Like Father, Like Daughter: The Correlation between Humbert and Lolita

Author Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Lolita* and its film adaptations, one directed by Stanley Kubrick and the other by Adrian Lyne, tell the story of 38 year old Humbert Humbert and the unconventional relationship he has with his much-younger stepdaughter, Dolores Haze. Throughout Nabokov’s story, Lolita exhibits a kind of sexual behavior that suggests she is mature beyond her years. Though her form of sexual expression is mature, she carries herself like a typical teenage girl. Whereas, Nabokov writes that Humbert, “Talks like a book” (114). He also uses mannerisms that are commonly exhibited by poised adults. At one point in the novel, Lolita even asks Humbert, “Of my what? Speak English” (Nabokov 149). Their differences in vocabulary and body language lead many *Lolita* audiences to question what these two individuals have in common that would allow for a relationship to ensue; but, in all actuality, there are quite a lot of underlying similarities. Through their tragic losses of family members, a mutually-shared inability to act their age, and their obsessions with Clare Quilty, Humbert’s and Lolita’s relation to one another goes far beyond that of just a “stepfather/stepdaughter” kind.

The first similarity between Humbert and Lolita is the lack of a healthy parental figure during each of their childhoods. In his article, “The Meaning and Morality of Lolita,” Colin McGinn notes, “Humbert’s mother dies when he is three in a freak accident…Harold Haze, Charlotte’s first husband, quickly makes a widow of her” (35). McGinn also remarks that, in furthering Lolita’s pain, Charlotte dies after being hit by a car as she “rushes blindly” towards the mailbox to send letters which will reveal Humbert to be a pedophile (36). The deaths of their
parents could, arguably, be the reason for, both, Humbert’s and Lolita’s skewed ideas of what constitutes a relationship. They have no previous stable relationships to compare their own to, which allows them to maintain sound moral consciences as their interactions with one another progress.

Another, and perhaps more obvious, similarity between Lolita and Humbert is their attraction to unsuited romantic partners. The characteristics they seek in a partner are considered, by most, to be immoral and inappropriate. In the beginning of the novel, Humbert explains to the reader his interest in provocative and prepubescent girls, and labels them as “nympha.” In her article, “Scenes of Instruction: Representations of the American Girl in European Twentieth-Century Literature,” Sofia Ahlberg writes, “In Lolita, the ‘nymph’ replaces the cult of the femme fatale” (71). Humbert describes his attraction to Lolita by saying, “What drives me insane is the twofold nature of this nymphet…this mixture in my Lolita of tender, dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity” (Lolita). In contrast to Humbert’s desire for young girls, Lolita prefers to interact with older men than boys her age. At one point in the novel, Lolita is allowed to invite boys from her school to a party Humbert throws her. When the party ends, and her friends leave, Lolita “swore it was the most revolting bunch of boys she had ever seen” (Nabokov 199). Lolita finds boys her age to be boring; and, instead, finds a thrill in being with older men. Both these characters’ interests are completely inappropriate and unconventional for their respective ages.

Another similarity between Humbert and Lolita is their shared ability to deceive; and that they use this ability against each other. In his article, “The Self-Deceptive and the Other-Deceptive Narrating Character: The Case of Lolita,” Marcus Amit states, “The hypothesis that Humbert…deceives is based to a great extent on his behavior as a character” (195). McGinn further supports this observation by stating, “Humbert’s infatuation with Lolita is inseparable from his love of language” (35). And in that lies the problem. There are several instances where
Humbert uses his “smooth talking” ability on Lolita in order to make his situation more beneficial. For example, upon her return from camp, Humbert tells Lolita that her mother is sick and in the hospital, when in fact her mother has died. Humbert explains that after Lolita inquired about her mother’s health, “I said the doctors did not quite know yet what the trouble was” (Nabokov 111). His ability to think on his feet and to use words that will put Lolita’s mind at ease, allows Humbert to lie and be believable at the same time. However, while it may seem like Humbert is the only misbehaving one in their relationship, when it comes to deception, Lolita is just as guilty. In her article, “The Tantalization of Lolita,” Brenda Megerle states:

Fearing that Dolores is clandestinely meeting another man and lying to him about it, Humbert spirits her away…The threat Humbert perceives is, of course, Dolores’s giving herself to another man and so taking Lolita away from him…The reader is also teased by the shadow of Dolores’s infidelity. We too hear that she missed her piano lessons, that she gives an unconvincing explanation of where she was while truant, and we see her wild dash out to a telephone booth on a stormy night after Humbert makes his suspicions known to her. (344)

This “other man” Megerle discusses is obviously Clare Quilty, whom Lolita eventually leaves Humbert for.

The final, and perhaps, most vehemently expressed similarity found in both characters is their separate obsessions with Clare Quilty. There is a mutual, initial attraction between Lolita and Quilty that Humbert is thoroughly oblivious to. Upon seeing Lolita for the first time, Quilty asks Humbert, “Where the devil did you get her” (*Lolita*)? However, Humbert soon reawakens from the trance Lolita places on him and becomes suspicious that there is another man in her life. Megerle explains this reawakening by saying, “Humbert is teased by jealousy” (343). However, no matter how suspicious and jealous Humbert gets, he still cannot figure out whom, exactly,
Lolita leaves him for. It is not until the very end of the story when Humbert visits Lolita three years after she runs away from him that he finds out his nemesis’s name. Lolita tells Humbert in an exasperated tone, “It was Clare Quilty” (*Lolita*). After Quilty’s identity is revealed to Humbert, he is so consumed with rage that, upon leaving Lolita’s house, rushes over to Pavor Manor (Quilty’s home) and unremorsefully kills him.

In contrast to Humbert’s jealous and vengeful obsession with Quilty, Lolita’s obsession with him resembles more of a teenage infatuation: She abandons her school responsibilities in order to sneak off with Quilty for short rendezvous, and also persuades Humbert to take her on a road trip so that her path would be able to cross with Quilty’s. Much later, Lolita explains to Humbert that, eventually, she ran away with Quilty, who proceeds to abandon her when she refuses to participate in his crude sexual activities. However, even after all of this, when Humbert begs Lolita to run away with him, she still chooses Quilty over Humbert. Lolita takes a stab at his heart by saying, “I would sooner go back to Cue” (Nabokov 279). Even though Quilty treated her with complete disrespect, her childhood infatuation still prevails over her stepfather’s idolization of her.

Vladimir Nabokov’s story, *Lolita*, is by no means a simplistic one. Though many audiences are quick to label Humbert as a pedophile and as an antagonist, they sometimes cannot look past their outrage to see the reflection of Humbert in Lolita. She, like Humbert, is a tortured soul blindly seeking consolation. They are both wounded by the losses they suffered in their youth; and, therefore, seek healing in all the wrong places. For Humbert, he believes Lolita can be, both, a lover and a stepdaughter. While Lolita yearns for Humbert to not be a lover, but the father she lost long ago. However, obviously the two cannot coincide and, inevitably, their relationship tragically ends. Perhaps these two characters were just too much alike for their own good.


