



MODERN CLASSICS



Vladimir Nabokov

*Lolita*

**Lolita**

**Vladimir Nabokov**

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## FOREWORD

*“Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male,” such were the two titles under which the writer of the present note received the strange pages it preambulates. “Humbert Humbert,” their author, had died in legal captivity, of coronary thrombosis, on November 16, 1952, a few days before his trial was scheduled to start. His lawyer, my good friend and relation, Clarence Choate Clark, Esq., now of the District of Columbia bar, in asking me to edit the manuscript, based his request on a clause in his client’s will which empowered my eminent cousin to use the discretion in all matters pertaining to the preparation of “Lolita” for print. Clark’s decision may have been influenced by the fact that the editor of his choice had just been awarded the Poling Prize for a modest work (“Do the Senses make Sense?”) wherein certain morbid states and perversions had been discussed.*

*My task proved simpler than either of us had anticipated. Save for the correction of obvious solecisms and a careful suppression of a few tenacious details that despite “H.H.”’s own efforts still subsisted in his text as signposts and tombstones (indicative of places or persons that taste would conceal and compassion spare), this remarkable memoir is presented intact. Its author’s bizarre cognomen is his own invention; and, of course, this maskthrough which two hypnotic eyes seem to glow had to remain unlifted in accordance with its wearer’s wish. While “Haze” only rhymes with the heroine’s real 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. References to “H.H.”’s crime may be looked up by the inquisitive in the daily papers for September-October 1952; its cause and purpose would have continued to come under my reading lamp.*

*For the benefit of old-fashioned readers who wish to follow the destinies of the “real” people beyond the “true” story, a few details may be given as received from Mr. “Windmuller,” or “Ramsdale,” who desires his identity suppressed so that “the long shadow of this sorry*

*and sordid business” should not reach the community to which he is proud to belong. His daughter, “ Louise ,” is by now a college sophomore, “ Mona Dahl ” is a student in Paris . “ Rita ” has recently married the proprietor of a hotel in Florida . Mrs. “ Richard F. Schiller ” died in childbed, giving birth to a stillborn girl, on Christmas Day 1952 , in Gray Star , a settlement in the remotest Northwest. “ Vivian Darkbloom” has written a biography, “My Cue,” to be published shortly, and critics who have perused the manuscript call it her best book. The caretakers of the various cemeteries involved report that no ghosts walk.*

*Viewed simply as a novel, “Lolita” deals with situations and emotions that would remain exasperatingly vague to the reader had their expression been etiolated by means of platitudinous evasions. True, not a single obscene term is to be found in the whole work; indeed, the robust philistine who is conditioned by modern conventions into accepting without qualms a lavish array of four-letter words in a banal novel, will be quite shocked by their absence here. If, however, for this paradoxical prude’s comfort, an editor attempted to dilute or omit scenes that a certain type of mind might call “aphrodisiac” (see in this respect the monumental decision rendered December 6 , 1933 , by Hon. John M. Woolsey in regard to another, considerably more outspoken, book), one would have to forego the publication of “Lolita” altogether, since those very scenes that one might in pettiness accuse of sensuous existence of their own, are the most strictly functional ones in the development of a tragic tale tending unswervingly to nothing less than a moral apotheosis. The cynic may say that commercial pornography makes the same claim; the learned may counter by asserting that “H.H.”’s impassioned confession is a tempest in a test tube; that at least 12 % of American adult males a “conservative” estimate according to Dr. Blanche Schwarzmann (verbal communication) enjoy yearly, in one way or another, the special experience “H.H.” describes with such despair; that had our demented diarist gone, in the fatal summer of 1947 , to a competent psycho-pathologist, there would have been no disaster; but then, neither would there have been this book.*

*This commentator may be excused for repeating what he has stressed in his own books and lectures, namely that “offensive” is*

*frequently but a synonym for “unusual;” and a great work of art is of course always original, and thus by its very nature should come as a more or less shocking surprise. I have no intention to glorify “H.H.” No doubt, he is horrible, is is abject, he is a shining example of moral leprosy, a mixture of ferocity and jocularly 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!*

*As a case history, “Lolita” will become, no doubt, a classic in psychiatric circles. As a work of art, it transcends its expiatory aspects; and still more important to us than scientific significance and literary worth, is the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader; for in this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson; the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac these are not only vivid characters in a unique story: they warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils. “Lolita” should make all of us parents, social workers, educators apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world.*

John Ray, Jr., Ph.D.

Widworth, Mass

## **\* PART ONE \***

1

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. 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.

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.

Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child. In a principality by the sea. Oh when? About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer. You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns.

2

I was born in 1910, in Paris. My father was a gentle, easy-going person, a salad of racial genes: a Swiss citizen, of mixed French and Austrian descent, with a dash of the Danube in his veins. I am going to pass around in a minute some lovely, glossy-blue picture-postcards. He owned a luxurious hotel on the Riviera. His father and two grandfathers had sold wine, jewels and silk, respectively. At thirty he married an English girl, daughter of JeromeDunn, the alpinist, and granddaughter of two Dorset parsons, experts in obscure subjectspaleopedology and Aeolian harps, respectively. My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three, and, save for a pocket of warmth in the darkest past, nothing of her subsists within the hollows and dells of memory, over which, if you can still stand my style (I am writing under observation), the sun of my infancy had set: surely, you all know those redolent remnants of day suspended, with the midges, about some hedge in bloom or suddenly entered and traversed by the