

In Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert (HH) admits at the very beginning of his memoir that Lolita might never have existed without Annabel, but he spends much of his time trying to convince the reader that Lolita, and therefore his feelings for her, surpassed anything from his past. But if the reader doubts HH and instead believes that Lolita is an attempt at reclaiming his thwarted young love, then the reader will doubt his love for Lolita as well and instead view it as a consequence of his having loved and lost Annabel as a child. His case of defense rests on his love for Lolita as an individual, and so he must convince the reader of her uniqueness from and superiority to Annabel. But a careful reading of the text, one that looks beyond the surface of the argument that HH presents after carefully attempting to bias the reader, reveals that, in fact, Lolita and Annabel have combined to form one figure of desire in HH's mind, thus nullifying one of HH's most appealing justifications for his actions.

One particularly striking example of this is found in a passage toward the beginning of part two, in the early stages of their travels together. HH writes the following:

The able psychiatrist who studies my case—and whom by now Dr. Humbert has plunged, I trust, into a state of leporine fascination—is no doubt anxious to have me take my Lolita to the seaside and have me find there, at last, the “gratification” of a lifetime urge, and release from the “subconscious” obsession of an incomplete childhood romance with the initial little Miss Lee.

Well, comrade, let me tell you that I *did* look for a beach, though I also have to confess that by the time we reached its mirage of gray water, so many delights had already been granted me by my traveling companion that the search for a Kingdom by the Sea, a Sublimated Riviera, or whatnot, far from being the impulse of the subconscious, had become the rational pursuit of a purely theoretical thrill. The angels knew it, and arranged things accordingly. [...] Perhaps, my learned readers may perk up if I tell them that even had we discovered a piece of sympathetic seaside somewhere, it would have come too late, since my real liberation had occurred much earlier: at the moment, in point of fact, when Annabel Haze, alias Dolores Lee, alias Loleeta, had appeared to me, golden and brown, kneeling, looking up, on that shoddy veranda, in a kind of fictitious, dishonest, but eminently satisfactory seaside arrangement (although there was nothing but a second-rate lake in the neighborhood). (167)

The beginning of this passage steps away from HH's recount of his time with Lolita and instead addresses the opinions he believes to be held by his audience, specifically, in this case, from those readers who are looking at his memoir through a psychiatric lens. These readers, he believes, are looking for a simple medical explanation for his behavior, and this is illustrated by his decision to put the words “gratification” and “subconscious” in quotation marks as if they are specific words used by his psychiatrist readers to describe him and the reasons for his passions. But though it is just his assumption that the “able psychiatrist” is trying to explain his desire for Lolita as a way of overcoming his desire for Annabel, he tries to convince his reader that it is a fact. He uses the phrases “I trust” and “no doubt” as a way to show his need to defend himself. He presents his opinion here as a sure thing and expects his reader to look past the opinionated nature of his claims. He goes so far in attempting to gain reader trust and sway reader opinion here that he even refers to himself as “Dr. Humbert,” which, in this context, could mislead reader to think that his views on such medical matters are authoritative.

In the following paragraph, HH attempts to disprove the claims that he feels are being hurled at him by those in the psychiatric field. He begins the paragraph by, once again, appealing

to the reader through a direct address. “Well, comrade,” he begins, including the reader as if they two are intimate acquaintances. Calling the reader a friend is a distraction, a way for HH to push his own agenda in front of the reader as truth.

And this agenda, as mentioned, is the claim that Lolita is something more than an incarnation of Annabel. A surface reading of this passage supports that claim: HH says that his desire to find a beach such as the one he had been on with Annabel was a “purely theoretical thrill.” He claims that Lolita had already freed him from his past, from Annabel. But upon closer inspection, these claims do not hold up. His so-called “rational pursuit” took him from beach to beach all over the country, and only “angels,” only fate, prevented him from finding such a place. This shows that it was only his failure that kept him from recreating the scene with Annabel. And the only alternative to “rational pursuit” that HH offers is a “subconscious” one, but his use of the word in quotation marks in the previous paragraph inflicts the word with scorn, encouraging the reader to dismiss that in favor of his interpretation.

But HH goes on to contradict himself in the last sentences. He claims “liberation” from Annabel, though earlier in the novel he mentions that seeing Lolita made “the twenty-five years [he] had lived since then” (39) vanish, thus fusing the two periods of his life into one. Far from being freed, he is thrust back into that time of his life, and even the two girls have become one, as evidenced by his combining of their names. Dolores Haze and Annabel Leigh become “Annabel Haze” and “Dolores Lee.” If HH does still see two identities, it is impossible for the reader to tell or to discern which is which, but HH’s wording implies that they have become one. He refers to each name as being an “alias,” and concludes by showing “Loleeta” as the alias to each of the aforementioned identities. They are one in his mind, and though this passage shows that quite explicitly, it is not the only point in the book where this is shown. Take, for example, the first time HH sees Lolita. He does not see *a young girl on the porch* or *the daughter of Charlotte*, he sees his “Riviera love” (39).

In addition to fusing the two names, however, HH also makes one other identity-related change by respelling Annabel’s last name as *Lee* instead of the actual *Leigh*. Keeping in mind that HH is a learned and well-read man, the reference here to Edgar Allan Poe’s poem *Annabel Lee* must be viewed as intentional, giving the reader an insight into his thoughts. In the poem, the speaker discusses his childhood love for a girl named Annabel Lee. Like HH’s Annabel Lee, the girl in the poem died, but the speaker refers to their love as unending, claims that nothing can “dissever” (Poe) their souls. HH inserts the *Lee* into the middle of his name for Lolita to create “Loleeta,” and while one might say that this proves that it is, in fact, Lolita toward whom he feels an undying love, the *Lee* comes from Annabel, and his of “Loleeta” is such that, as discussed above, it could, in this instance, refer to either girl or, more likely, to a fusion of the two.

Though HH would like to convince his reader that it is Lolita whom he loves and that Lolita is separate from Annabel, a careful analysis of the information he presents shows that the two have become one in his mind. He carefully misleads readers into trusting him, into letting a bias develop in his favor, so that they believe the things he wants them to believe. But he cannot hide from a closer inspection when he creates such contradictions as combining the two girls’ names and identities and presenting a nation-wide search for a beach as “rational.” Finally, his direct reference to a piece of literature in which the speaker is unable to let go of his childhood “bride” (Poe), shows that, far from moving beyond Annabel in a state of “liberation,” HH has recreated her, fused her with Lolita, the girl who so reminded him of her, and created the new, combined figure of desire, Loleeta.