

“A SHINING EXAMPLE OF MORAL LEPROSY” NARRATES: HOW THE NARRATIVE CHOICES IN *LOLITA* AND ITS FILM VERSIONS LEAD (OR NOT) TO IRONY*

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ABSTRACT: Nabokov’s *Lolita* is narrated in first person by pedophile Humbert, who is self-conscious and knows he is being judged. The Humberts in the two film adaptations also narrate, but Stanley Kubrick’s movie (1962) uses more than a strict voice-over narration, and Adrian Lyne’s version (1997) adopts a solemn tone.

KEYWORDS: irony, narration, voice-over narration.

It is difficult to disagree with Sarah Kozloff in her powerful work about voice-over narration, *Invisible Storytellers* (1988), when she claims that “Stories depend upon who tells them” (62). Indeed, *Lolita* the novel is narrated in first person by the pedophile Humbert Humbert, and that makes all the difference. It would have been another book had it been narrated by Lolita, or by Charlotte, or by Quilty, or by the fake psychiatrist who opens the novel. Even if it focused mainly on Humbert, the story would have been radically diverse if it were told in third person. By controlling the narrative, Humbert offers us his point of view and no one else’s. And, though he may experience a few changes during the story, his tone is vibrant and egocentric throughout. He is surely what Wayne Booth defines as a self-conscious narrator, one who knows he is writing his memoirs (*A Rhetoric of Fiction* 155), and he is doing so only two months after killing Quilty and seeing Lolita for the last time. More than that – Humbert knows he is being judged, since he addresses us, “ladies and gentlemen of the jury,” again and again. The Humberts in the two film adaptations also narrate, even though the 1962 film goes beyond a strict voice-over narration, and although the pervert in the 1997 version adopts a solemn tone. These contrasts will be discussed throughout this paper.

In *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette points out that there is a big difference between mood, that is, between who is the character whose point of view guides the narrative, and voice, that is, who the narrator is. Genette dislikes the terms first-person or third-person narrator because, for him, the choices are between having “the story told by one of its ‘characters’ or [having] it told by a narrator outside of the story” (243-4). The real question, for Genette, lies “whether or not the narrator can use the first person to designate *one of his characters*” (244). The novel *Lolita* constitutes what Genette labels a homodiegetic narrative. In other words, it is told by a narrator who is a character in the story (244-5).

Thus, Humbert’s unreliability as a narrator is a matter of voice, not mood. Humbert is unreliable because there are several instances in which he is dishonest with his readers. An example of his dishonesty appears when, in defending pedophilia, he mentions Dante, who fell in love with Beatrice when she was only nine (19). But he

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“forgets” to inform us that Dante was also nine, and children’s love for other children does not constitute crime. After Humbert delineates this brief history of literary pedophilia to justify his obsession with nymphets, he concludes, “But let us be prim and civilized. Humbert Humbert tried hard to be good” (19). By distancing himself from the narration and writing this passage in third person, Humbert is already being ironic, and he is also distinguishing his role as narrator from his role as character. As a narrator, he is witty and self-assured. As a character, or at least what comes through the dialogues, he is a coward, constantly frightened of being disclosed. The effect is as if he were talking behind people’s backs.

But even though Humbert comes through as unreliable, we have to trust him in some matters. For instance, we have to take his word on that Lolita seduced him, not the other way around. His narration is too lively and full of details for us to discharge it, and besides, it is the only account of the facts we have. We do not know Lolita’s version. True, after their first sexual relation she tells him, ““You revolting creature. I was a daisy-fresh girl, and look what you’ve done to me. I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me. Oh, you dirty, dirty old man”” (141). But Lolita says so smilingly, and he believes – and so do we – that she is kidding, especially because she was not a “daisy-fresh girl,” since she had had some kind of sexual experience with Charlie, a boy at the camp. Of course, we cannot believe our ears when Humbert admonishes Lolita, ““I am not a criminal sexual psychopath taking indecent liberties with a child. The rapist was Charlie Holmes; I am the therapist [. . .]”” (150). Humbert seems psychotic to us, his effect on Lolita is far from a therapeutic one, and Charlie was no rapist. We certainly cannot trust him on this, and we are willing to bet Lolita does not either.

But can we trust Humbert to be as handsome as he believes? Here are just a few examples of his vanity: according to his modest self, he is “an exceptionally handsome male; slow-moving, tall, with soft dark hair and a gloomy but all the more seductive cast of demeanor” (25), and “a handsome, intensely virile grown-up friend” (49); and he has “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” (43). Humbert just cannot get over himself. If anybody missed any of his numerous descriptions, he reminds us again on page 104: “I do not know if in these tragic notes I have sufficiently stressed the peculiar ‘sending’ effect that the writer’s good looks – pseudo-Celtic, attractively simian, boyishly manly – had on women of every age and environment.” His effect, on us at least, is not “sending” at all – it is rather ridiculous that a person can be so much in love with his looks. But there is nothing present in his narration to prove him wrong. Charlotte does find him attractive and Lolita does too, or so he claims, and he infers that Charlotte is jealous of Jean Farlow, their neighbor (88). The two film versions vary in how they transmit this important trait of Humbert’s personality. Stanley Kubrick does not show Humbert praising himself, but by having all the women characters in the film falling for him, the director is, in a way, conveying Humbert’s vanity. Adrian Lyne’s Humbert, on the other hand, is too deadly serious to be vain.

More than any other character in the novel, Lolita and Charlotte do not really exist outside Humbert’s narration. Booth mentions a narrator’s privilege, or his or her access to what other characters think and know, and he affirms that “Complete privilege is what we usually call omniscience” (*Fiction* 160). Humbert has almost no privilege as a narrator. He is by no means omniscient. He ignores Quilty’s mere existence, he wants to know as little as possible about Charlotte, and, towards the end, he admits how unfamiliar he was with Lolita’s ideas: “[. . .] I simply did not know a thing about my darling’s mind [. . .]” (284). He, as a narrator, even disguises most insight about himself

as a character. But he has the privilege – power would be a better word – to mold the other characters, manipulating information about them. Charlotte, for one, has no life at all far from his very unflattering descriptions of her. Everything she says and does is channeled through him. Lolita exists mainly through him, though she does have a past of her own. In Kubrick's version she even tells Humbert in the end, "I don't suppose it ever occurred to you that when you moved into our house my whole world didn't revolve around you." In the novel, Humbert points out that Lolita cries every single night (176). Lolita is strong and independent enough to be able to escape Humbert, leave Quilty, and meet and marry Dick. Hence, almost all of her universe revolves around Humbert's narration, but not all.

It is Quilty, however, that most definitely proves Humbert's lack of privilege as a narrator. Quilty certainly has a life of his own. In the novel we know of his existence through Humbert's clues – Charlotte mentions a famous playwright, and Quilty's brother, a dentist, is also suggested. In Lyne's film these hints are also present, and whenever Quilty appears his face is covered in smoke, making him a foggy character until Humbert finally finds out about him. This is coherent with the film's voice-over narration, which ignores Quilty until the end. In Kubrick's version Quilty is an extremely important character, and to solve the problem of Humbert's ignoring a person who appears so much, the story moves his death to the beginning of the picture, and the rest is told in flashback. Quilty is even shown in several scenes in which Humbert is not present. This is possible because, after all, the movie's narration does not happen all through Humbert.

Although Kubrick's film contains instances of voice-over narration, it is not wholly narrated by Humbert. To explain this, first of all, we need to define what voice-over narration is. For Kozloff, it is "oral statements, conveying any portion of a narrative, spoken by an unseen speaker situated in a space and time other than that simultaneously being presented by the images on the screen" (5). To illustrate, it is better to cite Lyne's version, in which voice-over narration is in full force. The voice-over narration present in the film fulfills all the conditions in Kozloff's definition so that it can be considered voice-over: we hear Humbert speaking (*voice*) and we do not see him narrating (*over*) (2-3). We should notice that voice-over narration is distinct from interior monologue, in which we hear the character's thoughts, though s/he is not narrating anything, and there is no time gap between past and present.

Kozloff also distinguishes between types of voice-over narrators. There are frame narrators, or narrators whose words open and close a film; there are micro-narrators, or narrators whose voice appears in less than 25% of a film (52). The narrators that dominate a film she calls embedded narrators, and this is clearly the case with Lyne's Humbert. But the truth is that it is complicated to place Kubrick's narrator in any of the above definitions. In spite of Kozloff's belief that Kubrick's *Lolita* has as much of an unreliable first-person narrator as *A Clockwork Orange* (117), this is not a consensus among other scholars. Mario Falsetto, in his essay "Narrational Gaps: Absence and Presence in *Lolita*," divides the film into thirty-five narrative units. Of the thirty-five, according to him, only five involve Humbert's voice-over. He also mentions that Quilty is so important in the film that his presence can be detected, either implicitly or overtly, in sixteen of the film's thirty-five narrative units (17). For Greg Jenkins, Kubrick's version still privileges Humbert's point of view, although the story no longer channels through him (38). For Pauline Kael, the film goes beyond adopting a simple narrator, and Peter Seller's routines as Quilty also serve as a kind of narration, commenting on the action (205-6).

I counted seven, not five, moments of voice-over narration in Kubrick's adaptation. They are mostly informative, helping us to locate the characters in space, as the first one shows ("Having recently arrived in America, where so many Europeans have found a haven before, I decided to spend a peaceful summer in the attractive resort town of Ramsdale, New Hampshire"), and time, as the fifth voice-over illustrates ("Six months have passed and Lolita is attending an excellent school where it is my hope that she will be persuaded to read other things than comic books and movie romances"). In only one of them is Humbert writing in his journal. But none of these bits of narration open or close the film, so calling Humbert a frame narrator is wrong. Since he is by no means an embedded narrator, maybe the term that fits him better, if we follow Kozloff's terminology, is that of a micro-narrator. Falsetto points out that "Despite the film's subjective voice-over commentary, Humbert does not control the fictional presentation. He does not really tell the film's story. The controlling point of view is more properly supplied by the film's overall narrating function. The voice-over is just one more element in that overall function" (19). Aside from Humbert's function as a micro-narrator, Kubrick's version also uses narration from the camera, one title saying "Four Years Later," one epilogue telling us of Humbert's death, a sign indicating where we are ("Camp Climax for Girls – Drive Carefully"), and Charlotte's and Lolita's letters to Humbert.

For ways of comparison, I counted seventeen moments of voice-over narration in Lyne's film, but all of them are much longer and cover more images than the voice-over in Kubrick's. Whereas the number of sentences together in all the moments of voice-over in the 1962 film only amount to nineteen, this number rises to seventy-six in Lyne's version, showing how much Humbert controls the narrative here, though this Humbert, unlike the narrator from the novel, lacks irony. The first voice-over in the 1997 film includes a reference to Humbert's past. Right after describing Lolita's name, he goes into "But there might not have been a Lolita at all had I first not met Annabel." Other narrative sentences follow, always accompanying romantic and soft-focus images of Humbert and Annabel, when both were pre-teens. These sentences are very similar to the ones in the book, but there are a few details. Whereas the novel's Humbert ponders about Annabel, "She wanted to be a nurse in some famished Asiatic country; I wanted to be a famous spy" (12), the Humbert in Lyne's movie prefers "She wanted to be a nurse. I wanted to become a spy," with a brief pause between sentences, while the camera depicts young Humbert looking lovingly at this Annabel. By leaving out the words *famished* and *famous*, Lyne drains the irony out of the lines. When Humbert as a boy hears his Annabel died of Typhus four months later, he cries hopelessly. The purpose of this passage in the novel is to show the roots of Humbert's obsession for nymphets, but in Lyne's film it serves to humanize the narrator, as well as to set the tone for Humbert's persona: a man who suffers for love. The main difference, however, is in the delivery. The novel's Humbert is diffusive and cheerful, while Lyne's Humbert, impersonated by Jeremy Irons, is a tormented soul speaking in a very solemn tone. And there is no distinction between his narration and his character, both being eternal sufferers.

Jenkins draws the following conclusion about Kubrick's Humbert, the micro-narrator voiced by James Mason: "If the novel's narrator is garrulous to a fault, this new voice is subdued, terse, and measured" (38). Yes, but it is also capable of calling attention to itself when it calls Humbert "poor Humbert," something that Lyne never does. Lyne's film, however, also uses other forms of narration besides Humbert's voice, such as signs, titles indicating dates, and Charlotte's and Lolita's letters. Not to mention

that, for Kozloff, every film contains a narrating agent, even if the film does not include voice-over at all. This is the image-maker (44).

Because both pictures are narrated in more ways than just by using first-person voice-over, it seems adequate to compare how the films start. In Kubrick's version, the image-maker shows a hand painting the nails of a small foot. It is probably Humbert doing Lolita's toenails, a scene which is repeated when the "couple" is in Beardsley, and from the start it denotes Humbert's subservience to his obsession. The movie then follows to Humbert's long and sarcastic confrontation with Quilty, until the narrator kills the molester. Gene D. Philips states that this prologue at Quilty's mansion "firmly establishes the air of black comedy that permeates the picture" (102). If the very first scenes already help to set the tone of the films, then Lyne's adaptation opens with Humbert driving mindlessly on a deserted, bucolic road, crying and nearly crashing against a truck. He has blood on his hands, and he carries a pistol and a hairpin. For someone unfamiliar with the plot, it is possible to imagine that Humbert has killed Lolita. The voice-over narration soon complements Enio Morricone's romantic soundtrack and the images by saying, in a serious voice, "She was Lo, plain Lo in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always... Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lolita." This is almost identical to the extract from page 9 on the book, but somehow the irony no longer exists. This is so because, in the novel, this opening comes right after the fake psychiatrist's foreword, and because before going into the many varieties of her name, Humbert the narrator teaches the reader to pronounce her nickname: "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" (9). These mere instructions already let us know we are entering a madman's universe.

We have evidence to affirm that Humbert is being ironic throughout his tale. In *A Rhetoric of Irony* Booth claims that the first steps a reader should take when suspecting irony are rejecting the literal meaning, trying a new meaning for the new utterance, and finally deciding on a new meaning (10-12). But Booth is being too reductionistic when he makes irony simply mean something else than what is written. The narrator in *Lolita* is ironic not because he means something else from what he is describing, but because of his tone. He sustains his ironic temperament throughout. For Linda Hutcheon, there are "five generally agreed-upon categories of signals that function structurally" in telling us that irony might be present in a text: changes of register, exaggeration or understatement, contradiction, simplification and repetition (156). In Nabokov's novel, the first and only change of register appears after the foreword. We move from a psychiatrist's erudite language to a narrator writing in first person, telling us how much he loves himself and nymphets. Occasionally, especially towards the end of the novel, Humbert attempts a few other changes of register when he tries to sound repentant for all he has done. But these are very short and unconvincing. We must keep in mind that the whole book praises what Humbert calls *nympholepsy*. Once or twice Humbert mentions guilt, but confesses that desire takes over and erases the shame (285). There are many examples showing that Humbert does not regret what he has done, but I will mention just one: "I would be a knave to say, and the reader a fool to believe, that the shock of losing Lolita cured me of pederosis. My accursed nature could not change, no matter how my love for her did" (257). He remains a pedophile, and his "accursed nature" includes not only his passion for nymphets, but also his passion for irony. After all, would someone who really repents make such a brilliant defense of child abuse (and abusers) when he is writing this only fifty-six days after he has last seen Lolita?

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, 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. We are not sex fiends! We do not rape as good soldiers do. (87-8)

For someone wishing to sound so repentant, Humbert surely seems to be enjoying the ride.

In the above quote from the book *Lolita* we can find other signals that indicate irony. The most flagrant one is in the last sentence, “We do not rape as good soldiers do,” demonstrating contradiction. It is dubious whether good soldiers rape, or whether soldiers can be good at all. The whole passage points to a simplification and generalization of how sex offenders act and how unperilous they really are. Calling what child molesters do “practically harmless” is indeed an understatement that could only be made by a molester. The word *strangers* in the third sentence also calls attention to itself because we know Humbert is no stranger to his prey, as much as we know that most abused children are victims of relatives and friends, not strangers. Repetition occurs in this passage because of the echoes between the adjectives in the second sentence and the phrase “their little hot wet private acts of sexual deviation.”

Then again, we have to take into account what Genette refers to as time of the narrating, which is an element of voice (215). Humbert, who adopts subsequent narration because he uses the past tense (Genette 217), is writing his memoirs from a psychiatric prison, awaiting trial for having murdered Quilty. This fact already foreshadows what is going to happen in the end. For Genette, “The narrator’s present [. . .] is a single moment without progression” (223). Before meeting Lolita in the novel, Humbert’s past is narrated in very broad terms, retelling only a few experiences (in Kubrick’s film, none). When they meet, it is as if time freezes. But overall, Humbert writes from prison, three years after he lost Lolita to Quilty. And still, he goes on narrating as if he is in heaven, long after he has been to hell. He narrates the pleasures in all details, and his remorse in passing. Humbert could have chosen to emphasize grief, as Lyne does, but his regretting moments in the novel are not much more than “[. . .] I held her quite hard and in fact hurt her rather badly for which I hope my heart may rot [. . .]” (205). Genette explains that the narrator can sound ironically superior to the character because they are distinct in age and experience (252). Hence, Humbert the narrator can be more ironic in the novel than his character. By the same token, the narrator can look back at his sordid affair with Lolita and attempt repentance, but the character does not.

Certainly the ironic signal that appears the most in the novel is exaggeration. Humbert’s whole style is exaggerated, as if he were hysterical and too overcome with joy. For instance, right after citing some laws about the age limits for girls, he adds: “This is all very interesting, and I daresay you see me already frothing at the mouth in a fit [. . .]” (19). When Humbert refers to himself as a “pentapod monster” he is not only exaggerating – he is also echoing what Charlotte calls him after she reads his journal. That is, he does not go very far in his condemnation of himself. But there may be yet another reason for Humbert’s exertion of irony. According to Katharina Barbe, people

use irony when they wish to criticize someone or something, but they still do not want the criticism to seem too harsh. Irony, thus, is a face-saving mechanism (97). So Humbert, by being ironic, in a way is also trying to save *his* face. Not taking himself too seriously is his method for not punishing himself for his deeds. For Booth, “All truths are dissolved in an ironic mist” (151). That is to say, Humbert’s topic of choice is such a taboo that he cannot deal with it straightforwardly. He needs to recur to irony.

We can find some of the signals of irony that Hutcheon mentions (156) in both films, but the voice-over narration in none of them is very ironic. Kozloff consents that the image-maker can employ irony in pictures that do not use voice-over by manipulating the editing, lighting, camera angles and soundtrack. She cites the example of the camera focusing on the word *Rosebud* on the sled just as the fire consumes it in *Citizen Kane* (110). However, she explains, when a movie does use voice-over narration, two types of storytelling become visible (109). She claims that when voice-over is included there happens “a doubling of the source of the narrative, an image-maker and an imitation storyteller; thus, should the filmmaker wish, he or she can create an ironic distance between these two sources” (110). Within these two structures, the filmmaker may force some ironic disparities (110). The two film versions of *Lolita* take little advantage of giving the narrator an ironic voice. In both, the attempt is to make the voice-over more reliable and less ironic.

In the novel, Humbert the narrator does point out, like in Lyne’s film, that he regrets the absence of Lolita’s voice from the concord of children playing (308). But the paragraph that comes immediately after demolishes any sentimentality, for it describes Humbert’s choice of a pseudonym for himself: “There are in my notes ‘Otto Otto’ and ‘Mesmer Mesmer’ and ‘Lambert Lambert,’ but for some reason I think my choice expresses the nastiness best” (308). Then he alleges he is against the death penalty. Humbert’s very last words in the novel are directed to Lolita:

One had to choose between C. Q. [Clare Quilty] and H. H., and one wanted H. H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita. (309)

Does this sound like a very regretful man? For Lyne and Irons, he sure does, and they chose to make Humbert ashamed of his tale from the start. Kubrick and Mason evade the issue of guilt, though Humbert is punished for his deeds. Clearly neither of the Humberts that narrate the films is as ironic as the Humbert narrating the novel, who decides to express, after a hundred pages of cynicism, “Oh, let me be mawkish for the nonce! I am so tired of being cynical” (109). And then, of course, he succeeds in being cynical for the next two hundred pages.

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