Ethics and Aesthetics in the Reception of Literary Character: the Case of Nabokov's Lolita

Herbert GRABES
Justus-Liebig-Universität, Giessen

ABSTRACT

Along with the renewed debate about ethics and aesthetics, an interest in literary characters has also returned. Thus the fictitious child-molester Humbert Humbert's abuse of Lolita, for example, has been considered to bear on the recently much discussed problem of child abuse. The actual scandal in this case lies in the fact that Nabokov has created a «moral monster» who as a narrator possesses the ability to subvert the reader's judgment-making capacity. In order to see how this is possible at all one has to consider the process of character constitution during the process of reading, with the successive perception of textual segments and the reader's implied-personality theory constituting formative aspects. Thus it can be argued that –possibly via a gendered perspective– the same text may allow for two irreconcilable constructions of H. H.: the converted criminal turned artist or the rhetorically gifted pervert who merely fakes a conversion.

Ethical considerations have recently become more prominent again in the reception of literary works of art. Both the historical and the political turn in literary studies and the neo-pragmatist[1] or neo-Aristotelean[2] turn in philosophical ethics have led to a renewed debate about the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. Beyond the field of theory, it seems to me significant that –for the first time in twenty years– students of mine recently initiated a heated discussion of the ethical implications of a book like Nabokov's *Lolita.*

Estudios Ingleses de la Universidad Complutense, 4, 23-40, Servicio de Publicaciones UCM, Madrid, 1996

With the heightened relevance of the ethical, an interest in literary characters has also returned. Although they are fictitious literary constructs, their specific make-up and interactions are seen once more as imaginary commentaries possessing existential relevance. Thus, in the example referred to, the fictitious child-molester Humbert Humbert's subjection of Lolita as his lust-object was considered to bear on the real problem of child-abuse, the scope of which has been made evident by recent campaigns in the United States and elsewhere.

Nabokov's *Lolita* is, of course, a novel prone to triggering off fervent discussion about the ethical responsibility of the literary artist. No other book since Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Joyce's *Ulysses* has caused such a stir by its violation of a deeply rooted sexual taboo. Here just a few reminders of its publication history. After some five American publishers had found the risk too high, Nabokov in 1955 had to make do with the notorious Olympia Press to have the book printed at all. Soon a hot debate about the primacy of ethical versus aesthetic considerations started in Britain, when Graham Greene recommended it as one of the best books of the year in the Christmas issue of the London *Sunday Times*. The potential danger to the morality of the nation seemed so great that the Home Office persuaded the French Ministry of the Interior to ban the book in order to stop its being smuggled across the Channel. In France a legal feud then commenced, accompanied by a Press campaign known as *l'affaire Lolita*. In Britain emotions ran high again when in 1959 it leaked through that Weidenfeld & Nicolson intended to publish the book, and Nigel Nicolson even lost his seat as Conservative MP for Bournemouth[3].

The scandal helped rather than hindered, of course, the commercial success of *Lolita*. When G.P. Putnam's Sons brought out an American edition in 1958, no fewer than a quarter of a million copies were sold within the first six weeks, and by the mid-Eighties sales were 14 million copies world-wide[4]. By this time the literary reputation of the book had also been firmly established thanks to numerous favorable books and articles, and after the shift in public views of morality brought about by the cultural revolution of the Sixties the once fierce debate looked like a storm in a test-tube. In the meantime the concentration on the complex structure and stylistic finesse[5] of Nabokov's best-seller had pushed ethical considerations so far into the background that David Rampton in 1984 found it timely to point out that the early

> ... denunciation of *Lolita* in letters to various journals ... often express[es] the genuine concern of people who cared about literature. Nabokov's novel is not the handbook for child molesters that some of them took it to be, but we can hardly be condescending about their anxieties[6].

Under the impression of the prevalent highbrow revelling in the discovery of ever more parodic structures and word-games, it must, however, have escaped his notice that ten years earlier Michael Bell had already been out to demonstrate that «the readers who have a principled and exclusive commitment to either an 'aesthetic' or a 'moral' rationale for the novel are likely to miss what is most valuable in it,»[7] and that in 1979 Nomi Tamir-Ghez, in one of the best analyses of the novel to date, had not only stressed that its «morality remained a central issue»[8] but had also shown in detail how it comes that –to use Rampton's phrasing– «the book cries out for a condemnation, a defence, a judgment, yet for various reasons it actively subverts the judgment-making capacity of the reader.» (1984: 107).

And, indeed, it is not only naïve readers who are likely to be entrapped[9] and subjected to Nabokov's superior art of subjectification,

> unwittingly accepting, even sharing, the feelings of Humbert Humbert, the novel's narrator and protagonist, the «maniac», the «nympholept», the «shining example of moral leprosy» (in the words of John Ray Jr., the fictive editor of Humbert's manuscript ...) (Tamir-Ghez 1979: 65)

The highly precarious relationship here between ethics and aesthetics is thus broadly determined by the constitution and assessment of an imaginary subject –a subject seemingly privileged in its self-creating role as an autobiographical narrator, yet nevertheless subject to the will and whims of Nabokov as the author of a fictitious biography. And as this multiple subjection (of the reader, of the narrator, of the characters in the narration) can only become effective in the reader's imaginative construction of illusions of «persons» during the process of reading, it seems necessary at this point to enlarge somewhat on the question of how words and sentences turn into «persons.» All the more so as, within an otherwise fully fledged narratology, this question has hardly been dealt with. In doing so I will be drawing widely on a systematic treatment of my own published as early as 1978,[10] yet –as German has become a cryptic language for scholars in the English-speaking world– gracefully overlooked even on the few occasions on which the subject is brought up.[11]

What has to be stated first of all is that subjectification as a text-guided creation of illusions of persons is not only a chief precondition for applying ethical considerations to a literary artefact, but an omnipresent impetus within the reading of literature; it cannot be discouraged even when the textual base is reduced to a mere voice. And what has also to be faced is the fact that the ensuing illusions are powerful – so powerful, indeed, that they may develop a life of their own, may move into other discourses and even become protagonists of new literary works. To bring up the name 'Hamlet' will, I think, suffice to demonstrate this point.

Thus, structuralist reductions of literary characters to mere «actants» (Greimas 1973), to complexes of action-linked attributes (Bremond 1973) or stable linkings between actional functions and predicates (Todorov 1973) are largely deficient, because they deal only with part of the textual base of character-formation and leave out entirely the process within which illusions of persons are created from this base by the reader.

It can even be said that analytical positions like «The notion of character, structuralists would say, is a myth» (Culler 1975: 20) or «Under the aegis of semiotic criticism, characters lose their privilege, their central status, and their definition» (Weinsheimer 1979: 195) actually have as little influence on the formation of illusions of persons in the process of reading as the physicists' assertion that our visual experience of a «sunset» is a mere delusion. At least the physicist can explain how such a delusion comes about (even if he cannot account for the emotional reaction the sight of a beautiful sunset may cause), and it seems worth trying to do something similar for the formation of illusions of persons from a text.

As to the components involved in that illusion-building process, these are both text-based and reader-based. Furthermore, the textual base for the creation of an illusion of a person can be extremely narrow – indeed, the minimum can be a mere name, or even a personal pronoun. What we usually get, however, is a grammatical and/or semantic linking of further textual elements and pieces of information to particular names and pronouns, as is clear in dramatic texts, but also in the insertion of name tags in narration. Yet even where the linking is not clearly masked on the textual surface, it generally can be divined from the semantic context, because a reader can rightly assume that there are no free-floating thoughts, feelings, utterances or actions. This, however, already brings us to the reader-based component of the illusion-building process, which, in contrast to the sometimes sketchy textual base, is always very rich indeed. It consists of nothing less than the entire complex of information about and conceptions of human subjects or persons, a complex referred to by psychologists working on interpersonal perception as 'implied personality theory.'[12] What is important for the possiblity of inter-subjective communication about literary characters is the fact that, although our individual experiences undoubtedly exert influence on our 'implied personality theory,' this theory is largely determined by culture-bound social stereotypes, pre-fabricated linkings of physical, psychic and mental qualities with each other and with age, gender, social roles, class and so forth. This likewise explains why there is a special problem involved in assuming that a wide temporal and/or cultural distance between the reader and the author of a literary text is bound to mean a considerable difference between the 'implied personality theories' of reader

and author respectively. Here lies the importance of cultural studies and social history for an adequate study of character formation in texts from times and cultures other than our own. And the fact that there are culture-specific gender-roles as well as gendered ways of experiencing and world-making leads one to expect that there are also gender-specific types of 'implied personality theory.'

As to the actual process within which the text-based and reader-based components interact so as to shape the illusion of a person within the psyche of the reader, it first has to be said that the special nature of the process resides in the fact that it is largely controlled by the sequential character of language. What we are actually dealing with is a successive semantic synthesis under the guidance of implied-personality theory in the course of a predetermined sequential perception of a given text. The fact that sequence is of the utmost importance in this case (and therefore predetermined generally by a cultural code and, in particular, by the author of a text) is borne out by the findings of psychologists concerning 'impression formation.' As numerous appropriate tests have shown, the reader – with the help of his implied-personality theory, especially the social stereotypes I have mentioned – will already have formed a far more complete illusion of a character at the first occurrence of the scantiest bits of information in the sequential perception of the text than that information actually verifies.[13] This explains the so-called 'primacy effect', the fact that the sequence in which a given number of bits of information about a person is provided bears substantially on the value attributed to them, with the initial information being of highest importance in 88 percent of all cases.[14] If, however, a previous warning is given concerning the dangers of an all-too rash judgment, this primacy effect can be reduced or even reversed into a 'recency effect'.[15] And as pertinent investigations have shown, the relative importance of the primacy effect is also dependent on the so-called cognitive complexity of the judging person: that is, on the reader's capacity to work with a differentiated set of categories and thus deal constructively with apparent inconsistencies or even contradictions.

This ability becomes of heightened importance when, in the process of reading on, further bits of information have to be accommodated, because these have to be linked not only with the previous ones but with the total illusion of the person already formed.[16] In the case of an unredeemable conflict it is the later bits of information that are generally eliminated or discounted,[17] unless the circumstances presented and the reader's implied-personality theory allow for the assumption that the imagined person's character has changed. As is well known, this latter procedure, which is modelled on the notion of a person's ability to 'develop', has become the structural backbone of the so-called

'Bildungsroman'. And we will soon see that one of the fundamental disagreements among critics concerning Nabokov's *Lolita* hinges on the question of whether Humbert Humbert is able to change – with gender presumably being a decisive factor in the disagreement.

What needs stressing here is the fact that an assessment of the possibility of synthesizing disparate bits of information about literary characters depends at least as much, or even more, on the reader's implied-personality theory as on the nature of the textual information. If, for example, some critics speak of a fragmentation of character or even of the deconstruction of the subject in the *nouveau roman* or some postmodern novels, it has to be said that with a 'weak' personality concept such as that presented in Goffman's theory of roles (Goffman 1959) a synthesis is still quite possible. Both in the construction of other 'selves' in the life-world and of illusions of persons formed during the reading-process, our implied-personality theory is central. It determines the degree of 'unity' and the kind of identity required for a plausible 'character'. What greatly helps in forming an illusion of personal identity are, of course, all kinds of recurrences in a text that are linked to a particular name, or to a personal pronoun as substitute for a name. These recurrences are, indeed, so important that Jacques Lacan, in his textual model of the human psyche, has defined personal identity as compulsory repetition.[18] And it is these observed recurrences that encourage us to risk predictions during the process of reading which may or may not be confirmed – and thus are a source of the kind of tension that makes us read on.

What follows from all this is that the notion of a literary character can be defined as the result of a process of illusion-building going on during the successive perception of textual segments. Thus it is decisive where this process comes to an end, and it makes sense to speak of a literary character as the illusion of a person that has been formed at the end of the reading of an entire text, assuming that all relevant bits of information have been noticed and integrated. That this is no more than an assumption becomes clear, however, when, in a renewed reading of the same text, such an illusion in practice starts changing again: new details are noticed, new links established, a new synthesis is created on account of an implied-personality theory that has changed ever so slightly under the influence of the reader's life-experience. This accounts for ever new, or at least slightly different views of the «same» literary characters in various interpretations of the same textual surface.

There are, however, two ways of building illusions of persons from texts that are essentially different. One either sticks to the sequence in which pertinent bits of information are provided in the text by the author, or one does not. What

follows from all that has been said about the importance of sequence for impression formation, is that one will in either case be unavoidably dealing with quite different illusions of persons. Thus, in order to have an ever so precarious common 'object' of reference in the study of literary characters at all, it seems necessary to stick to and give heightened attention to the sequence of information that guides the process of illusion-building. At least, this is the only way to give credit to the specificity of character formation in a particular literary text. For if one selects bits of information pertinent to the illusion of a person from various segments of a text and arranges them according to, say, a Freudian model of personality, many quite different imaginary persons will inevitably look quite similar, will suffer from the same obsessions, be determined by the same complexes, and so forth. The specificity –or individuality– of literary characters can only be adequately preserved in a critical paradigm that sees them not as complexes of attributes but as processual profiles formed on the basis of a sequence of perception of textual details.

This does not, however, solve the problem of the plurality of implied personality theories applied by different readers and critics. It is obvious that critics will agree in their assessment of a literary character if their implied-personality theory is at least roughly the same – and that they will disagree if this is not the case. Not so much because they apply the same criteria in their judgment, but mainly because they have already formed the illusion of a person in a similar or dissimilar way. They are actually talking about different 'characters'. How this pertains to the critical views of Nabokov's *Lolita* and how gender there comes into play we will soon see.

As already mentioned, this novel is a splendid example of literary subjugation in terms of both subjectification and subjugation. Nabokov, the master of both, recounts in his afterword to *Lolita* how he got the idea for the novel:

> ... the initial shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature's cage.[19]

Out of this idea there finally developed a fictitious autobiography demonstrating the existential imprisonment of man and the possibility of becoming aware of this situation by representing it in a work of art. What we are inescapably caged in is time, and the bars of this cage consist –to use Brian Boyd's terms– of the «irretrievability of the past, the insatiability of the present, and the unforeseeability of the future.» (Boyd 1991: 237-238) To turn this philosophical stance into narration, Nabokov had to subject his protagonist to a more concrete imprisonment, a perverse sexual obsession with girl-children

and a benign obsession with language. If the first makes him an obnoxious child molester and accounts for the ethical strictures on the novel, the second enables him to draw a highly artistic picture of his cage and explains the aesthetic appeal of the novel *Lolita*. And in order to link the two obsessions, Nabokov in Humbert Humbert creates a literary character who comes to the latter through the former, who finds his role as an artist only in consequence of the suffering his precarious sexual obsession has inflicted on others, but also on himself. Thus, the literary work of art has to be linked to his «real» life as closely as possible and to take the shape of an artistically written autobiography. And to make sure that this linkage remains essential to the end, this work of art cannot be published so long as it might possibly hurt the main victim of the perverse obsession that determines the artist's life, and even then only under a pseudonym. To complete this fiction Nabokov expressly provides an editor; and anticipating the debate about the primacy of ethical or aesthetic considerations his novel was bound to cause, especially attacks from the defenders of ethics, he turns this editor into a psychological expert on perversions who presents the book as a scientific «case history» and a «work of art,» but above all as a warning for «parents, social workers, educators,» because «still more important to us than scientific significance and literary worth, is the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader.»[20] Too bad, though, that his pious prose brings to mind the pornographic works disguised as «case histories» that were quite prevalent in the Fifties. «John Ray, Jr., Ph.D.,» is thus turned into a parody, and – in spite of his name – does not throw much light on what follows. He even changes the title of Humbert Humbert's life story from «Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male» to «Lolita,» thus occluding the fact that the book is all about Humbert Humbert – and about Lolita only insofar as she is important for him.

This must be so because, once Nabokov has created his autobiographical narrator, he leaves the entire telling of the tale to him, who subjects all the other characters, including himself as a narratee, to his own subjective view and his artistic ability at subjectification. This ability includes, of course, a deliberate shaping of his life story and a subjection of all and everything he tells to the constraints of a chosen textual genre. It soon becomes evident, though, that Humbert alternates between several genres and even addresses several audiences. According to his own title, he presents his autobiographical tale both as a love story and as a confession, and the very first lines of his narration bear this out. Yet immediately after this he refers to himself as a writer («You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style»[21]) and additionally as a criminal pleading before a jury. If we add that his presentation later also becomes a

detective story, we survey the whole range of his at least partly conflicting roles as a narrator. Writing a confession, he has to be totally open and absolutely truthful in order to gain the absolution of himself and the reader; in the love story he has above all to convince his Lolita and the reader of the genuineness and overwhelming power of his love by an ecstatic and romantic rendering; as the submitter of a legal plea he has to be careful, selective and rhetorically persuasive in order to help his case before the jury; in his autobiography of an artist he has to prove his aesthetic sensitivity and above all to demonstrate his talent to convince the reader; and finally, in the detective story he has to display the power of his imagination in constructing a maze, and his logical and intuitive ability to find a way out. Consequently, Humbert the narratee, being subjected to these varying discourses, has to appear in different roles: in the confession, as someone turning from a brave and careless sinner into a responsible and remorseful moral subject; in the love story, as someone transported by the healing power of love from egotistical lustfulness to a selfless caring for the other; in the court plea, as someone changing from a sly criminal, presenting himself as a victim of life, demonic powers and society, to a repentant sinner accepting just punishment; in the autobiography of an artist, as someone who discovers that the true field in which to live out his fantasies without hurting others is not life, but art; and, in the detective story, as someone who, through experience, has to learn that both life's tangle and its unravelling are determined by an inscrutable agency, parodistically called «McFate.»

Lolita, the literary character figuring exclusively in the title of Nabokov's novel, is subjected even more to these narrational frames, because she has to take roles that are determined by those chosen for the narratee Humbert Humbert. Within the confession, it has to be revealed that she is not the brash, insensitive American youngster she seems to be, but a quite sensitive, troubled and romantic girl who turns into a responsible and somewhat dejected young woman; in the love story, she changes from an alluring lust-object to rather common, yet hopelessly beloved, self-determined other; in the plea, she figures first as a demonic young seductress victimizing Humbert and then as a victim of an egotistical maniac who brutally deprives her of part of her childhood; in the artist's autobiography, she has to play the muse, the energizing force enabling Humbert to create a work of art that will immortalize her and his love for her; and finally, in the detective story, she operates as an agent of fate, crossing Humbert's intentions and launching him on an exasperated search for herself and his rival Quilty.

This Quilty, Lolita's mother Charlotte Haze, and Humbert's first love, the girl-child Annabel, are the only other literary characters of note in the novel,

and they are even more subjected to functional roles in the designs of the narrator and author. To start chronologically with Annabel: she figures in the confession as a memory of a youthful better self, in the love story as an emblem of ecstatic and perfect love later to be superseded by Lolita, and in the plea as a demonic girl-child fatefully engendering his obsession with nymphets. Charlotte Haze, in the confession, appears as an unfortunate, rather tasteless and hopelessly romantic American bourgeoise woman who falls easy prey to the exotic charm of the sinister European pervert; in the love story, she is both unwitting means and obstacle to the unreformed Humbert's lust; and in the plea, she is an egotistical mother unaware of the charm and needs of her exasperating daughter.

If Charlotte appears as a predictable person with no mystery, Humbert's rival Quilty is all the more extravagant and mysterious. The only time he becomes truly visible is when he is being brutally murdered by Humbert and thus removed from the story. In the confession, as an even more obnoxious pervert he has to assume the thankless role of double, representing the dark side of Humbert's self – this has to be extinguished; in the love story, he embodies the fateful rival who first robs Humbert of his love object, and later turns out to have mistreated the Lolita Humbert then professes to truly love; therefore, and because Lolita still loves him more than himself, Humbert has to punish and remove him; in the plea, Quilty figures as an even worse pervert than Humbert, more dangerous because unrepentant, so the reformed Humbert thinks he has done society a favor by killing him along with his vice; in the artist's autobiography, Quilty is again Humbert's double, with an inverse development from a gifted dramatist to pornographic film maker who dissipates his talent in drugs and debauchery; and in the detective story, he is Humbert's tease, sadistically exploiting his rival's weaknesses in taking first the role of the detective, and then that of the hunted criminal.

If all this seems to bear out the structuralist contention that literary characters are above all functions of plots and patterns of genre, with *Lolita* it has to be kept in mind that the situation has been reversed. All the genres mentioned, along with the characters in them, are themselves creations of Humbert the narrator, a literary character. And as this artistically talented narrator gives the characters several roles simultaneously, a different one for each genre, they appear as persons in their own right, transcending the narrow perspective and limited function enforced by any single narrational frame. The narrator of *Lolita* thus proves to be a master of subjectification, in regard not only to himself as a narratee, but also to the other major characters.

What has still to be shown, however, is how this subjectification in this novel works in detail; and, remembering the importance attributed to

impression-formation in my theoretical excursus, I will choose as an example the way in which information about Humbert Humbert is successively offered at the very beginning of the book. The initial view of the protagonist is an outside one, provided by the fictitious editor of his autobiography. What he first discloses is that «Humbert Humbert» is a pseudonym and that the «real» person hiding behind it died of a heart disease a few days before his court trial. Thus we are obviously dealing with someone suspected of a crime; but as the man is dead, *de mortuis nihil nisi bene*. We then learn that the deceased must have been thinking of death, because he had drawn up a will, and he must have been eager to get his manuscript posthumously printed, because he expressly entitled his lawyer to take care of this. Then it is suggested that the informant may have been chosen as an editor because he recently had received a prize for a book of his own «wherein certain morbid states and perversions had been discussed,»[22] and we may thus expect similar things to be disclosed in «Humbert Humbert»'s tale. Next, the editor asserts that he has not been tampering with the manuscript, except to correct what he calls «obvious solecisms,» and doing what the «author» already had tried to do: that is, deleting obvious references to still-living persons. From this we may assume that we will be dealing with a somewhat capricious writer, and that what he has written is closely linked with his «real» life. This is supported by further information about the changing of names in the book, and we learn that the only «real» name preserved is the first name of the heroine, because this is «too closely interwound with the inmost fiber of the book to allow one to alter it.»[23]

That we are dealing with a book written by a «real» criminal is asserted in the remark that references to his crime exist in the papers; and that this book must be of an autobiographical nature we can infer from the fact that the editor learned from it the «cause and purpose» of the crime. The authenticity of the autobiography is then stressed by the editor's disclosure of the further fate of the «real» people behind the pseudonyms in the book, and the reader cannot know at this point that the 'Mrs. «Richard F. Schiller,»' who «died in childbed, giving birth to a stillborn girl, on Christmas Day 1952»[24] is no other than Lolita, and that the biography «My Cue» by «Vivian Darkbloom» most probably deals with «Q» or Quilty, the dramatist whom Humbert Humbert has murdered and with whom the biographer had previously collaborated.[25] The additional conundrum that «Vivian Darkbloom» is an anagram of «Vladimir Nabokov,» who is indeed about to present the reader with his own kind of «cue,» the tangle of narrative threads in this novel, is an extra fillip which Nabokov fans would not like to miss but which more sober critics object to.

To return to disclosures about Humbert Humbert: we are told in advance that his book contains no obscene terms, and that the «aphrodisiac» scenes in it are «strictly functional ones in the development of a tragic tale tending unswervingly to nothing less than a moral apotheosis.»[26] Thus we receive an exculpating interpretation of the tale even before we get to it, and the subsequent assertion of the expert on perversions that «12% of American adult males» share the perverse leanings of the autobiographer, and that there would have been «no disaster» if he had seen a psychopathologist in time, rather increases our suspicion that we are in for a somewhat smutty book.

To counter this impression, the editor then first stresses the privilege of a work of art to «come as a shocking surprise,» obviously implying that we are dealing with art in the present case, before he starts mercilessly to denounce its maker:

> No doubt, he 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. Many of his casual opinions on the people and scenery of this country are ludicrous. A desperate honesty that throbs through his confession does not absolve him from sins of diabolical cunning. 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.[27]

This seems to be pretty complete, and it is for the reader to decide whether he really wants to become acquainted with the tune of a violin-playing monster. He has in any case been warned, and those who have decided they want to hear it are subsequently absolved from being frivolous in their aestheticism and even from being themselves morally depraved in their prurient curiosity; for the value of the book, the editor emphasizes, lies in its «ethical impact,» its capacity to point out «dangerous trends» and «potent evils» to all engaged in the task of «bringing up a better generation in a better world.»[28]

We need go only a few pages into Humbert's tale to see that he at least did not start his life as the monster the editor paints us. After such an initial condemnation there can come only a positive surprise, and we begin to wonder whether the editor is a reliable guide. Even if, during the subsequent recounting of Humbert's tawdry sexual experiences as a young man and of the cruel behavior towards his first wife, more shadows are cast on his character –particularly owing to his increasing obsession with certain girl-children insanely held to be demonic– what seems to count more is the fact that in the art of presenting his case we gain the impression that –to take up the editor's cliché metaphor– he has not only a violin at his disposal but all the various instruments of a whole orchestra, including the parodic echoing effects of electronic music. Ranging from the

intensely lyrical innovation of Lolita at the very beginning, through the sensitive rendering of his first tryst with Annabel, to the ironical portrayal of his aunt Sybil and the vicious cynicism in his depiction of Valeria, he stuns the reader enough to almost forgive him everything.

Almost. Because this temporary suspension of moral judgment for purely aesthetic reasons can be seen as only part of a larger strategy chosen by Nabokov. To quote Leona Toker: «*Lolita* produces a cathartic effect. It lulls us into long spans of sympathy for Humbert and then punishes us for our temporary suspension of judgment....[29]» This statement, however, implies that, later on, with the gradual disclosure of the destructiveness of Humbert's pedophilia, of the sufferings inflicted on Lolita and the cruel murder of Quilty, this sympathy finally vanishes and is not even revived by his professed betterment and remorse, because it does not appear authentic.

It is precisely here, that we have to remind ourselves of the importance that a reader's and critic's implied-personality theory has for the imaginary construction of literary characters and for their assessment. As has been pointed out, the casting of the narratee Humbert Humbert and of Lolita within the various genres chosen by the narrator always implies a change – the most important one being that of Humbert Humbert himself, because without it he would not have written the book at all. And, from Lionel Trilling's early essay (1958) on *Lolita* onwards, most critics have granted the protagonist his professed escape from the prison of his perverse obsession through the power of love, and the growth of his ensuing remorse into an artistic rendering of his plight and an attempt to thus immortalize Lolita. Commenting on the scene in which Humbert Humbert, finally confronted with a grown-up, pregnant Lolita, «hopelessly worn at seventeen»[30] and anything but a nymphet, discovers that he still loves her and always will, Nomi Tamir-Ghez (1979: 82) thus phrases the common reaction:

> Seen that way for the first time – without his jesting pose, suffering for the pain he had inflicted on the girl, and realizing that his love transcends his passion, Humbert at last wins us over, as the author intends him to.

Some critics in more recent close readings of the novel have, however, gathered evidence for the view that «in truth» Humbert Humbert never escapes his cage. Renate Hof (1984: 163-164) has pointed out that he remains an unreliable narrator to the very end, never giving up his illusion of the existence of nymphets and thus holding on to the very source of his obsession. Thus the tale of his moral betterment and the «reparation» of the damage done within the domain of art have also to be seen as conventional strategies of narration to which the unwary reader falls prey. Humbert Humbert, in this view, turns out to be a comic hero whose power to deceive at the end is ironically turned against himself.

If this altered view of the protagonist leads to a more comical reading of the book, Leona Toker, who also does not believe in Humbert's conversion, reads it on a more tragic note. Starting from Christina Tekiner's (1979) discovery that the time scheme towards the end of the novel may not really work in terms of realistic plausibility, she presents the view that both Humbert Humbert's final meeting with Lolita at Coalmont and his murder of Quilty never happened but are a mere fiction, a wish-fulfilment of the narrator. In imagining the first scene he is merely expressing his desire to return to normality so that «the reader's impulse to exonerate the 'I' of a confessional narrative can now be indulged almost with impunity» (Toker 1989: 221); in the second scene, he is expressing his desire to rid himself of the darker side of himself by imagining the murder of his double, whereby the details of the depiction of this murder attest to his unredeemed cruelty. And all this is written down by a Humbert Humbert who is in custody not for the murder of Quilty but for his abuse of Lolita, a narrator who is «a pseudo-artist who ... uses imagination as a substitute for life rather than as part of it» (ibid.).

Without going into detailed assessment of the textual evidence, it can be said that with a writer like Nabokov one can always assume that the texts he provides allow for several games on the part of the reader. Precisely because this is so, however, the construction of the illusion of persons from textual evidence by the reader depends even more on her or his implied-personality theory. How much evidence do we need to believe that a person has changed? As to Humbert, even Hof agrees with Tamir-Ghez that he «at the end of the narrative at last gives up the cynicism underlying his rhetoric, and his tone becomes more sincere» (1984: 151), but she then goes on to say that this could be just another strategy of a thoroughly ironical narrator. For her, it is almost impossible to believe that someone whom we have observed to use nothing but strategies has become authentic. For Toker, Humbert's «penitent narrating voice» (1989: 211) is a mere expression of the wish for a return to normality, a return that comes about neither in his own case —even in prison he prefers «*Children's Encyclopedia* (with some nice photographs of sunshine-haired Girl Scouts in shorts)»[31] to the Bible or a set of Dickens— nor in that of Lolita, whom the author will have to let die in childbirth because «Humbert has led Dolly too far astray to allow her a safe return to normality» (Toker 1989: 223).

It may seem somewhat vicious to comment on this by referring to the ironical treatment of precisely the assumption that characters have to be consistent and cannot change — in the very same chapter in which Humbert receives Lolita's letter, where we read that «Any deviation in the fates we have ordained would strike us as not only anomalous but unethical.»[32] And I would even dare ask

whether it is sheer coincidence that the critics who most radically doubt Humbert's change for the better and who reduce the chapters of the book that deal with this change to the level of mere imagination and wishful thinking are women. Could it be that there is also some element of wishful thinking involved? Could it be that their evident solidarity with Dolly Haze makes them see to it that Humbert the Terrible is not let off too easily as a reformed and repentant sinner? Not that Hof's or Toker's views can in any way be equated with the earlier moralistic readings of the novel which Nabokov so decidedly resisted. Both in fact opt for an overall aesthetic evaluation, with Hof stressing the comical effect brought about by the insight into the absurdity of perversion, and Toker the cathartic effect of its more tragic consequences. Yet it may be even more telling that they both denounce as naive the reader's inclination to grant the dying and professedly repentant child-molester-turned-autobiographical-artist any credibility at all. Is what we here encounter indeed a gendered view (including my own male ironical stance towards it)?

Returning to Nabokov's «initial shiver of inspiration»[33] for the book, the sketching of the bars of his cage did not make the ape escape from this cage. It merely showed that he was able to transfigure his predicament into a crude work of art. As far as Humbert Humbert, the pervert, is concerned, it is simply a question of whether the bars of his mental cage - his obsession with nymphets - are held to be as inflexible as the iron ones that imprisoned the ape or whether they may bend to the power of love. As far as the ability to transfigure his own predicament into a work of art is concerned, Humbert's autobiographical tale provides ample proof that his role as an artist is not faked. And the continuing popularity of *Lolita* also proves that his creator Nabokov granted him the fulfillment of his last wish: to escape the larger cage of time by taking refuge in art. For both he and Lolita as literary characters are every bit as alive as any remembered «real» characters can be.

NOTES

[1] Cf. Rorty (1989) and Shusterman (1992).
[2] Cf. Nussbaum (1990).
[3] Boyd (1991), 378.
[4] Boyd (1991), 387.
[5] See Tamir-Ghez (1979), 65.
[6] Rampton (1984), 103.
[7] Bell (1974), 184.
[8] Tamir-Ghez (1979), 65.
[9] «The rhetoric of *Lolita* is the rhetoric of reader entrapment ...» Toker (1989: 199).
[10] Grabes (1978).

[11] Cf. e.g. Rimmon-Kenan (1983), 59-70.
[12] Cf. Hastorf, Schneider, Polefka, (1970) and Jahnke (1975).
[13] Cf. Luchins & Luchins (1970).
[14] Cf. Anderson & Barrios (1972).
[15] Cf. Luchins (1957).
[16] Cf. Iser (1987).
[17] Cf. Anderson & Jacobson (1965) and Anderson & Norman (1964) and Jahnke (1975).
[18] Cf. Lacan's interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe's «The Purloined Letter» in «Le séminaire sur 'La Lettre volée',» Lacan (1966), 19-75.
[19] Nabokov (1959), *Lolita* (subsequently quoted as *Lolita*), 282-283
[20] *Lolita,* 7
[21] *Lolita,* 11.
[22] *Lolita,* 5.
[23] *Lolita,* 6.
[24] *Lolita,* 6.
[25] Cf. *Lolita,* 31.
[26] *Lolita,* 7.
[27] *Lolita,* 7.
[28] *Lolita,* 7.
[29] Toker (1989), 200; cf. also Boyd (1991), 233.
[30] *Lolita,* 253.
[31] *Lolita,* 31
[32] *Lolita,* 242.
[33] «Vladimir Nabokov on a book entitled *Lolita*,» *Lolita*, 282.

Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen
Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik
Otto-Behaghel-Strasse 10 B
35394 Giessen
GERMANY
Fax: (49)-641-702-5583
e-mail: herbert.grabes@anglistik.uni-giessen.de

REFERENCES

Anderson, N. H. & A. Norman (1964). Order effects in impression formation in four classes of stimuli. *Journal of Abnormal Social Psychology* 69: 467-471.

— & A. Jacobson (1965). Effect of stimulus inconsistency and discounting instructions in personality impression formation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 2: 531-539.

— & A. A. Barrios (1972). Primacy effects in personality impression formation. *The Nature of Theory and Research in Social Psychology*. Ed. C. Hendrick & R. A. Jones. New York: Academic Press. 210-218.

Bell, Michael (1974). *Lolita* and Pure Art. *Essays in Criticism* 24.2: 169-184.

Boyd, Brian (1991). *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bremond, Claude (1973). *Logique du recit.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Culler, Jonathan (1975). *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Goffman, Erving (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.

Grabes, Herbert (1978). Wie aus Sätzen Personen werden. *Poetica* 10.4: 405-428.

Greimas, Algirdas Julien (1973). Les actants, les acteurs et les figures. *Semiotique narrative et textuelle.* Ed. C. Chabrol. Paris: Larousse. 161-176.

Hastorf, A. H., D. J. Schneider, J. Polefka, eds. (1970). *Person Perception.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Hof, Renate (1984). *Das Spiel des «unreliable narrator»: Aspekte unglaubwürdigen Erzählens im Werk von Vladimir Nabokov.* Munich: Fink.

Iser, Wolfgang (1987). *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response.* Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Jahnke, Jürgen (1975). *Interpersonelle Wahrnehmung.* Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.

Lacan, Jacques (1966). *Écrits 1.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Luchins, A. S. & E. H. Luchins (1970). Effects of preconceptions and communications on impressions of a person. *Journal of Social Psychology* 81: 243-252.

Luchins, A. S. (1957). Primacy – recency in impression formation. *The Order of Presentation in Persuasion.* Ed. C. J. Hovland. New Haven, CT: Yale UP. 33-61.

Nabokov, Vladimir (1959). *Lolita.* Greenwich, CT: Fawcett.

Nussbaum, Martha (1990). *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Rampton, David (1984). *Vladimir Nabokov: a Critical Study of the Novels.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith (1983). *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics.* London: Routledge.

Rorty, Richard (1989). *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shusterman, Richard (1992). *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Tamir-Ghez, Nomi (1979). The art of persuasion in Nabokov's *Lolita. Poetics Today* 1.1-2: 65-83.

Tekiner, Christina (1979). Time in *Lolita. Modern Fiction Studies* 25: 463-469.

Todorov, Tzvetan (1973). *Poetique: Qu'est-ce que le structuralisme.* 2nd ed. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Toker, Leona (1989). *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Trilling, Lionel (1958). The last lover: Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita. *Encounter* 11: 9-19.

Weinsheimer, Joel (1979). Theory of character: Emma. *Poetics Today* 1.1-2: 185-211.