

# Analysis of Lolita's Life Tragedy from the Perspective of Postmodern Feminism

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**ABSTRACT.** *Lolita depicts an abnormal story that a middle-aged man, Humbert, who desired for his juvenile stepdaughter Lolita. Since its first printing, Lolita has attracted widespread attention from literary critics due to its controversial ethical themes, complex text structures, and obscure language style. This paper attempts to employ Postmodern Feminism Theory to explore the roots of Lolita's life tragedy. So that enlightenment can be given to modern women to prevent similar tragedies, further, it hopes to give some hints to eliminate gender discrimination and women's liberation.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Lolita; Postmodern feminism; Discourse power; Subjectivity; Body consciousness*

## 1. Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov was an outstanding Russian-American novelist, poet, and translator in the 20th century. Nabokov is a prolific contributor to many literary fields—he wrote novels, memoirs, literary criticism, biographies, plays, etc. But he was best known for his novels, among which *Lolita* was the most representative and controversial. *Lolita*, or *the confession of a white widowed*, was refused by several American publishing houses due to its immoral theme and frank sexual contents before it was finally published in France in 1955. This book went through a series setbacks before it was finally recognized by the academic world. It suffered banning in the United Kingdom, Argentina, South Africa, and other countries. But in 1958 when *Lolita* was published in the United States, it immediately became a bestseller and it climbed the first place in the New York Times bestseller list in January 1959.

*Lolita* describes an abnormal story that a middle-aged man, Humbert Humbert fell in love with his 12-year-old stepdaughter Dolores Haze, Lolita (Charles, 1958). The protagonist, Humbert was a European literature professor who immigrated to the United States from France. At his childhood, he had a sweet relationship with a 14-year-old girl, Annabel, but unfortunately, Anna died of typhoid fever. Anna's death led to Humbert's psychological trauma—since then, Humbert developed abnormal love for “sexy underage girls” whom he called Nymph (fairy in Greek mythology). He tried to rescue himself by marrying with Valeria, a mature woman at the age of 25, but this marriage ended in a hurry with Valeria's decision to restart the

relationship with her ex-boyfriend. Then, Humbert decided to move to the United States where he came across Nymph-like Lolita, the daughter of the landlord, Mr. Haze. Humbert was so deeply fascinated by Lolita that he wrote voluminous diaries about her. Having sent Lolita to the Summer Camp, Mrs. Haze who lost her husband years ago expressed her love for Humbert. To stay with Lolita, Humbert quickly got married to Charlotte. Charlotte accidentally found his diary and she was deeply depressed, after which she died of a car accident. Humbert finally had the chance to start the “love journey” with Lolita. But their trip ended when Lolita escaped with the help of Clare Quilty, a playwright whom Lolita admired. Three years later, Humbert finally found that it was Quilty who took Lolita away. He found Quilty and killed him, for which he was imprisoned during which he wrote this book-*Lolita*. Humbert died of thrombus in the prison and 17-year-old Lolita died at the same year at Christmas eve because of dystocia.

As a controversial novel, *Lolita* has been a hot topic in academic field since its publication. This article wants to discuss it from a new perspective by exploring the roots of Lolita’s tragic fate based on postmodern feminism, hoping it can be helpful to readers to have a deeper understanding of the theme rather than restrict in its moral contradictions and give enlightenment to contemporary women to lead a happy life.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholars at home and abroad have conducted numerous researches on *Lolita* from various perspective since its first publication. Appreciation of *Lolita* can be roughly divided into the following two aspects.

The first is the discussions on its ethical theme. It has been a heated topic whether it is pornography since its first printing in 1955. Denis de Rougemont (1964) stated in *The Myths of Love* that: “We are left with two sexual taboos, strongly respected by our mores in rapid transition from the primitive sense of the sacred to scientific hygiene: nymphet-love and incest (Rougemont, 1964: 51-52).” Nabokov brushed aside those proof by writing a postscript in which he claimed he had no intention and “it was just interaction of inspiration and combination” and he conceded that “it sounds like a conjurer explaining one trick by performing another (Nabokov, 2005: 329)”. Chinese scholars also showed their interests in its morality, such as Yang Haocheng’s *Lolita, a Sad Story* (1999), Zeng Lan’s *Moral, Immoral or Amoral-An Interpretation of Lolita* (2002) and Wang Jianping’s *The Abnormal Love beyond Morality-An Exploration of the Tragic Lot of the Hero and Heroine in Lolita* (2006).

The other perspective is that scholars turn their eyes on the text itself including its theme, the dazzling language, writing techniques, aesthetic features and so on. Scholars have a different interpretation of its theme. Trilling (1958) pointed out that “*Lolita* is not about sex, but about love” in his article *The Last Lover: Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita* (Trilling, 1958: 15). Huang Tech (2002) thought *Lolita* is themed at Human nature and Cai Lili (2006) expressed that desire and time are the theme in

her article *Lolita: the Eternal Tragedy of Being Lost in Desire and Time*. About its literary values, Wayne Booth (1961) referred to *Lolita* as an example, claiming that “a vicious center of consciousness had full and unlimited control of the rhetorical resources (Booth, 1961: 182-199).” and Trevor Mcneely (1989) expressed that “*Lolita* was written to prove a simple point in a complex way. The point is that the style can do anything (Mcneely, 1989: 185)”. And Zhang Wei (2004) praised its unique narrative strategies in her book *Lolita's Narrative Mysterious*.

It has been more than a half-century since *Lolita* has been published, and researches on it have never ceased. New findings can always be yielded and it can be explored furthermore. There is still much room for diverse interpretations on it.

### **3. Analysis of *Lolita's* Life Tragedy Based on Postmodern Feminism**

#### **3.1 *The Absence of Discourse Power***

The item “discourse power” (Foucault, 1970) was proposed by French philosopher Paul-Michel Foucault. Foucault once contended that “discourse is power”. Discourse and power are inseparable, and power is achieved through discourse. Based on Foucault's theory, postmodern feminists pointed out that women's voices have always been alienated from the mainstream discourse in the patriarchal society. And what the mainstream discourse represents is men's voices based on male standards and women are always in a state of aphasia. Women have always been subordinate to men and there is inequality between the men and women in society.

Therefore, postmodern feminists promoted that the premise of women's obtaining equality is to strive for discourse power. Just as Mary Joe Frug (1992) suggested that human experience is located “inescapably within language” because power is exercised both through direct coercion and the way in which language shapes and restricts our reality (Frug, 1992: 1045–1075). Postmodern feminists have put forward a new view that “we must create, or we will be destroyed (Li, 2005: 67)”. Under Humbert's absolute control, *Lolita* gradually lost her discourse power, becoming a “silencer” of her life, which is one of the main reasons for her tragedy.

After *Lolita's* mother's accidental death, Humbert immediately took her out of the summer camp and began to control her. Having had sex with *Lolita* in the “Enchanted Hunters” hotel at the first day, he warned her: “If I were you, dear, I would not talk to strangers (Nabokov, 1958: 129)”. Then Humbert told *Lolita* that her mother had passed away. There were no other choices for *Lolita*, the 12 years old underage orphan, so she had to stay with Humbert.

Humbert took every possible opportunity to brainwash *Lolita* that he was her father, he cared about her and she had no one to rely on but for him. Humbert mentioned more than once, “Look here, Lo. ... For all practical purposes, I am your father. I have a feeling of great tenderness for you. In your mother's absence, I am responsible for your welfare (Nabokov, 1958:79).”; “My chère Dolorès! I want to protect you, dear, from all the horrors that happen to little girls in coal sheds and

alley ways, and alas, comme vous le savez trop bien, ma gentille, in the blueberry woods during the bluest of summers (Nabokov, 1958:138)". He also reiterated over and over again that "I am your father under any circumstance", "I am your father, and I am speaking English, and I love you (Nabokov, 1958:138)". Humbert emphasized that he was Lolita's father, the aim of which is to suggest that he is the controller in the relationship and Lolita should obey all his arrangements instead out of love for Lolita. He rationalized his "selfish occupying" of Lolita on the shell of "father's love and care", which worked to Lolita at some extent because Lolita lost her own father when she was young.

Expect honey words, Humbert would lose his temper from time to time. He threatened Lolita, forbidding her from telling others their relationship. "Finally, let us see what happens if you, a minor, accused of having impaired the morals of an adult in a respectable inn... and the maximum penalty is ten years. Then, I have to go to jail... So, I go to jail. Okay. I go to jail. But what happens to you, my orphan?... Don't you think that under the circumstances Dolores Haze had better stick to her old man? (Nabokov, 1958:139)". Humbert also declared without shame, "but in the middle of the night, she came sobbing into mine... You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go (Nabokov, 1958: 132)". Therefore, Humbert smugly, "By rubbing all this in, I succeeded in terrorizing Lo (Nabokov, 1958: 139)". This is an obvious way of discourse suppressing, by which Humbert succeeded gradually depriving Lolita's discourse power.

Lolita fled with Quilty in order to live a normal life, because her emotional needs can't be satisfied with the lack of discourse power. However, Lolita's nightmare was not over yet. Quilty did not respect her will by forcing her to play a role in his pornographic film. She was ruthlessly kicked off away by Quilty just because she refused his absurd requirement. Later, Lolita married with Dick, a lame and half-dead retired soldier. Willing or unwilling, Lolita tried to fulfill "her duty" as a woman to give birth a baby, which directly led to her death.

As can be seen from above, Lolita has always been the "aphasia" with no chance to express her own needs. Cheated and threatened by Humbert, Lolita became obedient to him and lastly descended to his cheap sex worker. Suppressed and abandoned by Quilty, Lolita had no choice but to stroll at the street. Lolita had happy times with Dick because she at some extent had the chance to express her own thoughts. However, her dreams of leading a normal life ended when she gave birth to a baby. There is a settled context of discourse, including the way of thinking and behavior. Lolita has always been the passive state accepting other men's arrangements, undoubtedly, Lolita was deemed to a tragedy.

### ***3.2 The Absence of Subjectivity***

Different from the three main streams of traditional feminism, postmodern feminism no longer screams "female liberation" and no longer regard men and women are a rigid binary. They focused on gender-based differences and the equality between men and women. This kind of equality is not for women to enter the male

field. Men are required to use women's standards to measure women's rights and liberation. Instead, women try to be good women in their own ways. Feminists believe "there is no identity for a woman but that the feminine can be identified where difference and otherness are found (Gambaudo, 2007)."

In the novel, *Lolita* is isolated from the outside world and lives entirely within the space and time defined by Humbert. She has no right to make choices at all. She cannot be a normal person, let alone becoming a good woman.

After Charlotte's death, Humbert immediately picked Lolita out the summer camp in the name of his stepfather and took her chastity in the motel on the first day. In order to lock Lolita with him, Humbert chose to travel around America by car, which was a good way to monitor and isolate Lolita. Cars, motels, and road trips were, to some extent, a mobile prison made by Humbert. "It was then that began our extensive travels all over the States. To any other type of tourist accommodation, I soon grew to prefer the Functional Motel-clean, neat, safe nooks, ideal places for sleep, argument, reconciliation, insatiable illicit love (Nabokov, 1958: 133)".

After they finished their first car trip, Humbert chose to settle down temporarily and sent Lolita to a nearby female school, Beardsley, for the reason that this school was within his surveillance scope: "and through that gap you could see a shimmery section of School Rd., ...the playground ...should afford me by keeping Dolly's day adjacent to mine, I immediately foresaw the pleasure I would have in distinguishing from my study-bedroom, by means of powerful binoculars, the statistically inevitable percentage of nymphets among the other girl children playing around Dolly during recess (Nabokov, 1958: 169)."

He forbid Lolita from neither participating in normal social activities nor associating with other boys. He would madly blame Lolita even Lolita only spoke one word or made a phone call to her classmates. Humbert knew everything about all Lolita's friends - their names, hobbies, and their family relationships, etc. Under Humbert's supervision, Lolita did not have her own privacy, her own social activities let alone her own life. Humbert also frequently searches and confiscates Lolita's private money because money represents growth, independence, and maturity, which frightened Humbert that he would lose his control of Lolita. He hopes that Lolita only belongs to him and he does not want to share Lo with anyone. These actions, without exception, deprived Lolita's right to be a normal person.

When Miss Emperor, Lolita's piano teacher, called Humbert that his daughter did not come to class for twice times, Humbert reprimanded Lolita-like a mad lion, "Dolores, this must stop right away. I am ready to yank you out of Beardsley and lock you up you know where, but this must stop... This must stop or else anything may happen (Nabokov 1958:196)". Humbert felt that he was gradually losing the control of Lolita, so he once again chose to take Lolita to start a second road trip. The car, this relatively isolated mobile prison, was convenient for him to monitor and control Lolita more easily and thoroughly.

From the above analysis, a conclusion can be safely drawn out that Lolita totally lost her subjectivity when she stayed with Humbert. The right of choice has always

on Humbert's hand rather than Lolita- where to go, where to live, whom to interact with or even what kind of clothes to wear. Even Humbert himself admitted in his diary that it was because the basic right as a human was invaded that Lolita quarreled with and left him rather than some other specialties. Lolita's losing of subjectivity is also one of the major causes of her tragic fate.

### ***3.3 The Absence of Right Body Consciousness***

For the entire human race, the body is substantial and tangible. However, most theorists either evade or are ashamed to mention it. While "body" is an important concept in Postmodern Feminism Theory. Postmodern feminists believe that human physical characteristics are the main reference for distinguishing social groups in mainstream culture. In the view of postmodern feminists, women must disintegrate this female body ontology and free women from the long-term "objective" status, thus constantly improving their social status to further achieving equality.

"Therefore, the female body is no longer the target of male sexual desire, no longer the object of patriarchal social domination and discipline, and no longer becomes an object and tool that is arbitrarily manipulated and used in social activities and daily life (Wallin, 2001: 27-43)." Lolita herself did not form a mature body consciousness and Humbert madly desired for her body, which inevitably led Lolita to end in tragedy.

Lolita did not have strong body awareness. The so-called game she played with her male students in the summer camp was actually sexual intercourse. It was she who seduced Humbert when they had sex for the first time. "I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me. My Lo was a sportive lass... She rolled over to my side, and her warm brown hair came against my collarbone (Nabokov, 1958: 79)". Humbert later realized that Lolita was not as innocent as he had imagined. " 'You mean,' she persisted, now kneeling above me, 'you never did it (sex) when you were a kid?' 'Never,' I answered quite truthfully. 'Okay,' said Lolita, 'here is where we start.' " "Her kiss, to my delirious embarrassment...made me, conclude she had been coached at an early age by a little Lesbian(Nabokov, 1958: 82)". And "Sensitive gentlewomen of the jury, I was not even her first lover (Nabokov, 1958: 85)". In the novel, Humbert "forgave" himself after he knew he was not Lolita's first lover, which contributed to her tragic destiny in a roundabout way.

Although Lolita did not develop a mature body consciousness, she did not think it is natural to do such a thing with her stepfather. When Humbert took her to the hotel after he picked her out of the camp, she noticed that Humbert only ordered one room, she shouted to Humbert impertinently " 'You are crazy,' said Lo. 'Why, my darling?' 'Because, my dahrting, when dahrting Mother finds out she'll divorce you and strangle me, that's inset'(Nabokov, 1958: 79)". And after they checked out the hotel, Lolita felt that she was in trouble, saying to Humbert "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(Nabokov, 1958: 82)".

Humbert, as an adult, already had such sense that Lolita just imitated the films or books, and he should know that they should not have made such imitations work between them, but he made full use of such imitations to satisfy his evil desire. Later when they started the road trip, he even had Lolita eaten sleeping pills only because at that circumstance he could contentedly touch and pet her. Humbert was crazy to control Lolita, which was implied at the very beginning of the story “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul(Nabokov, 1958: 2).”

Having escaped from Humbert’s control, Lolita did not lead a better life. She was ruthlessly abandoned by Quilty just because she did not agree to perform in his porn movies. After getting married to Dick, she became a minor mother, which directly led to her death. Obviously, Lolita has no control over her body when she dealt with these three men. But that does not mean that Lolita did not change with time going by. As she gradually grew up, her body consciousness developed little by little-three years later when she and Humbert met again, she refused Humbert’s proposal that he could support her life and her baby if she left Dick and live with him. Because Lolita learned that even the worst family life was better than incest. Lolita’s lacking body consciences when her mother passed away and Humbert’s crazy desire for her body contribute to her tragic fate.

#### **4. Further Analysis and Suggestions to the Contemporary Woman**

The former part has analyzed the causes of Lolita’s tragic life detailedly, but further, we should notice that these causes not only come from Lolita herself but also the outside world she lived.

One of the key factor is the family atmosphere. Lolita’s father died early when she was a kid, so she did not know how to express her love to a “father” properly. She was pleased when she knew that her mother would get married to professor Humbert and called Humbert “dad” happily. She would seek help from Humbert when sands got into her eyes; she would sit on Humbert’s knee observing his work and she would eat his breakfast. But as far as Humbert is concerned, all her behaviors were sexual seducing, which directly leads to her tragedy. And her mother, as a guardian of a juvenile, Mrs. Haze invited a strange man to their house easily, which is an unforgivable mistake that destroyed Lolita.

Another is the law system of the society at that time. On the way they traveled, no matter the hotel-keepers, gas station attendants nor even the police they came across, none of them paid attention to this strange “couple” and no one cared that a juvenile girl who should have been at school but traveling around with an adult single man. And no one helped Lolita when she was abandoned by Quilty and forced to wonder at streets. If there were someone who doubted and called to the police, Lolita would not end up with such a tragedy.

Then what should girls do to avoid such a miserable life? First, parents or other family members are the first friends and teachers of a kid, they should be responsible for their children’s well-being both physically and emotionally. Second, complete law system should be set up to protect the weak. And law awareness

should be broadcasted to the whole society. Last but not least, as an individual, all of us should learn how to protect ourselves, especially for women, should cultivate our body consciousness consciously, have the control of our own subjectivity and strive for the discourse power.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, because of the absence of discourse, subjectivity, and right body consciousness, *Lolita* eventually ends up with a life tragedy. However, this tragedy happens not only because *Lolita* herself did not know how to protect herself, but also because her mother neglected her growth and people in the society did not have the awareness of juvenile protection. In the 21st century, although women's social status has been continuously improved, there still exists inequality and restrictions on women. Theoretical researches are for practical services, more studies on classic literary works such as *Lolita*, and more researches on postmodern feminism and other theories are conducive to eliminating gender discrimination and providing more beneficial and richer guidance for women's liberation and enlightening women in modern times to lead a happier life.

Limitations are inevitable because this paper only analyzes two main characters, and further comprehensive study can be carried out by thoroughly examining all other characters such as *Lolita*'s mother Mrs. Haze, Clare Quilty and her school-mates and other elements can also be included such as the educational background at America in the 1950s, the commercial applications of television advertisements, the prevailing moral ethics then, etc. for all these factors led to *Lolita*'s life tragedy directly or indirectly.

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