Contextualizing the Medieval Tradition of Courtly Love in Nabokov's *Lolita*

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Malek J. Zuraikat
Yarmouk University, Jordan

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Abstract: Using modern terms of morality to evaluate the sexual attitude of Humbert towards Lolita, which constitutes the central subject matter of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (2005), most readers view the novel as erotica, a piece of literature that glamorizes amoral sexuality and rebels against humans' morality. This view feasibly condemns the sexual relationship between a forty-year-old male and a twelve-year-old girl-child nymphet; nevertheless, it overlooks the insistence of the novel's fictitious narrator and editor that the narrative is ethical and heavily loaded with pro morality messages. To resolve this perspectival dichotomy, this article revisits Humbert's love of Lolita contending that the relationship between Humbert and Lolita constitutes a form of courtly love, not rape or pedophilia. Relying on the medieval definition of courtly love, the article argues that Humbert is better viewed as a medieval lover whose love-based sexuality towards Lolita is ennobling and transcendent. By so doing, the article discharges Humbert's love of Lolita from any modern connotations of animalistic carnality, thus maintaining the narrative's obsessive involvement in the medieval culture.

Keywords: courtly love, erotica, *Lolita*, Nabokov, pedophilia

1. Introduction

Most Nabokov critics believe that "*Lolita* is an extremely complicated text containing numerous cases of wordplay, literary allusions, parodies and cross references (that all produce) an elaborate, ludic text that invites them (readers) to decipher it" (Luxemburg 2004:119). They confirm that "Nabokov's work is well known for its complexity and its convoluted plots, something which is particularly true of *Lolita*, which is rich in patterns, repetitions and mises en abyme. The latter take the form of intertextual relations, references to painting, popular culture or cinema" (Orozco 2017:1). For example, Alfred Appel, Michael Maar, and Carl Proffer view *Lolita* as a collage of different literary texts that were known to Nabokov in one way or another. They contend that the novel's plot, tone, characters' names, and themes are indebted to works like Heinrich Mann's *Professor Unrat* and its movie *The Blue Angel* (Appel 1970:332), Heinz von Lichberg's *Lolita* (Maar 2005:1-20), and Herbert George Wells's *Apropos of Dolores* (Proffer 1968:35). While this formalistic consensus seems helpful in identifying the sources inspiring Nabokov's *Lolita*, it attributes the narrative's complexity to its compositional intertextuality and restricts its significance to literary, rather than cultural, backgrounds. This causes viewing *Lolita* as "a story of travesty, and deranged criminality; the confession of a pedophile, the perception of a madman, and the

wretched soul of an artist" (Butler 2014: 59), which overlooks Humbert's insistence to associate his love of Lolita with "King Akhenaten's and Queen Nefertiti's pre-nubile Nile daughters" (Nabokov 1955:19), his confirmation that "Lepcha old men of eighty copulate with girls of eight" (p.19), and his recurrent reference to Dante's love of Beatrice and Petrarch's love of Laureen (p.19). Humbert's obsession with the medieval culture is not be ignored or marginalized. It establishes the genealogy of his sexual relationship with Lolita, which constitutes the narrative's structural center. Accordingly, this article examines Humbert's relationship with Lolita emphasizing the role of the many classic and medieval cultural referents in contextualizing the narrative. I argue that the several cultural referents highlighted by Humbert represent cases of medieval courtly love; therefore, such a tradition should never be ignored when reading *Lolita*.

For King Akhenaten's relationship with Queen Nefertiti, Valerie Vande Panne (2013) writes, "Under Akhenaten's reign, Nefertiti and her daughters took the place of those goddesses, and 'were perhaps all used to satisfy the need for a female divine presence associated with sexual rejuvenation.' Nefertiti wore the crown of Hathor, elevating her status 'as a sex goddess, able to manifest the regenerative power of sexual rejuvenation'" (para.10). Concerning the sexuality of Lepcha old men and young girls, Anne Bolin and Patricia Whelehan (1999) explain, "Because the Lepcha believe sexual intercourse is important for stimulating maturation, eleven and twelve-year-old girls engage in full coitus. According to Ford and Beach: 'Older men occasionally copulate with girls as young as eight years of age. Instead of being regarded as a criminal offense, such behavior is considered amusing by the Lepcha'" (p.202). For Dante's relationship with Beatrice, Stephanie Chatfield (2015) contends that "Beatrice in Dante Alighieri's works is much more than a muse. She represents an idealized love, the kind of love that transcends physicality. Alighieri included her in both *La Vita Nuova* and *Divine Comedy*. She is his salvation; the 'gentilissima' (most kind) and 'benedetta' (blessed). It is Beatrice who serves as his guide in Heaven in *Divine Comedy*" (para.2). For Petrarch's love of Laureen, Mary Anne Myers (2013) confirms that the poet's love of Laura represents "the moment when the inviting hand of the lover meets the accepting hand of the beloved. With this salute, the beloved transforms from object to subject and the lover from subject to object, a reciprocal recognition that creates the intersubjectivity that is the ideal of love" (p.99). In short, the many referents mentioned by Humbert concerning male-female sexuality point to courtly love, which is viewed in this article as the most appropriate context of Humbert's sexuality towards Lolita.

Instead of adopting any modern "aspects relating to ethical judgments about 'right' or 'wrong' behavior" (Rodgers and Sweeney 2016:1) to read *Lolita*, this article takes Humbert's allusions to medieval courtly love as the cultural framework of Humbert and Lolita's affair. This may resolve the overt controversy between the novelist's promotion of the narrative as a moral affair and some critics' condemnation of the narrative's apparently amoral overtones. The article emphasizes the difference between the medieval tradition of courtly love and the modern perception of love and sexuality, arguing that the sexual relationship

between lovers in the medieval tradition of courtly love is not a phase of amoral eroticism, but part of "the traditional codes of conduct associated with knighthood": It is an ennobling experience through which humans get access to "the absolute, which [subtends] a profound wish for identity with the other, for self-identity" (Bloch 1988:33). Humbert's reference to the medieval tradition of courtly love is taken here as a serious obsession, not "a discursive space in which love is in a position to usurp religion's hold over the subject's desire" (Gaunt 2001:497). The article evaluates Humbert's sexuality towards Lolita without ignoring his obsession with the medieval culture and its tradition of courtly love, which may help *Lolita* readers better understand the morality of the narrative under discussion and decode its referential complexity.

2. Review of related literature

A considerable number of *Lolita* critics tackles the cultural referents of love relationships mentioned by Humbert. For instance, Martin Green (1966) reads *Lolita* in terms of Nabokov's belief that "Beauty and pleasure, fused into 'aesthetic bliss,' is art's only end and justification" emphasizing that "art is superior to religion just because it *is* a melancholy and local palliative [and that] *Lolita* is written as a melancholy and futile reparation to its heroine" (p.363). This means that *Lolita*, viewed as a piece of art, is superior to religion; therefore, its morality should not be examined or judged using any theological principles as they do not allow "taking human experience seriously enough" (ibid). This genius view denies the applicability of the modern religion-based concept of morality to *Lolita* emphasizing that displaying the love affair of Lolita and Humbert in form of art refines that experience and shields it against "every suspicion of the ordinary, of the obvious, of the morally or intellectually banal" (Green 1966:353). The moral perspectives humans use to address their daily experiences and activities do not apply, as Green implies, to Humbert's identity because of the character's artistic superiority to human's religious standard, considering that "Nabokov's art is clear enough, both in the exquisite rendering of his effects and in the trickiness of those effects" (1966:352). This suggests that while Humbert's relationship with Lolita resembles some relations in the real world, it is unfeasible to ignore that Humbert exits in the world of art and should be judged accordingly. Green (1966) explains,

> Humbert loves Lolita in the way Dante loved Beatrice, the way Petrarch loved Laura, the way Poe loved Virginia, the way Don José loved Carmen. The references to these great, tragic, idealistic love affairs run through the novel and challenge us to deny that Humbert's feelings belong to the same family and deserve the same respect. (p.370)

As readers admire Dante's love of Beatrice, Petrarch's love of Laura, and Poe's love of Virginia, then there is no justification to deplore Humbert's sexuality towards Lolita. Green concludes that Humbert's references to ancient iconic love relationships establish the most appropriate context of his love of minor Lolita, which implies that *Lolita* is better read as "a tribute to more than its heroine […] It is an intricately woven garland of mingled pain and delight, offered in tribute to

America […] in the way that America as a whole is related to Europe" (1966:372). Green's perspective addresses the artistic models borrowed by Nabokov from different European masterpieces to emphasize how Humbert's sexuality is not restricted to the modern perception of real-world love experiences and to (re-)define America in terms of the European culture. Nevertheless, it does not encompass all the classical referents cited in *Lolita*, such as King Akhenaten and the men of Lepcha, which limits the scope of Green's comprehensive reading and overlooks the centrality of the universal tradition of courtly love to the cultural background of Humbert's love affair.

Partially similar to Green, Jeffery Alan Triggs (1988) acknowledges the role of Humbert's references of iconic love relations in creating Lolita's ideal image from where the protagonist "had stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor" (Nabokov 1955:62). Triggs contends that "Lolita is not yet a deliverer but a Platonic composite of Annabel, Poe's 'Vee,' Dante's 'Bea,' Petrarch's 'Laureen,' and Merimee's Carmen. In other words, she is an artistic creation of his imagination, subject to his narrative will" (1988:6). Humbert is interested in idealizing Lolita rather than love; hence, he points to several ancient and medieval female referents to create his own ideal female, a girl whose identity incorporates different times and cultures. She belongs nowhere outside the lover's imagination where "Lolita (is) safe…fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita" (Nabokov 1955:62). Humbert's fanciful world is the only home of imaginative Lolita whose existence and beauty are made definable only through her creator's solipsism and dominance. By so doing, Humbert's allusions to iconic females reflect the novelist's interest in providing himself with the logistics and "freedom" to form an experimental lab-like space to tackle "the moral ambiguity of the twentieth century" (Triggs 1988:7). This view highlights the role of the several references of female models in establishing Lolita's fanciful image and protecting it against any moral misreading. Nonetheless, it is biased towards the novelist's ultimate control over the narrative at the cost of the narrative's self-contained intertextual referentiality. Thus, this article deciphers how Nabokov's creation of Lolita is indebted to the medieval tradition of courtly love more than anything else.

From a different perspective, Leland de la Durantaye (2007) contends that "*Lolita* is a moral book in the simple sense that from its first page to its last it explicitly treats moral questions" (p.190). Citing several examples of love relationships, Durantaye concludes, neither justifies nor contextualizes Humbert's love of Lolita in the modern age, but reflects Nabokov's "question of cultural relativism" (p.85). By comparing his love of Lolita to Petrarch, Dante, and Poe's love of little girls, Humbert is trying to create an atmosphere of uncertainty, considering that Nabokov "owes his fame to the discomfort he has caused his readers" (Durantaye 2007:84) and that "[t]o express in art a morality other than prescriptive, and to signal the existence of a Creator, required a density and complexity which became Nabokov's passion—and which required of his readers a patience and a persistence which to many of them seemed too great" (Durantaye 2016:179). Thus, Humbert's interest in ancient models of love relationships is part of the novelist's "interest in deception and dissimulation" (Durantaye 2007:103).

The protagonist parallels his love of Lolita with Petrarch's love of Laura, for instance, to stress the relationship "between the proud creation of great art and the heedless pursuit of love. By subtly describing, and avidly pursuing, Lolita as one would the inspiration lying at the outset of a work of art, Humbert tempts the reader to look at her as precisely that—and it is this most slippery step that allows for sensitive and schooled readers to be seduced, subdued, or entrapped" (Durantaye 2007:87). This genius reading suggests that the moral and stylistic uniqueness of *Lolita* stem from the novelist's ability of manipulating his sources to create an atmosphere of discomfort and puzzle his readers. Nevertheless, this article tries to help readers overcome such puzzling atmosphere by centering the theme of courtly love into the narrative's cultural sphere.

Interestingly, Anna Głąb (2021) views "cultural relativism" as the fulcrum of Humbert's references of iconic love relationships asserting "that there was no prohibition against sexual intercourse with young girls in ancient Egypt, Israel or India. He recalls Dante's loss of his mental composure for a nine-year-old Beatrice, and Petrarca's (*sic*) for a twelve-year old Laura" (p.32). This association implies that Humbert points out the artistic creation of Lolita—"fanciful Lolita"—to warn readers not to condemn his manipulation of that creature: "In Lolita Humbert does not see a person vested with dignity but an only object that can be used for his own goals" (p.33). Głąb is right, but it is unnecessary to restrict the value of the novel's cultural references to the fictitiousness of its world. As long as courtly love represents a phase of the classic or medieval culture, I argue, then it should get liberated from any sense of *Lolita*'s implausibility. Probably, Nabokov is historicizing Humbert's sexuality in terms of the courtly love tradition, a claim that partially concurs with Maud Chia-Rousseau's argument that *Lolita*'s referencing of ancient love examples reflects the novel's involvement in the art of imitation. She writes, "Humbert would not have chosen Lolita for a lover had he not been imitating romantic heroes […] Lolita is the falsely shining object, and […] Humbert, the hero, narrator, and writer of the novel he supposedly composes in prison, is the subject, blinded by the mediator" (2016:137). It is true that Lolita is an object while Humbert is a subject (Lacan 1998:69) and that citing certain love cases in the narrative may allude to a form of imitation, but it seems unfeasible to confuse the novelist with the protagonist or undermine the narrative's cultural value in favor of stressing the art-for-art-sake principle remarked in Nabokov's art by some critics.

Graham Vickers (2008), for example, suggests that *Lolita* represents "the constant interplay between the 'high culture' tastes of Humbert and the 'low culture' enthusiasms of Lolita. Simply put, Humbert loves art for art's sake while Lolita hungrily embraces the infinite promises of commerce. Humbert's cultural world always takes into account Lolita's more limited one, but hers can never accommodate his" (p.145). This Lacanian-Marxist perspective suggests that "the courtly code is conceived as a convention in need of a more concrete or pragmatic experience of the relation between love and power" (Franzén 2022:28) and that Humbert's insistence to view his sensual attitude towards Lolita as platonic love is part of his plan "to glamorize his wretched appetites by implying that his perversion is one to which artists and visionaries are particularly susceptible" (Vickers

2008:23). Nevertheless, it ignores *Lolita*'s obsession with the medieval courtly love tradition in favor of highlighting the artistic value of engaging with that tradition through "dreams and supernatural trans-generational coincidences" (Vickers 2008:29). In the same vein, Márta Pellérdi (2010) views Humbert's referencing to several examples of intellects' love stories as an attempt to offer "a literary historical overview of the essence of aestheticism as it is described in the poetry and writings of English and French representatives of the movement, as well as in the writings of its symbolist predecessors" (p.6). Nabokov is not concerned with Humbert's sensuality for its own uniqueness; rather, he is careful "to incorporate the Anglo-American tradition into his writings, making sure that Shakespeare's 'blood runs through' his American novels" (Pellérdi 2010:6). This view overlooks Nabokov's genuine creation viewing him as an individual searching for a source of authoritativeness.

From a completely different perspective, Frederick Whiting (1998) reviews a considerable body of the literary criticism published on *Lolita* highlighting the several strategies and approaches adopted by critics to address Humbert's sexuality in terms of moral "monstrosity". Citing several references that view Humbert and sometimes his creator, Nabokov, in terms of "moral apotheosis", "moral degenerates", "the pedophile", and "the pornographer", Whiting concludes that the subject matter of *Lolita* "tapped into a nexus of postwar social and political anxieties about normal, heterosexual, male subjectivity and its place within the organization of public and private life" (p.834). This suggests that the moral value of Humbert's sexual attitude towards Lolita stems from the narrative's socio-political exemplarity rather than the genealogy of such attitude. Whiting writes, "the novel and the criticism it generated prompt a rethinking of the larger issues of the postwar desiring citizen and the organization of his (for it was he) public and private life" (p.856). This reading points at the novel's potential involvement in the novelist's sociopolitical background, which contributes to broadening the narrative's value beyond Humbert's sexuality, an approach that falls beyond the scope of this paper.

Michael Rodgers (2011) takes "Nietzsche's philosophy as the best theoretical stratagem to understand the novel's relationship with morality" (p.105). In this sense, the many referents of ideal love relationships mentioned by Humbert constitute the moral message of *Lolita*, thus reflecting Nietzsche's principle that "'morality (*Sittlichkeit*) is nothing other (therefore *no more*!) than obedience to customs (*Sitten*), of whatever kind they may be; customs, however, are the *traditional* way of behaving and evaluating'" (Rodgers 2011:111). As readers admire Petrarch's love of Laura and Dante's love of Beatrice due to such relationships' involvement in inspiring poets' talent and creativity, for example, it is then natural to admire Humbert's love of Lolita due to its role in inspiring the protagonist's errand to go "beyond the challenging of readerly expectations to undermine the reader's faith in the author's respect for the reader" (Rodgers 2011:112). Undeniably, the novel's "Forward" confirms the novelist's respect for his reader, but it is necessary to consider that the narrative has its own world that does not necessarily comply with the standards and expectations of novelist's real

world. I agree with Brian Boyd and Donald Johnson that none of *Lolita*'s worlds can be ignored (2002:20), but it is unfeasible to confuse these worlds.

Overall, the several readings cited above insightfully tackle *Lolita* from different perspectives, but their treatment of Humbert's recurrent references to individuals like Don Quixote, Dante, Petrarch, Poe, etc. is still disturbing. It is never made clear whether the novel "is an incitement to vice or an encouragement to virtue, whether it is art for nothing but its own sake, or a work of rare moral force" (Durantaye 2007:4). Therefore, this study suggests that Humbert's insistence to parallel his love of Lolita with Petrarch's love of Laureen and Dante's love of Beatrice, for example, reflects his *quixotic* obsession with the ideals of medieval courtly love, which "not only condones fornication, adultery, sacrilege, but represents them as necessary sources of what it calls virtue. It is a grave error to condemn love in maidens, in the married, even in the clergy" (Denomy 1947: 22). Relying on this definition, I argue that Humbert's relationship with Lolita is not to be viewed in the social, cultural, or religious terms of modern legality or morality; rather, it is better evaluated in terms of courtly lovers' spontaneous pleasure and elation from which stems the religion-like-status of Humbert's love of Lolita. This reading may contribute to resolving the narrative's lasting complexity, as it contextualizes Humbert's resounding statement that Lolita is the source of his own salvation (Nabokov 300). Explaining how Humbert's relationship with Lolita constitutes a phase of "religion" (Lewis 1936:2; Turner 1954:29; Robertson 1969:14), should mitigate the controversy of whether one may view Humbert's relationship with Lolita as nympholepsy, pedophilia, or something else.

3. Discussion

Due to its explicit focus on the sexual relationship between an adult male and a twelve-year-old girl, *Lolita* is usually read as a pornographic text that promotes pedophilia (Centerwall 1990:468-84), rape (Rampton 1987:99-117), or consensual child-adult sexuality (Fowler 1974:174). While there seems to be no problem whatsoever with reading the novel as erotica, one wonders why John Ray, the novel's alleged editor, declares that *Lolita* is significant due to "the ethical impact (it) should have on the serious readers; for in this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson; the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac […] warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils" (Nabokov 5-6). Is Ray too ignorant or even "foolish", as observed by Appel (1970: ixviii), for not noticing the novel's overt eroticism? Considering that Ray is the only source of the quasi-historical background of the whole novel and that his "Foreword" to the novel demonstrates that he knows more than any other person about the reality of Humbert's story and personality, it is unfeasible to read the novel viewing Ray as a fool.

In fact, Ray is the only individual who depicts Humbert's captivity and reports how the story has got composed and published. He is the one who guides readers' perception of the novel through his concise "Forward", which flows thus,

> No doubt, he (Humbert) is horrible, he is abject, he is a shining example of moral leprosy, a mixture of ferocity and jocularity that

> betrays supreme misery perhaps, but is not conducive to attractiveness. He is ponderously capricious… He is abnormal. He is not a gentleman. But how magically his singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author! (Nabokov 5)

Ray speaks "with great sensitivity and reasonableness" (McDonald 1973:353), warning readers that the protagonist, though attractive and jocular, is not to be admired and that the novelist, though detestable, is to be acknowledged for his wit and professionalism. As "the fictitious editor of Humbert's manuscript" (Sweeney 2010:2), Ray associates the narrative's perplexing atmosphere with readers' expertise: "The naive reader of *Lolita* sees only the bare bones of the pedophilic plot and deplores what he reads; the sophisticated reader puts aside all moral concerns and simply enjoys the beauty of the work; but the astute reader (as he is occasionally addressed in the book) sees that this is a work in which morality and art are intermingled in original and challenging ways" (McGinn 2003:39). Neither the novel's morality nor aesthetics represents its self-contained world; rather, it is the complex interrelatedness of both components that constitutes the narrative's autonomous world and its true value. Obviously, "Ray is not intent on pondering where evil arises from but would rather document it instead" (Rodgers 2011:113). He is not concerned with condemning Humbert's sexuality or advocating modern morality but rather historicizing both. The ostensible contradiction between Ray's insistence that *Lolita* is a didactic story and the undeniable pornographic atmosphere of the story implies that reconciling moralism and eroticism is the astute way to understand the narrative's coherence, meaningfulness, completeness, and uniqueness, an objective that may not be reached unless the concept of courtly love, which contextualizes "morality within immorality" (Boase 1977:25), is integrated into the argument.

Analyzing the works of Ovid, Virgil, Horace, Cicero, Boethius, Capellanus, Chaucer, and the troubadours, Alexander Denomy (1947) states that "[t]he novelty of Courtly Love lies in three basic elements: first, in the ennobling force of human love; second, in the elevation of the beloved to a place of superiority above the lover; third, in the conception of love as ever unsatiated, ever increasing desire" (p.20). This implies that courtly love is the only context where humans' *noble* nature and instinctual desire cooperate to elevate lovers and set them second to God. Moreover, it may get developed into a religion or phase of belief where the beloved is viewed as the ultimate power or source of power that dominates the lover's life and destiny entirely, as found in Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" (1.1095-102) and *Don Quixote* (Jehenson 1990:18-20). Besides, courtly love can get transformed into a form of power that motivates individuals to become influential members in the society, as evident in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* where love ignites Troilus's prowess and patriotic obligations motivating him to fight against the Greeks and gain many victories (5.1800-06). Through courtly love, lovers' animalistic "natural" desire "arises beyond carnality to something higher and better" (Silverstein 1969:82). Courtly love is the ennobling journey from desire to virtue, a journey that

unifies lovers' minds, hearts, and destinies through a spiritual, rather than corporal, nexus.

The implication of this concept substantiates Humbert's recurrent calls on God to help him get Lolita. At his first chance discovery of the girl, Humbert recalls his *coastal* adventure with Annabel—"the juvenile breasts I had fondled one immortal day" (Nabokov 39). He then declares: "Let her come soon. I prayed, addressing a loan God, and while mamma is in the kitchen, let a repetition on the davenport scene be staged, please, I adore her so horribly" (p.62). While the first excerpt may indicate that Humbert views Lolita through merely an erotic gaze, the second implies that the lover takes his love of that girl as something that does not deviate from God's doctrine or morality. A similar repertoire is used when Humbert asks for God's interval against Haze's plan to keep Lolita away from the house by sending her to Beardsley College after the summer camp. Although he believes that "wringing one's hands was a fictional gesture," Humbert begs: "look, Lord, at these chains!" (p.83) In response to this call, as Humbert believes, God dismisses Haze from the entire world, a decree for which Humbert admires and thanks God, "not water, not water" (p.88). Overall, Humbert views his love of Lolita as an act that God not only allows but also decrees and supports.

Humbert's approach of calling on God's help to get united with Lolita is identical to the troubadours' belief that courtly love is always ennobling and worthy of God's interval, as "[t]he morality or immorality of Courtly Love," for the troubadours, rests on this: "Does love further a man in virtue or does it effect a regress; does it ennoble him or degrade him?" (Denomy 1947:28) For Humbert, loving Lolita inspires him with hope, power to live, and sense of belonging; therefore, it is ennobling and superior to the social and religious rules of this world. Similar to the troubadours as well as people of love and "nympholepsy" (Nabokov 129), Humbert does not trust religion or modern social norms to judge his love affair. It is the medieval culture, in opposition to its modern equivalent, that provides an ideal context for loving "nymphs" since the modern "era" lacks the carefree sexuality of the "Romans" and "dignified Orientals". Humbert confirms: "the old link between the adult world and the child world has been completely severed nowadays by new customs and new laws" (p.124). Instead of questioning his love affair or contemplating its morality, the speaker questions the authoritativeness of nowadays customs and laws emphasizing the dignified status of the medieval era in comparison to the declining present era. Accordingly, it is feasible to democratize Humbert's love affair with Lolita from the principles of modern laws and associate it with Avicenna's dignified, oriental culture, which admires such affairs for having "a positive and contributory role in the ascent of the soul to divine love and union with the divine" (qtd. in Denomy 1947:30). Thus, Humbert's constant invocation of God does not stem from his sort of complex personality or lack of serious religious devotion, but from his belief in the ennobling power of courtly love.

In opposition to Megerle's viewpoint that "the novel offers no authorial judgment of Humbert's actions" (qtd. in Rampton 1987:110), many of Humbert's statements advise readers to view his sexual relationship with Lolita as a

manifestation of courtly love. For example, Humbert says: "I want them (learned readers) to examine…and see for themselves how careful, how chaste, the whole wine-sweet event is if viewed with what my lawyer has called, in a private talk we have had, 'impartial sympathy'" (p.57). While Humbert's statement is set in a very specific situation, where he is left with Lolita in the house on a Sunday morning, it applies to his entire love story. The speaker is encouraging his "learned readers" to view his love of Lolita as a purely natural passion that should not be debased for any social or religious considerations. Humbert declares: "I have but followed nature. I am nature's faithful hound" (p.135). The speaker promotes his love of Lolita as a normal response to the call of nature, which emphasizes the chastity of that affair and introduces it as neither pedophilia nor rape, but a unique source of goodness and virtue, a viewpoint that matches John Wilcox's conclusion that courtly love should be taken as "unaffected by social, religious, or economic pressure" (1930:322).

To reinforce this perspective, Humbert associates his love of Lolita with the love relationships of Dante and his Beatrice (Nabokov 19), Petrarch and his Laureen (p.19), and Poe and his Vee (Nabokov 107). The main resemblance among these three representative examples of love is that the woman is chaste as she exists in poetry. Although it is possible that Beatrice, Laureen, and Vee are real girls whose poet lovers have practiced sex with them in the name of courtly love, the fact that such love relationships are made known to the world through poetry makes them part of art, which is always moral, aesthetical, and superior. As Nabokov says, art is never sinful, and "(poets) never kill" (p.88). This is potentially why Humbert's sentence against Quilty is written in verse (pp.299-300). It seems that Humbert is trying to introduce himself as a poet, similar to Dante, Petrarch, and Poe, who should never get blamed for his love affairs as it inspires his art of eternal joy and perpetual virtue. He works to gain the status that gives him the full right and ability to love a twelve-year-old girl with impunity—without being condemned for committing any moral or social offense. In short, Humbert does not view his love of Lolita as a censurable sin, but a unique source of eternal joy and salvation—the source of "Eden" where no evil may exist (pp.21, 22, 57-8, 145, 166, 178, 300).

Humbert reinforces this heavenly context by insisting that Lolita is a girl-child nymphet (Nabokov 16), a mixture of two categories, namely children and nymphs. As the concept of childhood always connotes chastity, innocence, and purity while the concept of nymph gets always associated with semi-divinity, it is natural that Lolita's semi-divine status discharges her relationship with Humbert from any connotations of profanity, debauchery, or evil represented by rape and pedophilia. Even when the concept "nymph" is read as "an abbreviation of nymphomaniac. A woman afflicted with insane sexual desires" (*Oxford English Dictionary* (online), s.v. 'nymph'), Lolita's relationship with Humbert remains free of rape and pedophilia connotations. Besides its angelic and childlike implications, the word "nymph" implies hypersexuality, which is called by Humbert the nymph's "fantastic power" (Nabokov 17). This means that while Lolita is an innocent and immature girl-child nymphet, she is also a demonic nymph whose charm is irresistible, especially by persons who can detect that charm (Nabokov 17, 20).

Lolita does not plan to arouse Humbert's sexuality; she is probably "denied the power of the female gaze […] she does not get to self-reflect, self-correct, or pursue existential quests" (Rakhimova-Sommers 2021: 52). Nonetheless, it is her hypersexual appearance that inspires the whole affair, which resembles the role of women in the medieval tradition of courtly love. In Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, for instance, Emily does not plot to attract men's attention; rather, it is her charm that makes her vulnerable to their masculine gaze. Min Young Kim (2011) explains, "[i]n addition to her existence under Theseus's power, she is exposed, unwillingly and unwittingly, to the lustful gaze of the two Theban warriors: Palamon and Arcite" (p.80). In Hansen's words, "Emily is apparently oblivious to the gaze of Palamon and Arcite that seals her fate" (1992: 221); hence, it is unfair to blame her for the catastrophic consequences of men's love of her.

Again, Lolita's nymphet personality involves two opposing traits: childlike innocence and demonic mature hypersexuality. Such a paradox implies the innocence of Lolita's attitude towards Humbert and his attitude towards her. Thus, while Lolita's childlike innocence releases her from any intentionality to violate any moral codes, her demonic hypersexuality discharges Humbert from the responsibility of violating any social conventions or religious laws. This is why Humbert sometimes portrays Lolita as a mature girl whose young age does not undermine her sexual desire or ability to seduce any expert including himself. In fact, Humbert, as the narrator declares, "was perfectly capable of intercourse with Eve, but it was Lilith he longed for" (p.20). Considering that "Lilith" is a noun that refers to "a female demon" (*Merriam-Webster* (online), s.v. 'Lilith'), Humbert's sexual relationship with Lolita, at the worst-case scenario, is mutual and balanced, not rape or pedophilia. His relationship with Lolita is "nymphet love" that incorporates two main portions, one of "hell" and another of "heaven" (Nabokov 135). Hell refers to the consequential misery of love while heaven refers to lovers' transcendental joy (Boase 1977:77-9). Noticing Lolita for the first time, Humbert *complains*: "without the least warning, a blue sea-wave swelled under my heart and, from a mat in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses" (p.39). Not only has the event happened without Humbert's interval, but it is an indirect consequence of Lolita's charm. Regardless of whether she is aware of the sexual message her "half-naked" body reveals, Lolita's first appearance in the novel ignites Humbert's erotic personality and causes him to be the person he is throughout the narrative. He complies with the innate nature of humans, as described by Emmanuel Levinas: "To enjoy without utility, in pure loss, gratuitously, without referring to anything else, in pure expenditure—this is the human" (qtd. Harasym 1998:42).

Humbert's "nymphet love" of Lolita synonymizes the medieval concept of courtly love in the sense that it ennobles lovers and transcends their affair beyond carnality. This perspective contextualizes Humbert's statement, towards the end of the narrative: "I thought I would use these notes in toto at my trial, to save not my head, of course, but my soul" (p.308). The man views his relationship with Lolita as a source of spiritual repose and salvation. His main concern is spiritual, rather than carnal, solace, which suggests that his apparently instinctual desire towards

the girl at the beginning of the story is transformed or developed into a purely divine way of thinking and contemplation. In the closing statement of the story, Humbert says: "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" (p.309). Against the temporal and sensual nature of sexuality, Humbert's words focus on the immortality and divinity of different forms of art, as if he wants his love of Lolita to be viewed as an uncontaminated form of that art. It is true that he does not speak about such a correlation directly, but to perceive art as the transcendent *residence* shared by him and Lolita suggests that he views his love, devotion, and belonging to Lolita as a source of both elation and virtue, considering that neo-platonic courtly love always functions as a mixture of both "beauty and goodness" (Boase 1977:81).

What supports this reading is the *romance* structure of the story and the *knightly* status of the lover. Thomas Frosch (1987) recommends that "we best describe *Lolita* generically not as a love story or a novel of pathos but as a romance. The plot itself is composed of a series of typical romance structures, each one a version of the quest or hunt and each one an embodiment of a specific type of suspense or anxiety" (p.83). In fact, the romance journey of Humbert and Lolita can be divided into three main stages: possessing the beloved, losing her for a rival lover, and taking revenge against that rival or his agent. The first stage starts with Humbert's notice of Lolita in the *garden* of Mrs. Haze's castle-like house and closes with his leaving the hospital where Lolita is taken by Quilty (Nabokov 39-246). The beginning of the second stage is marked by Humbert's apologies to Dr. Blues, and its end is marked by Lolita's letter to Humbert where she explains her life conditions and asks for money (pp.247-66). Finally, the revenge stage starts with Humbert's departure of his Rita to kill Lolita's new lover, and it closes with Humbert killing Quility and declaring that Quilty does not deserve "pity" at all (pp.267-309). Analogically, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, a medieval romance, consists of three main parts: Troilus's quest for possessing Criseyde (1.260-4.175), losing Criseyde for Diomede (4.176-5.1701), and revenging the loss of Criseyde by killing Diomede (5.1702-806). In short, the three stages of Humbert's love of Lolita resemble the three typical stages that constitute the structure of most, if not all, medieval love romances; therefore, it is very feasible to label the relationship between Humbert and Lolita as courtly love.

Similar to Troilus, Humbert is portrayed throughout the narrative as a *knight* or *noble* person whose lifelong concern is to gain his beloved and defend his love against all obstacles. Although he neither rides a horse nor carries a sword, he constructs his knightly image by introducing himself as the son of a high bourgeois father who "owned a luxurious hotel on the Rivera" (Nabokov 9). While this little biographical information seems marginal, it is noteworthy that the "Bourgeois sociology in the 20th century is tied, philosophically and methodologically, to the pragmatism of the (medieval) ruling class" (Slaughter 1975: para.1). The 20th-century bourgeois of Humbert is the modern equivalent of both medieval high bourgeois and aristocracy, a social category whose members can prove their "well-born" and gentility" by practicing courtly love (Green 1980:114). Andreas

Capellanus (1990) reports that courtly love, *fin amours*, refers to the romantic actions and feelings of the society's highest classes— the medieval gentility (bk.1). Accordingly, Humbert's reference to his bourgeois origin is not innocent, but a way to emphasize that he is qualified to practice courtly love and enjoy its ennobling nature.

To deepen this sense, Humbert, in the different stages of his romantic journey, confirms that loving Lolita does not ensue "impinging on a child's chastity" or "impairing the morals of a minor" (Nabokov 55, 62). While this confirmation may reflect the man's anxiety towards the modern legislations of children and minor sexuality, it reflects the tradition of courtly love in terms of prioritizing the prosperity of the beloved's chastity and ethics. Notably, Humbert works hard not to let anyone notice his love of Lolita (Nabokov 138, 150-51, 195-98), which can be attributed to either the man's jealousy or concern about the beloved's reputation. Either way, Humbert is a courtly lover, considering that the medieval convention of courtly love demands that lovers should keep their love affair as a secret and that the lover is to be jealous for the sake of maintaining his beloved (Capellanus 1990: bk.2). Interestingly, Humbert's love of Lolita is marked by jealousy and its conventional consequences, such as insomnia and wrath (Nabokov 254, 293). It is out of jealousy that the first thing that has come into Humbert's mind after losing Lolita is revenge: "To myself I whispered that I still had my gun, and was still a free man–free to trace the fugitive, free to destroy my brother" (p.247). Later, he declares: "I immersed myself in the poetry of others. But not for a second did I forget the load of revenge" (p.257). Such statements reflect the core of courtly lovers' attitude towards their beloveds, an attitude marked by persistence to maintain their ladies against any restrictions, obstacles, or considerations.

After his long trip to Lolita's new address to kill her and her husband Dick, Humbert declares: "I could not kill *her*, of course, as some have thought. You see, I loved her. It was love at first sight, at last sight, at ever and ever sight" (p.270). Not only has Humbert decided not to kill Lolita and save her husband for her own sake, but behaved as an ideal courtly lover by giving her "an envelope with four hundred dollars in cash and a check for three thousand six hundred more" (p.278). Humbert's generosity in this specific occasion is a direct imitation of the medieval courtly lover's readiness to serve the beloved and do whatever she decrees without hesitation. In fact, medieval courtly love is built on "*minnedienst*", which is "the right of a woman to demand unquestioning service in whatever triviality she fancies, and the need for a knight to gain honor for his lady by embarking on a series of otherwise pointless adventures" (Jackson 1987:65). Thus, while the given four thousand dollars might be viewed merely within a materialistic context, they function as a romantic message to Lolita assuring her that Humbert is still her ideal lover.

It is true that Humbert's message goes in vain, as Lolita refuses to return with him (Nabokov 280); nevertheless, the man does not give up her love. After leaving Lolita with Dick, Humbert continues his revenge journey: "I had to go, and find him, and destroy him" (p.280). This declaration may represent an intention to commit a crime, a state of personal revenge; simultaneously, it functions as a

courtly service for the beloved –*minnedienst*. Humbert says, yet implicitly, that he wants to kill Quilty for kidnapping Lolita from her "dignified protector" (pp.297, 300). Thus, killing Quilty is not a *narcissistic* crime, but a revolution against Quilty's dishonesty and exploitation of the innocent "school of virtue" Lolita represents (Boase 1977:28). In his poetic rationale of sentencing Quilty to die, Humbert says:

> Because you took advantage of my inner
> essential innocence
> because you cheated me– …
> Because you cheated me of my redemption …
> you have to die. (Nabokov 300)

This excerpt associates Humbert with innocence and purity; simultaneously, it emphasizes Quilty's treachery and cheating. Thus, Humbert is not mad because Quilty has deprived him from his main source of sensual pleasure, but because Quilty distorts Humbert's salvation incarnated in Lolita. In short, *Lolita* is "about the immortality and ideal rather than merely sexual nature of Humbert's obsession with Lolita" (Chin-Yi 2015: 293).

4. Conclusion

Attributing *Lolita*'s moral complexity to Nabokov's use of certain linguistic and structural techniques in favor of promoting a certain "symbolist tradition" of literature against Tolstoy's "narratively and morally simple tradition of the people," Martin Green (1987) concludes that "*Lolita* is in fact the product and the gent of a corrupt culture" (pp.13, 15, 33). This viewpoint seems valid in terms of *modern* religious, social, and cultural codes, but it echoes Quilty's fragmented response to Humbert's bill of "poetical justice" (Nabokov 299). Sitting on a chair helplessly and reading his own death-bill, Quilty tries to save himself from Humbert's sentence by creating an atmosphere of silliness through phrases like "Here goes, I see it's in verse," "That's good, you know. That's damned good," "Oh, grand stuff," "Didn't get that," "A little repetitious, what? Where was I?" and "Getting smutty, eh?" (pp.299-300). The overt lack of certainty and excessive triviality of Quilty's comments, especially "(I) didn't get that," represents the lasting misunderstanding between the Quilty's *modernized* perspective and Humbert's medieval world. Quilty's viewpoint, which goes in line with Green's modern contempt of the novel's "rebellion against all morality" (1987:25), views religion and social regulations as superior to art and beauty while Humbert's medieval courtly-love world views sensuality as ennobling and transcendent.

Though there seems to be no problem in Quilty's despise of Humbert's personality, which concurs with the modern contempt of Humbert's sexuality, it is noteworthy that Quilty, the spokesperson of the modern society at this specific point, is the character who brags his own involvement in pedophilia: "I'm very fond of children myself" (Nabokov 296). Quilty's critique of Humbert's apparent amorality is self-contradicting, as Quilty blames others for what he himself is. Blaming Humbert for raping Lolita (p.298), Quilty forgets his own crimes of kidnapping the girl from the hospital (pp.246-7), forcing her to practice sex with

other men, and kicking her out of his mansion (p.276). It is ironical that Quilty, the master of "weird, filthy, (and) fancy things" (p.276) critiques Humbert who "had the utmost respect for ordinary children, with their purity and vulnerability, and under no circumstances would he have interfered with the innocence of a child, if there was the least risk of a row" (Nabokov 19-20). In brief, Quilty is not the right person to judge or blame Humbert's sexuality because he himself is a debased pervert whose best doings are rape and pedophilia, a state that undermines his ability to see Humbert's case objectively.

This explains why Humbert, towards the end of the novel, asks *Lolita*'s readers to notice the difference between "H. H." and "C. Q" and to choose between the two: "And do not pity C. Q. One had to choose between him and H. H." (Nabokov 309). The way Humbert is articulating his request is tricky. He is indirectly saying that preferring Quilty to Humbert is to support evil and guilt against innocence and righteousness, considering that Humbert does not view himself guilty of pedophilia or rape, but an innocent father or loyal patron whose love can never be culpable (pp.298, 300). In fact, Humbert believes that he is Lolita's only legitimate lover who has the right to defend her regardless of the costs and consequences. Thus, in opposition to the viewpoint that killing Quilty is a punishable crime of murder, Humbert believes that the righteousness of his relationship with Lolita legitimizes killing Quilty and makes it inculpable entirely. While such a perspective may seem illogical in terms of modern rules and legislations, killing Quilty, in terms of medieval courtly love, is more lawful, less willful; more legitimate, less sinful. Accordingly, Humbert's call for readers to see him as different from Quilty is an indirect call for judges, i.e. readers or *fictitious* jury, to weigh Humbert's personality and morality in terms of medieval courtly love.

Accordingly, despite its overt erotic subject matter, "*Lolita* is not about sex, but about love. Almost every page sets forth some explicit erotic emotion or some overt erotic action and still it is not about sex. It is about (courtly) love" (Trilling 1987:5). Emphasizing that courtly love refers to the ennobling transformation of people's instinctual desire into a source of virtue, *Lolita*'s erotic diction and tone promote Humbert's courtly love of Lolita as a natural cord that has the power to unite people regardless of their gender, age, social class, and race. Hence, Nabokov's referencing of various models of courtly love from different cultures, such as King Akhenaten, the men of Lepcha, Dante, Petrarch, Don Quixote, and Poe not only justifies Humbert's love of a twelve-year-old nymphet, but also demonstrates that courtly love has its own unique righteousness. It is the backbone that unifies the various parts of *Lolita*, thus releasing it from the standards and principles of modern morality. Accordingly, without considering the ennobling nature of courtly love and its role in constructing *Lolita*'s structure, subject matter, and themes, the novel will remain puzzling, and Ray's insistence that the story has a moral or an ethical purpose will remain meaningless.

Malek J. Zuraikat, Associate Professor
Department of English, Yarmouk University
ORCID: 0000-0003-1948-2671
Email: m.zuraikat@yu.edu.jo

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