the overtness of these “symbols” indicates their roles as baits or narrative traps to mock any psychoanalytic or symbolic interpretation. The gun of Lolita’s father is a perfect example.

Humbert mockingly reminds the reader that the gun represents the father's phallus in Freudian analysis: "We must remember that a pistol is the Freudian symbol of the Ur-father's central forelimb" (142). The recurrent lightning motif can be seen as allusions to the Freudian "primal scenes" (Ingham 31-32). Among other recurrent symbols and allegories are the rain, the hunting motif, and the dream-like quality of the journey. All these can be interpreted to allude to psychological meanings and unconscious desires though surely in a parodic way.

#### 4. Can this Reading Hold?

The problem with this Freudian reading of the novel is that it oversimplifies the novel that preemptively defies such reading. This simplification does not do justice to the intriguing multidimensional characters that Nabokov creates. Most significantly, it is the fact that the novel mockingly and antagonistically invites a psychoanalytic reading that the reader should not stop at this level. To such a reading, Humbert appears as a monster. At the same time, he is a victim of his oedipal complex and childhood issues. He is presented as a fallen Freudian hero suffering of psychopathic turmoil and conflict: "my world is split...while my body knew what I craved for; my mind rejected my body's every plea" (20). *Lolita*, too, would be seen as a victim, an innocent child who is being abused; and as a demoniac, precocious nymphet, a young *femme fatale* seducing and manipulating her stepfather. Such reading overshadows the reader's sense of judgment by offering a readymade simplifying frame of understanding. *Lolita* cynically anticipates the kind of critical argument it is going to generate. It warns readers of any simplification of its puzzling and perplexing structure. The narrator addresses the readers as a "jury" (5). On one level of the novel's discourse the addressee is a literal jury who would decide Humbert's fate—the narrative being his confession report. On another interpretive level, the addressee is the reader who is been manipulated by the unreliable narrator. The novel ascribes a more important role to the readers who are reminded constantly not to trust the simplifying and generalizing judgments presented to them easily. Humbert mocks psychoanalysis continuously throughout the book. He reports that he initially wanted to study psychiatry as the less talented would do: "At first, I planned to take a degree in psychiatry and many *Manqué* talents do" (9). He constantly sarcastically reports stupid psychiatric opinions he faces, for instance

I discovered there was an endless source of robust enjoyment in trifling with psychiatrists: cunningly leading them on; never letting them see that you know all the tricks of the trade; inventing for them elaborate dreams, pure classics in style (which make them, the dream-extortionists, dream and wake up shrieking); teasing them with fake "primal scenes"; and never allowing them the slightest glimpse of one's real sexual predicament (22).

Dreams in Freudian psychoanalysis are "the [royal road] to a knowledge of the unconscious element in our psychic life" (*Interpretation* 441). Humbert's cunning treatment of psychiatrists in this key passage undermines any attempt at a psychoanalytic reading. Readers should be cautious and critical to whatever he says. Humbert cynically admits that he tried to use psychotherapist solutions only to prove their falseness, or as he puts it, "just for the heck of it"



(102). He contemplates the psychiatric analysis of his (ab)use of Lolita to rid himself of the Annabel complex:

The able psychiatrist who studies my case..... is no doubt anxious to have me take Lolita to the seaside and have me find there, at last, the “gratification” of a life time urge, and release from the “subconscious” obsession of an incomplete childhood romance with the initial little Miss Lee (109).

Here, Humbert admits that he tried to take Lolita somewhere similar to the beach scene in his memory of Annabel in order to gratify that urge or take her spell out. By achieving the repressed will to have sex with her, a psychotherapist would think that Humbert will release the repression and free himself of the nymphet spell. Humbert states that it did not work for him (110). He claims that he found in Lolita the compensation for this loss. That the loss was negotiated the moment he possesses “his” Lolita (108).

Nabokov disdains the arrogant presumptions of psychoanalysts to be able to know the truth of the human psyche or its aesthetic, creative productions: “...everybody should know that I detest symbols and allegories (which is due partly to my old feud with Freudian voodooism and partly to my loathing of generalizations devised by literary mythists and sociologists) ...” (209). He considers applying psychoanalysis to “interpret” literature an imposing of an external authority to the “meaning” of the literary work. Hence, the theoretical or epistemological potential of *Lolita*, if any, is to defy this authority, to resist this rising “religion” (Heller 12) of psychoanalysis. Readers would be imprisoned in a stereotypical frame of understanding, unable to participate in, and produce the meaning(s). For Nabokov, this pretentious claim (of psychoanalysis) is a reductive simplification and mistreatment of the genius of literature. It empowers the psychoanalyst over the text and the author. The latter turns into a psychoanalysis and, or patient to be treated. The whole literary work is reduced into a clarifying module or example to psychoanalytical concepts and theories. The work of literature loses its own aesthetic and creative value and turns into signifying and referring to the subject of the analytical process; the very discipline and “science” of psychoanalysis. What Nabokov sees mistaken in a Freudian reading is the possibility of being merely a projection of the critic’s personal ideas or complexes on the text. Instead of this generalization and oversimplification, Nabokov has this formula for his kind of critic:

My advice to a budding literary critic would be as follows. Learn to distinguish banality. Remember that mediocrity thrives on “ideas.” Beware of the modish message. Ask yourself if the symbol you have detected is not your own footprint. Ignore allegories. By all means place the “how” above the “what” but do not let it be confused with the “so what.” Rely on the sudden erection of your small dorsal hairs. Do not drag in Freud at this point. All the rest depends on personal talent” (*Strong Opinions* 66).

Here, the impact of Russian formalism and the New Criticism in American literary culture on Nabokov is evident. In these schools of literary criticism, the aesthetic value of the text is primary. Such approach does not look for meanings and interpretations in the text. Instead of that, it speculates possible ways to enjoy and grasp an aesthetic aura of the literary text. The style, the beauty of the language, and the neat form of the literary work are more important

than the content, the ideas or the (hidden) meaning that a psychoanalytic reading may produce or uncover.

In his novel as well as in his critical opinions, Nabokov employs this shift from the “what” question of content into the question of the “how,” i.e., the form. While this shift is driven among other factors by traces of Russian Formalism and the then dominant school of New Criticism that reject symbolic and/or hidden meanings in literature as mentioned above, it also performs a deconstructive function on a rising school of criticism and ideology. The novel’s discourse that subverts the rising wave of psychoanalysis lines it with postmodernist fictional texts that approach and subvert modernist power-knowledge structures. Because the novel illustrates both modernist (formalist, new-critical) elements such as the glamorous charming language as well as postmodernist subversive representation of American life in the twentieth century, it has become one of the best transitional cultural texts of American culture in the twentieth century.

#### 4. *Lolita* Undermining Psychoanalysis:

Novels are not preoccupied with presenting theories. Hence, *Lolita*’s preemptive substitution for the simplifying psychoanalytical reading is not a counter theory. It is rather an exercise in meta-theory. Nabokov does not articulate a literary critical theory in his novel, he is creating a text that is beyond the reach of the contemporary literary theories of his time. His method is to defy the taken-for-granted claims of Freudian psychoanalytical criticism. As Nabokov suggested above, the right question is not what the novel does, but how it does it. *Lolita* creates a literary aesthetic puzzle that makes psychoanalytic claims and interpretations look naïve and insufficient. The novel’s theoretical potential is an argument against existing “reductive” theoretical views to literature. It is an attempt, through the mazing multiple-layer structure, to refute the structural, simplifying rendering of literature into hidden psychological meanings, and textual keys to reach them.

The difficulty to interpret *Lolita* lies mainly in the complexity of its structure; the manipulation of the villain-narrator; the illusive poetic language and literary style; and the overlaps/interactions between all these layers. The narrative structure of *Lolita* consists of many narrative layers: the metafictional framework of the author (Nabokov) and his context; John Ray’s foreword; and the final layer and major part of the text: Humbert’s journal.

The author and his world create the context of the story. In other words, we cannot encounter the text apart from the author and his cultural and biographical context. Assuming, as Jacques Derrida suggests, that nothing can be outside the text (*Of Grammatology* 158), the reader has to integrate Nabokov’s antipathy to Freudian psychoanalysis into the matrix of the text. However, this does not have to mean the need to pursue a psychoanalytical reading like the one attempted earlier in this paper; but to see how the novel approaches psychoanalysis as a central theme. The second narrative layer, the foreword, supports this integration. Assuming that we take John Ray’s following suggestion of the relevance of psychoanalysis to the story seriously, the significance of this theory, not as a potential analytical approach to the text, but simply as a key theme is established.

As a case history, *Lolita* will become, no doubt, a classic in psychiatric circles. As a work of art, it transcends its expiatory aspects; and still more important to us than scientific significance and literary worth, is the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader; for in this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson; the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac — these are not only vivid characters in a unique story: they warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils. *Lolita* should make all of us — parents, social workers, educators — apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world. (Emphasis in the original 4)

This metafictional frame of narration shows the text as the quintessential example of literary psychoanalysis at work. The fictional John Ray is a psychoanalyst who attributes the story's importance to its signified moral and social "meaning." This foreword, although read sometimes as cynical, rhetorical and mocking, shows the kind of critical reading context the novel is anticipating (and preemptively subverting!), a context where it makes sense to readers because it warns and teaches them. The implied criticism to this approach, one can develop, is that this is an attempt to reduce an aesthetic work of art into something morally shocking. The psychoanalyst John Ray seems to say that it is Humbert's unusual nature, his complexes, his pervert repressed sexuality that give the novel its shocking original effect.

Counter to the novel's foreword, Humbert's memoir, the most intriguing and manipulative layer of the novel's structure, constantly mocks and ridicules psychoanalysis. The novel's genre awareness and anticipation of the critical dialogue is carried out throughout the memoir. This creates an interesting dialectical relationship with the novel's foreword. A potential synthesis of such a dialectical relationship would be the need for something beyond psychoanalysis, which, arguably, is the key rhetorical message in the novel. The integration of readers in developing and generating the meanings of the novel is challenging. Humbert continuously invokes the reader: "I cannot tell my learned reader. . ." (31), "The reader has also marked the. . .", "I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay..." (37), "But every once in a while I have to remind the reader of my appearance much as a professional novelist..." (69). This continuous involving of the readers into the center of the narrative is to engage them in the process of literary creation instead of having a safe distance from which they approach and interpret the text from the outside. As an "aristocrat of imagination" (Shute 6), Nabokov's main concern is that readers *should* imagine. It is imagination that creates the novel. "Please, reader: no matter your exasperation with the tenderhearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect hero of my book, do not skip these essential pages! Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me" (86). Nabokov creates a kind of relationship with the reader that is totally opposed to what psychoanalysis would offer. There is no analyst and analyzed here. There is only the narrative situation that the reader is invited to be part of. The narrative game continues as the novel invites the reader to be more attentive, not to be fooled by the mesmerizing quality of the prose of the unreliable narrator. Readers should remember that these are the pervert maniac's manipulative words. The dialectical overlaps between the narrative layers enhance the reader's engagement and thrill.

Within the flux of his narrative Humbert talks not only to readers, but also to his editor: “(I notice the slip of my pen in the preceding paragraph, but please do not correct it, Clarence)” (20). Such overlaps alienate and distance the readers, reminding them every now and then of the fictiveness of the story.

By creating a text that defies generalizations and simplifications, *Lolita* distances the reader from accepting the obvious interpretation. The alienating/distancing self-consciousness and the continuous mockery of Freudianism prevent easy surrendering to psychoanalytical narrative traps. The text constantly reminds us that it is fictional. All the mocking comments on psychotherapy are examples of this alienating narrative technique (21). Humbert likes to make fun of the “[trifle] psychiatrists” (22). He sees Charlotte Haze as the model for the American culture of “soap operas, psychoanalysis and cheap novelettes” (53). This can be superficially seen as an attempt to be fair with the reader. However, it can also be seen as part of the make-believe game Humbert is playing with the readers. The poetic language and elusive style constantly overwhelm the readers. We may lose sight of who is guiding our judgment and in what direction we are heading. Readers may forget that the story is told from one side, and it is the most unreliable one. Humbert uses this manipulative language in an attempt to reduce the expected harsh judgment of his “jury” (the literal jury as well as the imagined one, i.e. the readers). Taking Humbert to be the author of the story means identifying with the narrative game of the real author, Nabokov.

The key to understand *Lolita* is the novel’s constantly emphasized notion of the unreliability of the narrator who is at the same time the villain. This established narrative “fact” indicates that we cannot trust Humbert as he ironically tells us in the very beginning of Part One: “You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style” (5). Throughout the novel the readers are kept in and out of the memoir. Time and place formulate themselves according to the manipulative memory selections of Humbert. The narration moves from the time of narration in prison, to the time and places of the “real” events as he recalls them. Characters, major and minor, are tinted by his own architecture. Admitting his story at face value is surrendering to his manipulation. On the contrary, refusing to believe what Humbert says is impossible, since his is the only account, we have of the story. The only threshold critics have is to read between Humbert’s lines, looking for gaps and inconsistencies. Knowing his style, even this method turns into subjective, selective and personal. Nevertheless, it is the only possible way to avoid falling into his game.

Critics have speculated the inconsistencies of events at the end of the book. Alexander Dolinin, for instance, studies the acuteness of Nabokov’s use of time and chronological details. Dolinin focuses on the inconsistency of the chronological account of Humbert’s meeting with the pregnant Lolita, the murder of Clare Quilty, Humbert’s imprisonment and death. He suggests that “the last chapters of the novel would be reread as a pure fiction created by the unreliable narrator” (32). He concludes that “the text turns into kind of palimpsest, where one faded layer shows through another, only to be complicated by a third. Deciphering these texts, we learn to recognize true reality (without quotation marks), which, according to Nabokov, is multi-layered and multi-colored” (Dolinin 40).

According to this reading, Humbert's creation and killing of Clare Quilty are layers of fiction within the fiction of the memoir. The latter does not belong to the "reality" Humbert is reporting. Quilty is a mere figment of Humbert's imagination. Dolinin considers the killing of Clare Quilty a "cunning fabrication of the hero" (32). By creating Quilty, Humbert attempts to create an alternative villain to the story, a counter ego. The recurrence of Quilty's name throughout the novel and the ambiguity surrounding his appearances support this reading. Humbert encountered him only twice throughout the novel. Quilty is presented in the dark. The first time they meet, Humbert describes him this way: "Suddenly I was aware that in the darkness next to me there was somebody sitting in a chair on the pillared porch. I could not really see him" (84). Quilty is always somewhere around as a lurking threat to expose Humbert. The two indulge in this strange dialogue:

"Where the devil did you get her?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said: the weather is getting better."

"Seems so."

"Who's the lassie?"

"My daughter."

"You lie — she's not."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said: July was hot. Where's her mother?"

"Dead" (84).

What is strange in this conversation is who reports it. This conversation takes place in the Enchanted Hunters hotel at Humbert's first night with Lolita as lovers. We know that Humbert is reporting from his memoir. He is a first-person narrator, not an omniscient one. He knows only a part of the story where he is involved. In the lines above, Humbert reports Quilty's accusative lines that he could not hear quite well at the conversation time. Had he heard them, it would have been strange that they did not warn him of the man (he claims to be ignorant of his rival to Lolita's heart throughout Part Two). If he had not, as the conversation shows, it would be strange that he is reporting them. This example in addition to many others, shows that the entire second part of the novel is a creation of Humbert's imagination. As suggested above, Quilty is very likely to be a made-up counterpart of Humbert himself. The whole story of Quilty can be seen as a "literary double tale" (Meyer 1) fictionalized by Humbert. Quilty's association with pornography, his interest in Lolita's body alone is used by Humbert as a counter-image to his claimed aesthetic inclinations. By creating a worse pedophilic monster than himself, Humbert is trying to make himself look better. He is trying to convince the readers that he, unlike Quilty, loves Lolita's soul and body as an aesthetic being not as a sexual object merely. Moving all the way to the murdering scene, the second time the two men meet, according to Humbert, we find an even more obscure account. The whole scene is a dream-like, absurd fantasy, albeit very cinematic at the same time. The surreal quarrel between the two goes like this:



We fell to wrestling again. We rolled all over the floor, in each other's arms, like two huge helpless children. He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us ... (199).

The indifference of Quilty's guests who were downstairs when this quarrel happens indicates the dream-like nature of the scene. Humbert imagines the murder as a dream-like revenge, a psychological redemption of his eternal loss: the growth of Lolita out of nymphethood. By killing him, he creates a conclusion to the oedipal drama. Some critics go even further to consider this killing as Nabokov's fictional settlement with Freud and psychoanalysis, a settlement of "the influence anxiety" (Sæverot 88). John M Ingham, for instance, claims that "Quilty personifies Freud and psychoanalysis in the first instance, Nabokov has the Oedipus complex ...[to] murder psychoanalysis (44-45). The possibility that Quilty never existed, except in Humbert's imagination, makes perfect sense as a mockery of Freudian psychoanalysis. The whole Quilty account can be seen in a similar way to the stories Humbert cunningly and ironically reported to his psychiatrists (22), an attempt to manipulate his jury, (and) the readers.

Humbert knows that losing Lolita is inevitable. He cannot stop time and prevent her growth out of the Eden kingdom of nymphethood. The only way out for him is through immortalizing her, capturing the very essence of her nymphethood through the novel, her aesthetic counterpart. By creating and killing Quilty, Humbert gives his story a dramatic end. He gives himself the role of the hero instead of the villain. By reading a poem to Quilty as a declaration of his sentence to murder him, Humbert performs/achieves his own aesthetic, "poetic justice" (199).

Winning the readers' empathy turns Humbert into a hero. Accepting his rhetoric, readers forget the recurrent alienating warnings and identify with him. It also means that Nabokov wins by proving the readers' readiness to be manipulated. It illustrates the ability of the aesthetically well-nit trap to appeal to readers. Readers are not rationally or morally driven as they presume to be. This puzzling game refutes the presumption that psychoanalysis is capable of reaching *the* meaning(s) of the work of art and understanding the human psyche. As Warren Holt puts it, Freud tried to construct models to know/understand the human mind, Nabokov "sought to develop complex, layered, works of prose which would explode any models of the mind that could lay claim to explaining the ineffability of the psychic experience" (51). *Lolita* is a perfect example of how fiction can be employed to compete with and undermine such claims by (literary) theory.

The novel's manipulative, illusive language builds up to the perplexing end. Aware of Humbert's manipulation, the critical reader hardly accepts any simplifying interpretation. Such interpretation may lead to satisfactory conclusions, but none of them are certain. It is meant that we do not know what to believe, since it is the novel's prior concern to show that to claim knowledge is too presumptuous. By creating so waterproof puzzle, Nabokov succeeds to refute the "pseudo-scientific hermeneutics of psychoanalysis" (Holt 50), proving art to be superior to theory of this kind. The novel's continuous attack on psychoanalysis can be understood as a "backlash to protect the aura of language, [Nabokov's] sacrosanct artistic realm, from the

encroachment of interpretation, which he dismisses as trite reductionism” (Holt 50). *Lolita* defies any sense of readymade meaningfulness or interpretation. It uncovers the contradictions and limits of psychoanalysis, and creates possibilities and multiplicities of meanings.

## 5. Conclusion

It is too presumptuous to ascribe a specific interpretation to a genius work of art like Nabokov’s *Lolita* since the novel defies the very notion of interpretation. In *Lolita*, meaning is not something you look for here or there in the (un)conscious (hidden, symbolic) layers of the text, the author’s mind, or the reader’s personal interpretation. It is rather an infinite construction of the dialectical relationships that connects the different layers of the text and its infinite layers of imaginable contexts. Extracting a singular meaning for the novel in these places is beside the point. The novel illustrates that psychoanalysis is a reductive system of interpretation. It does not reveal any hidden “meaning” and should not be entitled to do so. There are always unending layers of meanings multiplying dialectically with every reading of the text.

By showing its limitations and refuting its generalizations *Lolita* rhetorically subverts psychoanalytical literary criticism. It declares it to be reductive, naïve, comic, and pointless if not impossible. While Nabokov’s critique is not scientific in the proper sense, it is an aesthetic, narrative argument for the genius of literature and art against the limitations of theory. It shows that literature is much deeper than a mere articulation of psychological drives and complexes. The novel does not shock readers only for its morally problematic sexuality, but also because it exposes the insufficiency of the critical interpretive apparatuses that their consumerist modern culture provides. Thus, *Lolita*, like original works of art, participates in revising and developing the presuppositions of psychoanalytic criticism, pushing it to explore new frontiers. The theoretical potential of applying *Lolita* to psychoanalysis is that our critical response to the text, what we presume to call the “meaning” of the text is illusive, subjective and eclectic. Interestingly, the novel does not articulate theory in a conventional way. It does not produce a theory or a world philosophy, but challenges an existing one. *Lolita* successfully reverses the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis. Rather than becoming a “case history” to prove psychoanalytic insights as the fictional foreword of the novel rhetorically anticipates, it has become a cultural and historical icon that challenges the claims of psychoanalytic criticism.

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