

**Humbert Humbert: Ape in the Cage**  
**The novel of the nymphet Lolita and her cruel, suffering seducer\***  
by Dieter E. Zimmer

It would be hard to think of a more incriminating plot: a forty-year-old monster who calls himself Humbert Humbert loves little girls—whom he calls nymphets—in the budding stage of their development; loves them shamefully, brutally, hopelessly, so much that he marries one nymphet's mother to be close to her twelve-year-old daughter. Just at the right time, chance clears the mother away by means of a car accident, and in a years-long drive through the United States, from hotel to motel, from cinema to milk bar, Humbert Humbert enjoys a debauched, painful "parody of incest" with his Lolita. Another monster of even more perverse disposition at last robs him of her, and when "H. H." faces trial, it is not for the seduction of a minor or for rape, but for murdering the rival he finds after years of searching. And yet another irony: after concluding his memoir and shortly before the trial, he dies of coronary thrombosis. These are the contents of the novel by

**Vladimir Nabokov: *Lolita*, translated by Helen Hessel, Maria Carlsson, Gregor von Rezzori, H. M. Ledig-Rowohlt; Rowohlt Verlag, Hamburg; 447 pp., 20 DM.**

A book with a history. The Russian Vladimir Nabokov (both names should be stressed on the second syllable), driven by the times to America, where he has already written novels in English and for many years has been professor of European literature at prestigious Cornell University, began composing it in 1949. When the manuscript was completed five years later, no publisher wanted to take it: in a country where some of D. H. Lawrence's books can still not be printed and the Post Office a few years ago seized Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*, the risk of a trial was too great.

A publisher's reader, Nabokov reports, suggested that Humbert Humbert be turned into a homosexual farmer who seduces a twelve-year-old "Lolitus" in a barn. After all, homosexuality is literary, reports Nabokov, from **gloomy** experience, but not love for nymphs, happy marriages between Whites and Blacks or an atheist's serene final days.

---

\* This was my first article for *Die Zeit*, whose editorial team I had just joined. When I read it again after a span of 45 years, I have mixed feelings. I don't really think it's very good. At the time I only knew this one book by Nabokov. And I wrote entirely on the defensive: to protect the novel against the accusations of pornography in the air. In Germany, in fact, the matter was actually in the balance - the major pornography judgments that introduced and secured the "exception for art" had not yet been issued, and it could be expected that the book would be banned and its publisher charged. Friedrich Sieburg's review in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* for October 3, 1959 ("Nothing there, people!"), which appeared while I was still working on my manuscript, undoubtedly encouraged me, a newcomer, to work for the cause of a scandal-ridden book. In any case, the article had consequences for me. It came to Nabokov's attention and must have appealed to him, because a few weeks later he had his friend Ledig-Rowohlt inquire whether I could not translate something of his. Ledig pressed a copy of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* into my hands before the year was out—and I became a part-time "Nabokovian" and "Nabokovologist."

At last *Lolita* was published, rather out of place, by the Paris publishing house Olympia Press, which has a reputation for being not too narrow-minded in erotic matters. However, since British family men bought the dangerous book in France, it was also banned in France on appeal from the British Foreign Office.

Years of underground fame followed, like that long enjoyed by Joyce's *Ulysses* or many a D. H. Lawrence novel.

Meanwhile, serious critics (including Graham Greene) campaigned for *Lolita*, and an American publisher (Putnam) therefore dared to tackle the book.

What a surprise: *Lolita* was neither a flop nor brought before the court! On the contrary, *Lolita* was a bestseller for months. And only a few critics disagreed with the exuberant eulogies that the book has now received everywhere. Even the otherwise very reserved weekly *TIME* said: Certainly greater than Wilde - and perhaps greater than Dostoevsky?

*Lolita* has been read in many ways. **Some** think it pure pornography, others find it an extremely informative book; **some** read it as an allegory of decadent Europe debauching young America, others as an allegory of young America seducing venerable Europe; **still others** find no allegory at all.

**Some** consider *Lolita* the best travel book about the United States, others see it as anti-American hate literature; for **some** *Lolita* is the most depressing, for others the funniest book of **their** lives; **some** read it as a romance novel, **others** as a mockery of the romance novel. The judgments are always passionate.

Yet all these contradictions only confirm the book's quality, for a great novel is wiser than all interpreters, perhaps wiser even than its author. It unites the paradoxes of life. In *Lolita* there is tragedy and farce, and each reciprocally intensifies the other: the first becomes crueller, the second more profound. Brutality and tenderness permeate each other in Humbert Humbert's passion. Against the foil of unusual cravings, the banality of life looks all the more banal.

A romance novel? Certainly, *Lolita* fits into the scheme "two against the world." But if you read *Lolita* as a romance novel, you have to understand the term "love" in a very broad sense. None of the romantic "I want to lead you by the hand through life." Humbert's love is cruel, monstrous, destructive (not least of himself)—and at the same time hopeless. Because *Lolita*, spoiled by the cinema, advertising and reading "comics," arguably gets entangled with him at the start of the affair in such a way that he can claim with a pretence of right that she seduced him, not he her; but that was just a casual exercise on her part, matching what she imagined as practice for a modern *teenager* who dreams of becoming a big movie star. No involvement, only disgust and repugnance for her seducer, whose passion she will never return. Love in this "romance novel" is a one-sided and unhealthy thing.

An ageing, repentant Humbert writes his confession. Only years of deprivation, an irrevocably last reunion with a Lolita transformed, pale, bespectacled, pregnant, and at seventeen the faded wife of a knucklehead mining mechanic in a poor coal town, and the terrible vengeance on his rival have taught him that the designs of his passion are not working out. It is no longer sex that controls him exclusively. He loves more tenderly than ever a Lolita who has lost her allure. But his victim is destroyed forever.

The shiftiness of this odyssey through the witch cauldron of sexomania creates a Walpurgis night mood. Humbert the demon, who took a delicate virgin into his control (her delicacy has suffered somewhat in a modern environment) and guarded her jealously and suspiciously in his hideous, secretive grotto; Humbert the demon, from whom a more powerful incubus finally gets the prey away; uncanny pursuit of one demon by another, struggle—and in this scene the infernal mixture of the laughable and the horrifying that dominates the entire novel rises to its pitch.

Seen in this way, *Lolita* is a realistic study of the demonic, and the demons do not haunt somewhere outside in night-time ruins, they circle in the blood of people. What did Malraux say recently? Psychoanalysis has rediscovered demons, and as a part of man; the task of a new culture will be to find again the gods in people too.

Humbert's report is indeed a Baudelairean flower of evil: in the wake of perverse desires that have the power of hypnotic fascination, only the aesthetic decoration of humiliating passion remains. (This applies to Humbert, but not to his author Nabokov, who, unlike Baudelaire, is by all accounts a happy family man.)

For all the violence, Humbert is certainly no rough-hewn criminal. "You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine . . ."—to be doomed to a helpless, tormenting, degrading passion like his.

Nabokov tells a strange anecdote that supposedly gave the impetus to this novel. It is curiously reminiscent of Flaubert's statement that he wanted to reproduce colors in his novels, a bleak gray, for example. In 1939 or 1940, Nabokov reports, he got hold of a newspaper clipping about an ape that a tireless trainer had taught to draw. What did the ape draw? The bars of his cage. The anecdote matches the novel's prevailing mood in a vague but powerful way: Humbert, the ape-like lover, trapped in the cage of his passions, uses all his art to represent this cage, these passions.

*Lolita* is a novel in the great tradition of Flaubert, Proust, Joyce. Exactly a hundred years earlier, in 1856, *Madame Bovary* caused a similar scandal. The state charged Flaubert: his novel was immoral, realism "without bounds" was not permitted. A skilful defense lawyer countered that a realistic description of the crimes deterred readers and incentivized virtue.

Flaubert was acquitted. But actually, neither prosecution nor defense had represented his intentions. He wanted neither morality nor immorality, he wanted a work of art, and it was self-evident that a work of art presupposes "boundless" truthfulness. Likewise, Nabokov wants neither to incentivize "nympholepsy" (the reader not so schooled in sex lore learns

from Humbert many Greek names for his ailments) nor to deter from it. He wants nothing more and nothing less than to write a great novel.

He is hostile to all "literature of ideas." He has made derogatory comments about Dostoyevsky, Balzac, Thomas Mann and Gorky. **As a writer who aims for excellence, he has for sure to clear away systematically various other great literary options.** How he can do so as a literary professor who is constantly forced to relativize and historicize is another question. All the same he is very popular with his students, even though he, characteristically, torments them with questions like this: What color was the handbag that Anna Karenina was carrying when she committed suicide?

*Lolita* too has "no moral in tow." The novel's effect should have shown him, even so, that there can be dangerous relationships between art and life. Men who read *Lolita* with pleasure are said to have become "nymphet-conscious." And women have flocked to offer their daughters as film *Lolitas*. . . . What must Nabokov have thought when one day a little girl stood at his door with a tennis racket with the letters L-O-L-I-T-A?

But we shouldn't exaggerate this aspect. Moral offenses will continue to occur in the future, and there will be no shortage of voices to blame *Lolita* or some other novel. But that would mean swapping cause and effect.

Is it the artist's task to prevent from the outset all misunderstandings a work may be subjected to? Then the only recourse would be to fall silent. But who would have wished away Goethe's *Werther* because a few dunderheads misunderstood him and put bullets through their heads?

And is *Lolita* pornography? Pornography is the copulation of banal, aphrodisiac clichés. Readers will search in vain for clichés; and those who read the novel as an aphrodisiac will soon enough put it down "disappointed." A cold novel, because it does not appeal to the reader in a comforting or instructive manner, but wants nothing but to give "aesthetic bliss"? " . . . as if the form does not match the heat" (Benn). Nabokov's art makes a tormented story a delight.

In fact, Humbert's story is so consistent, he himself has such a sense of "sin," that it is difficult to misunderstand his agony and ultimate repentance. Everything is behind him, when he remembers a day from the past: *Lolita* gone, he sick with longing; down in the valley a small town, its streets empty, but the voices of children and women ringing out together in a painful unity up to his lofty slope: "and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not *Lolita's* absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord." He understands: he has stolen from his beloved her youth. *Lolita*, his pet name for "Dolores," is no longer only the cause of pain, she is also the one *in* pain ...

Here—and this explains the book's success better than short-term shock value—a **contemporary** attitude to life has found **literary expression, without recourse to implausible plotting and entirely without reflections on social circumstances.** The novel unfolds with the rigor and relentlessness of Greek tragedy; there is neither the dimension of grace nor any commitment to class struggle, nor any authority to which Humbert could

appeal against his fate. Through all the metamorphoses of his personality, he sits trapped in the infernal cage of his self, trying to maintain the facade of a respectable litterateur while hell gapes behind it. His cynicism is a weapon whose inadequacy he quickly sees. Without ever committing himself to a recognized institutional ethical norm, he learns that there are barriers no one can cross.

And how it is all told! *Lolita*, says Nabokov, is the result of his love affair with the English language. What a gorgeous child! In his handling of American English, Nabokov is a linguistic phenomenon. The network of anticipations, hints, witty allusions and Joycean wordplay becomes apparent to the reader in all its subtlety and cunning only on a second reading. With a myriad of sharp observations and precision touches, Nabokov lifts America to verbal life. Anyone who knows the American *Lolita* must of course regret not hearing her bobby-soxer slang speaking in her home tongue. But Rowohlt's team of translators have done their best: a better-fitting translation is hard to imagine.

Anyone who demands of a work of art that it must represent moral behavior or at least condemn immoral behavior in the name of a recognized ethical norm can never be satisfied with *Lolita*. There is no compromise. A division into "brilliantly told" and "repulsive content" will not work: the novel demands an **absolute** Yes or an **absolute** No. After all, art is not an acrobatic trick in empty space, not just a daring experiment in form. Great art always opens up a new sphere of life, lets the world be experienced in a completely new way, or it is not great art.

Over the past hundred and fifty years the Novel has repeatedly broken taboos. Who today still takes offense that adultery, fraud, betrayal, rape, theft, murder have found their way into literature? As early as 1798, Friedrich Schlegel predicted: "If one draws on psychology to write novels, it is very inconsistent and petty to want to shy away from the slowest and most detailed dissection of unnatural lust, hideous torture, outrageous infamy, disgusting sensual and spiritual impotence." As long as man is a frail being, he will have to allow himself to appear in art in all his heights and depths.

*Translated by Brian Boyd with help from Alexandra Berlina, Sabine Baumann and especially Ludger Tolksdorf.*