

The ‘Nerves’ of Lolita: How the film adaptations of Vladimir Nabokov’s novel support our cultural perception of sexual assault

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Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) is known for writing from the perspective of mentally disturbed characters with tragic backstories. One of his most famous works, Lolita, tells the story of a middle-aged professor’s obsession with his twelve-year-old stepdaughter. The stream of consciousness writing style employed by Nabokov allows readers to dive deep into a pedophile’s mind and understand the character’s doomed desires. Since its publication in 1955, there have been two well-known film adaptations of the novel, one in 1962 by Stanley Kubrick and the other in 1997 by Adrian Lyne. The actors chosen to play Humbert Humbert were unable to capture the character’s descent into madness and paranoia. While Mason’s Humbert is known as a cynical, humorous gentleman, Irons’ portrayal makes the character seem pathetic and helpless against temptation. Furthermore, Dolores, known as Lolita, was designed by filmmakers to be a seductress instead of a preteen. Her skimpy clothing and seductive lipstick imply that she is sexually mature and therefore responsible for her abuse. Today, the impact of this oversexualization of young females in media is known as “The Lolita Effect”, which has altered society’s views of sexual assault victims. This is a sharp contrast to the innocent, immature, childish depiction of Dolores in the novel. The changes Hollywood made to the original story have stripped it of its “nerves” as Nabokov put it, the depth of which earned the novel the title of his masterpiece.

“Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta” (Nabokov 1). The author knew what he was doing when he composed what is possibly the most intriguing first line in novel history. From here, readers are pulled into the twisted mind of Humbert Humbert, an English professor with an insatiable desire for his young stepdaughter, Dolores. On its own, the preface is appalling and disturbing;

who wants to read about such an inappropriate subject? However, it is clear after reading the book that the story is intended to be much more than a piece of erotica. Lolita is a love story, though not in the traditional boy-meets-girl-and-they-live-happily-ever-after sense. It is a love story in the sense that one feels a passion for the other that defies all logic and time, a passion that was doomed from the start.

For my banned book project, I wanted to stand out with a novel that I didn't think any of my other classmates would dare to dive into. I had already seen the 1997 film adaptation of the novel prior to this project because I am a fan of actor Jeremy Irons. Since I had watched one of the movies, I already had the images of the characters and the scenery in my head as I began to read. But page by page, I realized the film could not have been more different than the tragic memoir I had become so emotionally invested in. I chuckled at the narrator's dry, self-deprecating humor; I braced myself against the vivid, lewd descriptions of young Dolores through Humbert's eyes; I wept at the devastation of realizing the severity of his moral transgressions. I have always been an avid reader, yet there has never been a book that has left such a deep imprint on my psyche as *Lolita* did.

I found the task of having to write a minimum ten-page paper daunting until I started combing through sources. Many of the articles I found on the book highlighted the effects of the changes made from the original 1955 publication to the movie adaptations in 1962 and 1997. I came across one subject that I thought summarized the discrepancies perfectly: the *Lolita* Effect. As discussed in University of Iowa professor M. Gigi Durham's book of the same name, the concept describes how the portrayal of young women in media impacts adolescent girls' self-image, as well as the way society views sexual assault victims as responsible for being abused. Additionally, I was shocked that Nabokov's *Lolita* was inspired by a real-life kidnapping. Sally Horner was eleven years old when she was abducted by fifty-year-old Frank LaSalle and taken across the country from New Jersey to California in 1948. I thought of myself at eleven and was gripped with

stomach-turning fear when I imagined being plucked from the innocent life I knew and forced to do unspeakable things with an older man. I thought of the injustice that popular culture was doing to victims like Sally Horner by presenting them as seductive "nymphets" who wanted what their abuser had in store for them.

The two "*Lolita*" films did nothing to fight these depictions; in fact, they can be considered the reason for the *Lolita* Effect. They dressed Dolores's character in the skimpiest clothing imaginable, making her appear to be years beyond her age. The directors cast the role of Humbert with two men who could not bring the same emotional depth to the character as was seen in the book. Whereas in the book Humbert was in a constant inner struggle between morals and desire, in the movies he was presented as charming, which may have been why I was so entranced by Irons' performance when I initially saw the film. Perhaps the directors felt it would be easier for the audience to stomach the film if Dolores was a sexually mature young woman, and Humbert was lured in by her siren calls, thus confusing the roles of who is the victim and who is the perpetrator. I stand by my claim that Nabokov's *Lolita* is a masterpiece, for he is a brilliant prose writer with an endless capacity for exploring the mind of the deranged. What does not deserve this title are the film adaptations of the novel, for they portray a twelve-year-old girl as a temptress, and a middle-aged man as a prisoner to her charms. These depictions do not give a voice to the true victims in the relationship between abuser and the abused.

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