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Lolita : Examining “the Underside of the Weave”

Lolita, I Presume; On a Character Entitled “Lolita”

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Lolita, I Presume; On a Character Entitled “Lolita”

Susan Elizabeth Sweeney

- 1 What’s the name of the heroine in Vladimir Nabokov’s most famous novel? Or, to make matters even simpler (along the lines of Groucho Marx asking who is buried in Grant’s tomb), what’s the name of the title character in *Lolita*?
- 2 The answer may not be as simple as it appears. From the very beginning of *Lolita*¹—that is, from the novel’s title, the opening of the fictitious foreword to Humbert Humbert’s memoir, and the opening invocation of that memoir—the name of its heroine seems both overdetermined and oddly indeterminate.² As the novel proceeds, she is designated by a growing number of nicknames, diminutives, sobriquets, misnomers, and possible allusions to various female characters in other works of fiction with similar names,³ even as her actual identity, her personality, her consciousness, and her perception of the novel’s events remain elusive. “Lolita” itself is part of the difficulty. Although Humbert calls her by assorted names throughout the novel, he reserves “Lolita” almost exclusively for her role in his fantasies and memories. As a result, that rapturously repeated name comes to represent not the novel’s primary female character, but instead her construction as a nymphet within his imagination: “a fanciful Lolita [...] overlapping, encasing her; floating between [him] and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own” (62).⁴ Electing to call the child by this romantic, “foreign”, exotic diminutive, rather than by her given name, parallels and reinforces Humbert’s other attempts to appropriate her person for his own purposes. Calling her “Lolita”, in other words, is another way of denying her a separate, autonomous existence.⁵ A close reading of the novel suggests, in fact, that “Lolita” is not her name any more than “Annabel” is—no matter how frequently it may appear in Humbert’s narration.
- 3 Nabokov, who observed in his *Lectures on Literature* that a novel cannot be read, but only reread (*Lectures on Literature* 3), designed his most famous novel so that it would be misread—initially, at least—in keeping with its narrator’s unreliable representations of the heroine. As Nabokov remarks in his essay “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*”, “Certain

techniques in the beginning [...] misled some of my first readers into assuming that this was going to be a lewd book" (313). Such techniques may also persuade readers to identify with Humbert's point of view, only to discover eventually—as he himself gradually does, in the process of remembering, drafting, recopying, rereading, and revising his memoir—that they know little about the title character apart from his construction of her.

- 4 Humbert's attempt to rename the little girl "Lolita" exemplifies the way in which his unreliable first-person narration, for much of the novel, prevents readers from identifying with her or even understanding how she might differ from his description. Humbert's narration is so deceptive, in fact, that readers may find it necessary to use assorted designations—for example, her legal name and her nickname—in order to distinguish between the actual child and his construction of her as a seductive temptress. Indeed, more than fifty years after the initial publication of *Lolita*, there is no longer a critical consensus over how to refer to the title character. Some critics, such as Ellen Pifer, call her by various names (Lolita, Dolores Haze, Dolly Schiller, and so forth), depending upon the context; still others choose either "Dolly", as Julian Connolly does, or "Dolores".⁶ Such indeterminacy is entirely appropriate, because it reflects the way in which Nabokov's novel ultimately undermines the narrator's attempts to control its heroine.

1. What's in a Name?

- 5 Pondering the question of what to call the heroine of *Lolita* reveals the extent to which the text obscures her identity, even while drawing attention to it. Ironically, characters' names seem to be more important in *Lolita* than in any other Nabokov novel, even *Pale Fire*.⁷ Consider the host of nicknames, aliases, titles, and epithets that Humbert invents for both himself and Dolores Haze; the pseudonyms that supposedly disguise other characters' "real" identities; the puns on the names of minor characters such as Miss East, Miss Beard, Miss Lester, and Miss Fabian; the suggestive names of other students in the class list from Ramsdale School; the "cryptogrammic paper chase" on which Humbert's nemesis leads him through a series of hotel registers (250); the coded references to Clare Quilty's existence that appear throughout the novel; and Vladimir Nabokov's own shadowy anagrammatic presence as "Vivian Darkbloom". Throughout the novel, naming functions as a way to assert familiarity with, knowledge of, and control over others, and, in particular, to claim the privileges of authorship with regard to another character. Even so, the most important name remains Humbert's private designation for the heroine as an object of desire. "Lolita" is the first word of the novel's title, the first word of John Ray, Jr.'s foreword, and the first word of Humbert's memoir (as well as the last one).⁸
- 6 The problem of the heroine's name appears on the novel's very first page. Ray, the fictitious editor of Humbert's manuscript, explains in the second paragraph of his foreword that

While "Haze" only rhymes with the heroine's surname, her first name is too closely interwound with the inmost fiber of the book to allow one to alter it; nor (as the reader will perceive for himself) is there any practical necessity to do so. (3-4)⁹
- 7 Because this statement follows the foreword's first paragraph, which twice refers to "Lolita" as the title of Humbert's memoir, it seems to indicate that that is the

character's name, too. And yet Ray's comment does not actually reveal the heroine's first name.¹⁰ Indeed, he next refers to her by her married name, even though first-time readers will neither recognize it nor realize the significance of the fact that "Mrs. 'Richard F. Schiller'" has died in childbirth (4). Such readers will understand, however, that the scare quotes surrounding this name mark it as yet another pseudonym. Ray's opening paragraphs, in fact, identify the heroine only by her father's surname and her husband's first name, middle initial, and last name, even as he emphasizes that those masculine appellations are specious. Her own first name, quintessential though it may be, remains hidden.

- 8 Ray does mention "Lolita" throughout his foreword—seven times, in fact. And yet, in every instance except one, this name, too, is surrounded by inverted commas, since it indicates the title of Humbert's manuscript. On the only occasion when it appears without quotation marks, it ostensibly refers to the child:

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! (5)

- 9 Notice, however, that the child's name occurs almost in passing, as part of Ray's portrait of Humbert as an artist, lover, and madman. In this context, "Lolita" still seems to be associated with the "magically" seductive, stirring, and poignant depiction Humbert has created—that is, with the book that has "entranced" us—rather than with the child herself. This usage accords with Ray's characterization of her throughout the foreword. He draws attention to names in general, and to the heroine's name in particular, at the same time that he omits her actual first name and uses "Lolita" mostly to designate the book in which she appears.¹¹

- 10 Humbert's narrative, in turn, begins by invoking his private name for the child in the first word of his opening sentence: "Lolita". He also divides the name into syllables, spells it phonetically, and tells readers exactly how to pronounce it: "Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta" (9). Humbert uses this utterance to embody "Lolita"—not in the child's own body, however, but in the physical sensations experienced by the person pronouncing that name aloud. Significantly, Humbert distinguishes it from her other names as well:

She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita. (9)

- 11 Here, Humbert clearly identifies "Lolita" as a private, singular pet name that expresses his desire for the girl. Soon afterwards, he articulates for the first time a claim that will resonate throughout the novel, the assertion that he himself created Lolita: "In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child" (9).
- 12 Over the course of the next eight chapters—in which Humbert introduces himself, alludes to his present predicament, and summarizes his life before meeting the novel's heroine—he occasionally mentions the name "Lolita", as when he observes that "in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel" (14). In chapter ten the actual child appears, preceded by her mother's offhand reference to "Lo", which Humbert ironically and characteristically misunderstands, noting in a parenthetical aside that "Lo [is] presumably the maid" (38). And in chapter eleven, which recounts their first interactions—according to a diary that he claims to quote from memory—Humbert

variously calls her "Dolores" (41, 43), "L." (42, 43, 45), or "Lo" (43, 44, 46-51). Only when he describes the child as a nymphet, or as an incarnation of Annabel Leigh, does he name her "Lolita". When Humbert invokes that name, in fact, he usually prefaces it with relative or possessive pronouns that assert his special relationship with such a particular, immediate, unforgettable, and quintessential figure: "And what is most singular is that she, *this* Lolita, *my* Lolita, has individualized the writer's ancient lust, so that above and over everything there is—Lolita" (44-45).¹² Despite his wish to celebrate her uniqueness, this sentence also seems to refer to his own construction—rather than the child—as he repeats the name "Lolita", asserts his possession of it, and describes how it supplants everything else.

- 13 Once Humbert begins to recount his relationship with the girl, the matter of her name grows more complicated in the remaining chapters of Part 1, and even more so in Part 2, as he tries desperately to maintain his fantasy of "Lolita" while playing the part of her father and controlling her interactions with strangers, neighbors, peers, and teachers. He usually addresses her in conversation as "Lo", although he calls her "Dolores" during an argument over skipped piano lessons and "Dolly" while interrogating her about a supposed encounter with a child who shares that name (205, 225). Humbert often designates her as "Lo" in a domestic context—in conversations with her mother, for example, or when he himself takes on a parental role—and as "Dolly" when discussing her with schoolmates or teachers. When the headmistress of Beardsley School refers to his stepdaughter as "Dorothy Humbird" and "Dorothy Hummerson" (177, 178), however, he doesn't correct her. Indeed, it seems as if other characters have their own names for the novel's heroine. Her friend Mona, for example, calls her "Lollikins", "Dolly-Lo" (223), and even, in a mocking echo of Humbert's possessive pronouns, "my—and the author's—Diana" (222), suggesting that this last name, that of the heroine of *The Enchanted Hunters*, may be Quilty's pet name for her (222).
- 14 Near the end of the novel, Humbert acknowledges the difficulty of naming, recognizing, or knowing the heroine of *Lolita* when he asks whether Quilty remembers "a little girl called Dolores Haze, Dolly Haze? Dolly called Dolores, Colo.?" (296). This question, mocking Quilty's apparent confusion of Humbert with a telephone repairman, conflates the child's first name with that of a city, and puns on two meanings of "call"—to name, and to communicate by telephone—with the abbreviated name of a state. Humbert's question also alludes to Quilty's own earlier, "horribly cruel" pun with a made-up name in a hotel register: "Will Brown, Dolores, Colo." (251). Here, however, Humbert's frenetic wordplay emphasizes the impossibility of locating the child or even deciding which name (Dolores or Dolly) she should be called.
- 15 Although Humbert identifies the little girl by various names when he speaks to her or to other characters about her, in his thoughts, perceptions, fantasies, and memories he generally designates her as "Lolita" (or, more specifically, as "my Lolita"). Indeed, one indication of how much Humbert's narration dominates the novel is the fact that although the name "Lolita" appears throughout his memoir, he only pronounces it aloud four times—and even then, his narration may not establish clearly whether he actually utters it (or just imagines doing so), and whether she responds to it.
- 16 In the first instance, Humbert recalls a conversation about how children might protect themselves from pedophiles; when the little girl quotes a newspaper column advising children to record suspicious license plates, even if they don't have a pencil, he

comments, "With your little claws, Lolita"—but this riposte marks the end of the chapter, and there is no indication that she has either heard or replied (166). In another instance, when he recounts the beginning of their second road trip together, Humbert reports that he told her, "You are a funny creature, Lolita"—but then he immediately renders this dialogue unreliable by adding, "or some such words" (209). Although he does address her again as "Lolita" in the same speech, it quickly shifts from reported conversation to first-person narration, by way of the repeated phrase "I remember" (209), and again the chapter ends with no indication that she has heard his monologue. In the third instance, too, Humbert's use of the name suggests self-dramatizing memory rather than actuality: "'Lo! Lola! Lolita!' I hear myself crying" (236). In the fourth instance, however—which I will discuss presently—he addresses her directly as "Lolita" during their final conversation in Coalmont.

2. Only Words

- 17 Within Humbert's narration, various embedded texts reinforce the distinction between such names and the actual child, while revealing his poignant awareness that he now has "only words to play with" (32) and underscoring the artifice of the novel itself. An alphabetized list of students in her class at Ramsdale School illustrates how much his pet name for her differs from her official appellation:

So strange and sweet was it to discover this "Haze, Dolores" (she!) in its special bower of names, with its bodyguard of roses—a fairy princess between two maids of honor. I am trying to analyze the spine-thrill of delight it gives me, this name among all those others. [...] What is it? The tender anonymity of this name with its formal veil ("Dolores") and that abstract transposition of first name and surname, which is like a pair of new pale gloves or a mask? (52-53)

- 18 In this passage, Humbert personifies the name, pretends that it is "a fairy princess between two maids of honor", and identifies it with various items of clothing—a veil, a pair of gloves, and a "charshaf" or chador (53)—that might hide a woman's body. Although her transposed surname and first name seem to mask her identity, to the point of rendering her virtually anonymous, he enjoys the thought that he alone knows her— "(she!)"—apart from this formal entry in a list. Even as Humbert's description of her printed name obscures her physical presence, it draws attention to his own body—just as his account of pronouncing "Lolita" did—by evoking the "spine-thrill of delight" produced by seeing that name.
- 19 Later in the novel, Humbert clings to this and other versions of the heroine's name as substitutes for her body. After she escapes from him, he composes a plaintive ballad that repeats her legal name rather than his private designation for her: "Wanted, wanted: Dolores Haze"; "Officer, officer, there they go [...] and her name is Haze, Dolores" (256). Meanwhile, as he writes his memoir in his prison cell, Humbert tries in vain to conjure Dolores by repeating his pet name for her: "Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita. Repeat till the page is full, printer" (109). The word's meaning dissipates as he repeats it, however; and the fact that the printer either misses or ignores his command underscores Humbert's lack of control over the name he has coined and the text in which it appears—let alone over the child herself.
- 20 "Lolita", then, comes to represent not only Humbert's imaginary construction of Dolores, but also his desperate attempts to make that construction permanent within

his text. The novel insists that those efforts will inevitably fail, leaving him with "only words" (32). And yet, until very recently, virtually all readers, reviewers, and critics referred to the novel's heroine by Humbert's pet name for her, as if there were no difference between the actual child and either her role in the narrator's erotic daydreams or her afterlife in his memoir. Although several Nabokov scholars now call her "Dolly" or "Dolores," they remain the exception, proving the rule that she is still generally known as "Lolita". Humbert's name for her continues to obscure her individual identity, even as it attains its own separate existence beyond the pages of Nabokov's novel. The word "Lolita" lives on in child pornography, urban slang, advertising, journalism, and popular culture, where it is usually defined as "a sexually precocious young girl" (*Collins English Dictionary*) or "a precociously seductive girl" (*Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary*). One can even imagine readers assuming that the title of *Lolita* denotes the heroine's sexual precocity, without realizing that the novel's narrator is the source of that popular association. Humbert's efforts to rename her as "Lolita", apparently, have been quite successful.

3. In Character

- 21 Even so, there comes a point, near the novel's end, when Nabokov tries to signal to readers that his heroine may belie Humbert's portrait of her as a vulgar, bratty, promiscuous, desirable little girl. In this scene, Humbert receives a letter from her, several years after her disappearance—although again ironically, and characteristically, he doesn't even recognize her handwriting. He opens another envelope first, and then muses, in response to its contents, that we are often bewildered when friends fail to conform to our expectations. Humbert observes that we "endow our friends with the stability of type that literary characters acquire in the reader's mind" (265), as if to suggest that our perceptions of literary characters, at least, appear to be consistent, reliable, and accurate. (Indeed, he seems to pun on the words "type" and "character," referring both to conceptions of personality and to printed letters of the alphabet.) Humbert adds

Whatever evolution this or that popular character has gone through between the book covers, his fate is fixed in our minds, and, similarly, we expect our friends to follow this or that logical and conventional pattern we have fixed for them. (265)

- 22 Readers of *Lolita* who accept Humbert's claim—that we remember literary characters as "fixed" and unchanging—may be surprised when he next quotes from his stepdaughter's letter, because its "small matter-of-fact voice" differs considerably from his narration as well as from his earlier depictions of her (266). Her representation of herself, and her story, within this short, simple, almost stark letter belies Humbert's attempts to make her into a character in his own fantasy—and his own text—by renaming her as "Lolita".
- 23 Reading the heroine's letter, then, may challenge Nabokov's readers to adjust their assumptions about her character.¹³ Certainly, the letter prompts Humbert himself to reconsider his relationship with her, a process that will continue as he composes and revises his memoir. He begins to admit to himself, and to the novel's readers, that she may not have been the dangerous and seductive *femme fatale* he made her out to be. When he tracks her down in Coalmont, for example, he is struck at first—as at other moments in the novel's plot—by how much her physical reality deviates from his

mental conception of her. As if finally acknowledging this fact, Humbert calls her "Dolly" or "Dolly Schiller" throughout the Coalmont chapter, until at last, in another rhapsodic imitation of Catullus, he proclaims his longing that "the world know how much I loved my Lolita, *this* Lolita, pale and polluted, and big with another's child, but still gray-eyed, still sooty-lashed, still auburn and almond" (278). Humbert then asks her to come away with him at the same time that he twice, unmistakably, addresses her aloud as "Lolita": "Lolita, [...] this may be neither here nor there but I have to say it. [...] Think it over, Lolita. There are no strings attached" (278). Significantly, this is the only instance in the entire novel when she responds to that nickname—even though she refuses his invitation—and the only time when she offers him any endearment in return: "No, honey, no" (279).

- 24 In the chapters following this scene, with its suggestion of some degree of final mutual understanding, Humbert gradually admits how little he had allowed himself to know her before. During her abduction and enslavement, Humbert explains, he had deliberately suppressed any awareness of her feelings, including

what I could not help perceiving, the fact that I was to her not a boy friend, not a glamour man, not a pal, not even a person at all, but just two eyes and a foot of engorged brawn. (283)

- 25 He now acknowledges, too, that he knew nothing about her mind "and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight" (284). Humbert's narration, meanwhile, keeps shifting among various possible names for her: "brave Dolly Schiller", "Lolita girl", and "a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze [...] deprived of her childhood by a maniac" (282, 285, 283). In the last paragraphs of his narrative, Humbert again juxtaposes the names "Dolly Schiller" (308) and "Lolita", before telling her—or rather his construction of her, now addressed in the second person as his manuscript's ultimate reader—that art constitutes "the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita" (309). This final invocation of "my Lolita" seems profoundly ironic, and not only because the novel's heroine must necessarily be dead in order for readers to be reading Humbert's narrative, according to "the agreement with the so-called authorities" (280). Humbert's last words acknowledge that he is indeed addressing his own "Lolita"—not the child herself, and not his memory of her, but the textual representation of her that he has made.

- 26 Thanks to such artful sleight of hand in the final paragraphs of Nabokov's novel, the name "Lolita" ultimately seems to refer to the book and its title, rather than the character. A close reading of the novel confirms, in fact, that "Lolita" is not actually the name of the title character—not her legal name, not a name she is commonly known by, and not a name that she identifies with or uses to refer to herself. And yet determining what name she would wish to be called—the usual solution for problems of nomenclature and polite address—is difficult.

- 27 Early in the novel, when her mother calls her "Lo!" she replies, "And behold"—"not for the first time", Humbert adds parenthetically (50). She signs herself "Dolly" on a postcard from camp (81). She only names herself aloud on one occasion, and even then it is to establish a specious identification for another girl, who probably doesn't even exist, in order to concoct a flimsy alibi for herself: "I only know her first name [...] Dolly, like me" (225). In her letter to Humbert, she not only avoids calling herself "Lolita" but avoids associating herself with any one name in particular. After addressing Humbert as "Dad", she signs herself "Dolly" and then adds, in a proud

parenthesis, "Mrs. Richard F. Schiller "(266). Although in accordance with correct etiquette—that is, for a woman to sign her first name in a letter to someone she knows well, and then to write her full married name in parentheses if it is not engraved on her stationary¹⁴—this signature effectively makes her identity more ambiguous. She chooses not to use her given name. Instead, she reveals an entirely new name, as if to assert her ability to rename herself—even if that name, "Richard F. Schiller", actually belongs to someone else, and appears in a parenthetical aside. Most strikingly, the double signature allows her to represent herself by two different names simultaneously, without having to limit her identity by choosing between them.

- 28 At the end of *Lolita*, then, the heroine's ultimate sense of her own identity—as Dolores, Lo, Dolly, Mrs. Richard F. Schiller, or whatever—is unknown to Humbert and inaccessible to the novel's readers. The association of her character with any one particular name remains stubbornly ambiguous and problematic. Pondering this dilemma, one might recall how, in Charles Dodgson's *Through the Looking Glass*, the White Knight demonstrates the difficulty of referring to anything in words by distinguishing the name of a song from its title, what it is called, and what it is. How, then, should one refer to the title character of *Lolita*? Perhaps the best strategy—in order to acknowledge the character's subjectivity, resist the narrator's bias, and honor the text's insistent artifice and indeterminacy—is to refer to her without naming her at all.¹⁵

- 29 Ms. Sweeney is President of the International Vladimir Nabokov Society.

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NOTES

1. All references to the novel are to *Lolita*. New York: Vintage, 1990.

2. As David Gates explained in *Newsweek*, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the book's American publication, "those who know the novel understand that there is no such person as the

enchantress "Lolita"—only an ordinary American girl named Dolores Haze, fond of pop music, chewing gum and roller skates, encumbered with a nickname too exotic for her to inhabit. The book's title is an artful misdirection: it points not at its putative heroine, but at her representation in the narrator's mind." (Gates n.p.)

3. Critics have drawn upon the various names associated with the heroine of Nabokov's novel to propose that she alludes to several other literary characters—from "Lola," the seductive showgirl in Josef Sternberg's film *Die Blau Engel* (Appel 332n4), to "Lolita", a young girl in Heinz von Lichberg's eponymous short story (according to Michael Maar); "Dolores", the dead mother of an appealing stepdaughter in H.G. Wells's novel of that title (proposed by Penny McCarthy); and even a dying horse named "Lolita" in Mayne Reid's Western romance *On the War Trail* (suggested by James Bratcher).

4. What Humbert chooses to call the novel's heroine does matter, after all. Linda Kauffman remarks that the child "only serves as a simulacrum when her nicknames—Lolita, Lo, Lola, Dolly—are used, for her legal name, Dolores, points too directly toward another representation—Our Lady of the Sorrows—and thus to a higher law than man's." (Kauffman 64) Certainly, Humbert's naming reinforces his attempts to substitute his own representation of her for the child herself. I would add, however, that these nicknames are not equivalent: two of them ("Lo" and "Dolly") are familiar names used by her mother and her friends, while another two ("Lolita" and "Lola") were assigned to her by Humbert and used exclusively by him.

5. Susan Anika Quayle argues against readings of *Lolita*, like this one, that emphasize Humbert's ignorance, repression, denial, or belated recognition of the heroine's separate existence and therefore her suffering. Accordingly, Quayle has chosen not to follow what she calls, in the third note to her essay, "a common critical practice of using the name 'Lolita' to refer only to Humbert's imagined vision, and 'Dolores' to refer to the 'real' child" (Quayle n.p.) In her reading, Humbert is indifferent to any aspect of the child's existence apart from her body. But Quayle's approach ignores the novel's narration, which is not only a marvel of delicately engineered unreliability but also encompasses several levels of selective perception, memory, literary craft, rereading, and revision on Humbert's part, which inevitably points to changes in how Humbert represents the little girl. As a result, Quayle's approach fails to distinguish between the child and Humbert's descriptions of her. As I show in the present essay, moreover, Humbert himself clearly differentiates "Lolita" from her other names and identifies it, in particular, with her role in his imagination.

6. I myself have gradually shifted from calling Nabokov's heroine "Lolita", without thinking much about it (Sweeney 1999), to deliberately using her given name. As I explain elsewhere, "Although most critics follow [Humbert's] lead—using the sobriquet that he repeats throughout his narrative, from first word to last, and reiterates in its title—I prefer to call her Dolores. Since she never identifies herself as "Lolita," using Humbert's pet name seems to deny her subjectivity and minimize his unreliability." (Sweeney 2004, 203n7)

7. Nabokov frequently omits or obscures his characters' names in order to emphasize a protagonist's precarious sense of identity and unreliable perceptions of others. The narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, for example, is named only once—with the abbreviation "V."—in a speech by Sebastian himself, while in *The Enchanter*, the precursor to *Lolita*, everyone is nameless but a single minor character. Nabokov also employs names to refer to his own authorship, which often seems to threaten his characters' belief in their own autonomy. Nabokov's playful acknowledgment of his own authorship appears not only in the form of characters with similar names, such as "Vivian Darkbloom" in *Lolita*, but also in frequent allusions to a magisterial writer, positioned outside the text, whose name is suppressed or forgotten by the narrator. Finally, Nabokov often masks the names of other important female characters in his works, from his wife, Véra Nabokov—addressed only as "you" in *Speak, Memory*—to Vadim's anonymous future wife in *Look at the Harlequins!* who is also invoked in the second person. For other onomastic

patterns in Nabokov's oeuvre as a whole, see Gennady Barabtarlo on characters with related names and Nassim Balestrini on naming in Nabokov's short fiction.

8. A few of Nabokov's other novels and two chapters in his memoir, *Speak, Memory*, are also named after central female characters: *Mary*, *Ada*, "Colette", and "Tamara." The title of his last, unfinished novel, *The Original of Laura*, continues this pattern and ironically reflects upon it, since the fragments of Nabokov's manuscript seem to suggest that "Laura" is a fictitious character based on "Flora", a novelist's wife.

9. Presumably, there is no "practical necessity" to protect Dolores's identity by changing her first name because she and her only child are both dead, a fact that Ray obliquely announces in the next paragraph. But what about her disguised family name? Martha Carpenter has claimed that several puns on "the Blazes" and "blaze" in *Lolita* (36, 219) hint that "Blaze" may be the heroine's "real" surname. Conversely, Alexander Dolinin argues that "Haze", her supposedly fictitious last name, has been so carefully worked into the text of the novel as a whole that it, too, must be part of the book's essence.

10.

The name "Lolita" pervades the entire novel, of course, but Ray's claim that the heroine's first name is woven deeply into the fabric of the book could apply to "Dolores" as well. When Humbert lists the tourist spots they visited together, for example, he remarks: "Mission Dolores: good title for book" (158). Alfred Appel, Jr.— who assumes that Ray is referring to "Dolores", "Lolita's given name" (321n1)— cites other appearances of that name throughout the novel (332-333n5).

11. Similarly, Nabokov's essay "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*", which has come to serve as the novel's afterword, generally uses the name "Lolita" to designate the book and not the character.

12. As Humbert himself acknowledges, and as Appel (367n) and Dyer point out, such invocations imitate the Latin poet Catullus and his followers.

13. The novel includes another missive from her—a postcard, signed "Dolly", sent from Camp Q (81)—but this letter demands substantially more reconsideration from readers because of her comparatively longer absence from the novel, the amount of time that has passed, her increased age, and the changes in her status (as married woman and expectant mother) that she explicitly announces.

14. See Nancy Tuckerman and Nancy Dunnan's entry on "A Woman Signing a Letter" (Tuckerman 659).

15. This essay began as my contribution to a 2008 panel at the annual conference on Literature Since 1900 in Louisville, Kentucky. I would like to thank my fellow panelists, Stephen Blackwell and Zoran Kuzmanovich, the organizer of the panel, Marianne Cotugno, and my anonymous reviewers at *Miranda* for their thoughtful suggestions.

ABSTRACTS

This essay focuses on the problem of naming the heroine of Nabokov's famous novel. From the very beginning, her name is both overdetermined and indeterminate. As the novel proceeds, she is designated by an increasing number of diminutives, aliases, and misnomers, even as her own perspective remains elusive. Humbert calls her by various names—for example, "Lo" at home, "Dolly" with her friends and teachers, and "Dolly Schiller" after her marriage—but reserves "Lolita" to signal her role in his fantasies and memories. As a result, "Lolita" comes to represent

not the novel's heroine, but rather her construction as a nymphet within Humbert's imagination. How she would choose to name herself is unclear—she signs her letter to Humbert, for example, as "Dolly (Mrs. Richard F. Schiller)" (266)—but it would certainly not be as "Lolita". And yet, until very recently, reviewers and critics always referred to her by Humbert's pet name, as if there were no difference between the actual child and her role in his fantasies—or, indeed, her afterlife in his memoir. "Lolita" comes to represent not only Humbert's imaginary construction of a nymphet but also his desperate attempts to make that construction permanent within his text. The fact that most readers still refer to the novel's heroine as "Lolita" suggests that Humbert's efforts have generally succeeded.

Cette étude est consacrée au problème que pose le nom de l'héroïne du célèbre roman de Nabokov. Dès les premiers éléments du texte, son nom est à la fois surdéterminé et indéterminé. A mesure que le roman progresse, elle est désignée par un nombre croissant de diminutifs, alias, et autres appellations impropres, alors même que sa perspective sur les événements demeure insaisissable. Humbert l'appelle de plusieurs noms (par exemple "Lo" à la maison, "Dolly" avec ses amis ou ses professeurs, et "Dolly Schiller" après son mariage), mais réserve "Lolita" pour souligner son rôle dans ses fantasmes et ses souvenirs. En conséquence, "Lolita" en vient à représenter non pas l'héroïne du roman, mais sa constitution en tant que nymphette dans l'imagination de Humbert. Le nom qu'elle choisirait pour se désigner elle-même n'est pas clair—elle signe notamment sa lettre à Humbert de "Dolly (Mrs. Richard F. Schiller)" (266) — mais ce ne serait sans doute pas "Lolita". Pourtant, jusque très récemment, les critiques ont toujours fait référence à elle en utilisant le surnom donné par Humbert, comme s'il n'y avait aucune différence entre l'enfant elle-même et le rôle de cette dernière dans les fantasmes du narrateur ou dans sa vie au-delà des mémoires de Humbert. "Lolita" en vient à ne représenter que la construction imaginaire d'une nymphette par Humbert, et également les efforts désespérés de ce dernier pour rendre cette construction immuable dans son texte. Comme la plupart des lecteurs font toujours référence à l'héroïne du roman en utilisant le nom "Lolita", il semblerait que les efforts de Humbert aient été plutôt efficaces.

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Mots-clés: Lolita, Dolorès, personnage, caractérisation, nom, nomination, onomastique, titre

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