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ENGL 3050  
02 November 2017

A Glimpse into the Mind of a Sociopathic, Narcissistic Pedophile: A Syntactic Analysis of

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

Given how deplorable the narrator of his most renowned novel is, it is a true testament to Vladimir Nabokov's stylistic brilliance that his literary work, *Lolita*, remains such a prominent work of literature over sixty years after its publication. *Lolita* is presented from the viewpoint of the pedophilic narrator, Humbert Humbert, and focuses on his obsession with a young girl, Eleanor, who he nicknames Lolita. In a series of wild plot turns, Humbert goes from living with the girl and her mother as a boarder to eventually absconding with Eleanor after her mother dies in a tragic accident, ultimately posing as her father while fulfilling his most disgusting desires. Eleanor eventually escapes with the help of another unsavory character who Humbert tracks down and kills by the end of the novel.

Humbert Humbert is arguably one of the most unreliable, sociopathic, narcissistic narrators an author could concoct, so how is it that *Lolita* is so widely read and such a cultural phenomenon to this day? To answer that, one does not have to look farther than the style of the writing. Nabokov is able to command the English language and its conventions with such skill that he entrances readers, making them immerse themselves in a story that leaves them feeling horrified, but unable to detach from the story. Through various syntactic elements of the following quote, Nabokov not only exposes the narcissistic and sociopathic nature of his narrator, but also shows how he

forces readers to become invested in a story that leaves their skin practically crawling with disgust:

*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 rambler, at the bottom of a hill, in the summer dusk; a furry warmth, golden midges.*

Beginning with the sheer length of the sentence, reaching an astounding ninety-nine words, Nabokov's verbosity immediately indicates that the narrator is not being forthcoming with the true intent of the statement he is making. Making the reader's brain run such a sentential marathon causes them to lose focus of the original meaning, Humbert's *very photogenic mother*, and leads them to the subject Humbert views as the most important: himself. Since this passage appears early in the novel—the second chapter to be exact—it is one of the first glimpses the reader gets into the how narcissistic Humbert is. He cannot bear to have the reader's attention shift to anything other than him and only mentions others if it serves his need of drawing the reader in or explains some facet of himself. He mentions his mother's death only to evoke pity and uses the reference to his childhood to draw the reader into the recesses of his mind. His mother and her tragic death fail to exist in the reader's mind by the time they reach the ninety-ninth word of the sentence.

Moving on to Nabokov's more specific syntactic decisions, the punctuation alone reveals much about the narrator and how he works to connect with his reader. The parentheses around the adjectival noun phrase, (*picnic, lightning*), reveal Humbert's sociopathic nature as they indicate that the specifics of his mother's untimely death may intrigue readers, but is not necessary information. Treating the specific circumstances of her death as little more than fluff introduces a dismissive tone, inappropriate for a topic as dark and serious as the death of one's own mother. The level of flippancy reveals Humbert to be a cold man, making it difficult for the average reader to connect with him. If he lacks the basic level of empathy to feel sad about his own mother's death, how can he possess any type of human feeling that the reader can identify with and connect to?

Recognizing that his reader would fail to connect with a narrator with little regard for even his own mother, Nabokov's later use of parentheses acts to counter the reader's previous disdain by replacing it with feelings of intrigue, though it still leaves them with a feeling of discomfort. He introduces an aside that draws readers in by placing the sentence modifier *I am writing under observation* in parentheses. The aside itself builds interest; the addition of the parentheses furthers the interest by forging a narrator-reader bond regardless of whether the reader consents to such a relationship. The mention of being under observation compels readers to delve deeper into the story and know what led him to the point that he would not be able to write without a careful eye watching over him. However, breaking the fourth wall and directly addressing the reader by cordoning off the clause with parentheses forces the reader to have a direct relationship with the narrator—an admitted pedophile and narcissistic sociopath—that most narrators do not forge. Nabokov has little choice but to force a

bond between the narrator and reader through direct address because the relationship would not happen naturally given how unlikeable Humbert is. Additionally, Humbert's need to forcibly create a bond with the reader reveals his need to be the focus of interest.

Also harkening back to Humbert's narcissism, Nabokov's use of the colon, found roughly in the visual middle of the sentence, signals a definitive shift away from discussing the death of Humbert's mother to Humbert luring the reader into a dreamscape of reminiscence. Directly following the colon, Humbert invites the reader to explore *those redolent remnants of day suspended*, giving an adult voice to childhood memories through rich imagery. By the end of the sentence, the original subject of the sentence, Humbert's *very photogenic mother*, no longer lingers in the reader's mind. Humbert cannot even discuss his mother's death without sidetracking the reader, having them redirect their attention to the more important subject at hand: himself. The level of narcissism this sentence alone reveals is jarring and if not for Nabokov's engaging style, leading the reader down an eloquently worded rabbit hole, they would likely be so put off by Humbert's self-serving rambling, they would not read on.

Throughout most of the sentence, Nabokov retains a high level of speech, following most conventions, giving Humbert an air of intelligence and authority. Humbert thrives on charisma and intellect as methods of controlling both the reader and other characters in the novel, so the use of a semicolon after the last independent clause of the sentence to separate it from two noun phrases, defying the conventional use of the semicolon to govern multiple independent clauses, seems out of place. In trying to establish the narrator as the person of great intelligence and charm, why would Nabokov choose to blatantly violate a punctuation rule? Arguably, the noun phrases that follow the semicolon act as a brief glimpse into a pattern of stream of consciousness

that would not typically be in complete sentences. The failure to adhere to conventional grammatical structure when the narrator is distressed or lost in thought reoccurs throughout the novel, usually appearing as fragments to indicate stream of consciousness. This breakdown shows the cracks in Humbert's psyche, reminding the reader that they are trapped in the mind of a man who can only be classified as unstable and unwell.

When unpacking this sentence syntactically, one thing that stood out was attempting to differentiate between prearticles and genitive prepositional phrases. While RK diagramming does not differentiate between the two, tree diagramming does so determining which it was quickly became a challenge as the sentence is dripping with both. The determining factor was which word in the phrase seemed most important for content. The most prominent examples of this conundrum were the phrase *hollows and dells of memory* and *remnants of day suspended*. In the case of the phrase, *those redolent remnants of day suspended*, *remnants* seems to carry more importance than *day suspended* as Humbert waxes on about the scraps of memories that seem to linger within his mind; thus, *remnants of day* is parsed into the noun *remnants* followed by the genitive preposition *of day*. The phrase *hollows and dells of memory*, however, poses a different situation where the key focus of the noun phrase is not the visual *hollows and dells*, but rather *memory*. Ultimately, *hollows and dells of* acts as a particularly verbose prearticle with *memory* as the head noun. The fact that this was such a prevalent point of confusion and debate reaffirms the idea that Nabokov was intentionally working towards a point of rambling to entrench the reader in Humbert's mind, forcing them to grow closer to the story and the narrator spinning the tale. As

long as the reader cannot escape the engrossing style, they cannot escape the story and consequently, Humbert.

This same inescapable style is possibly the most apparent in the slew of adjectival prepositional phrases that follow the phrase *redolent remnants of day suspended*—four to be exact. Nabokov thrusts the reader into an imagery-rich dreamlike reminiscence, describing the remnants of memory that Humbert lingers on that ultimately leads into the stream of consciousness noun phrases that conclude the sentence. The greatest purpose these adjectival prepositional phrases serve is to guarantee that the reader has lost track of Humbert's mother in favor of falling into the web of his own narcissistic personality.

Nabokov's choice of verbs also works to settle the reader in Humbert's mind, less so than a physical setting. By using verbs of knowledge like *subsists*, *stand*, and *know*, Nabokov sacrifices semantic value to ensure the reader is less so guided by action and more thought. The story is rarely about the action that characters are committing and is almost entirely guided by thought and feeling. Humbert is trapped in thought because his mind is where he commits the worst of his sins before he is finally given the chance to transform thought to action. He also is constantly lost in thought as he tries to shape the thoughts of others to better serve his own needs and desires. He is so driven by mental processes rather than real action that he becomes convinced that the accidental death of Eleanor's mother is his own doing because he imagined her death so often. It was as if his murderous thoughts and desires materialized and the rest of the world saw it as an accident when it was entirely his doing. By conditioning readers with verbs of thought, Nabokov sets readers into the metaphorical setting of Humbert's twisted mind

where they remain until the story is finished. Once again, readers are unwittingly guided into this narrator-reader relationship that they would not consciously form.

In the context of the rest of the story and the disturbing inner machinations of Humbert's mind, another interesting syntactic choice was Nabokov's decision to use the adjectival noun *freak* to describe Humbert's mother's death—it seems wholly out of place given that the narrator could easily be described as *freak* himself. This is a man that openly lusts over a young girl, essentially kidnaps her at age twelve when her mother dies—a death he takes credit for despite it being an accident—and then molests her, and ultimately kills the man that helped her escape from him. Given how atypical his entire being is, qualifying anything as *freak* to him seems odd and must only be because of his age at the time of his mother's death. Perhaps it was because of his age when it happened that he would consider it to be unordinary—it is important to remember that this is an adult voice portraying images from childhood—or perhaps Nabokov cleverly inserted this adjectival noun to try to make Humbert a more relatable character. *Freak* adds a layer of shocked emotion, despite Humbert being unable to feel that level of empathy because of his sociopathy. Sociopaths often learn how to connect with people for their gain and societal acceptance by mimicking how others show empathy. Given that he was so young when his mother died, the story he tells about her death most likely is influenced by others telling him about how she died—he would not have a clear memory of it. It is not branching too far to speculate that he is likely mimicking the examples of empathy he has witnessed from others and is using that mimicry to come across less sociopathic and to gain sympathy from the reader for the tragedy he experienced in the loss of his mother.

The concept of Humbert not being old enough to remember his mother's death is further supported by Nabokov's choice of the adjective *photogenic* to describe her. Perhaps he's merely commenting on her beauty, but most likely it is far more significant of a descriptor because his only memories of her lie not true memory, but in photographs he grew up seeing when he was growing up. Since he has no memory of his mother and seems to have no real emotion about her death, revealed by his flippant tone evoked by (*picnic, lightning*), his mentioning her only serves two purposes: to earn sympathy from the audience who would recognize the loss of one's mother as traumatic and painful and to act as a gateway to entrench the reader deeper in the maze of his twisted psyche before they realize he has done so. Using tragedy for his own self-serving purposes reveals evil narcissistic and sociopathic characteristics.

Overall, the sentence was indescribably challenging to unpack syntactically—arguably, an intentional action on Nabokov's part—as it was difficult to even decipher where when clause ended and another began. The level of flow and readability despite the length of the sentence is a remarkable feat on Nabokov's part and best demonstrates what a skilled narcissist Humbert is that he could seamlessly lead the reader from the death of his mother to his own childhood reminiscence before the reader realizes what he has done. Humbert will continue ensnaring readers through Nabokov's skillful manipulation of syntax for decades, possibly centuries to come, because no narrator as loathsome as Humbert should be able to enchant readers, but he does. Because of syntactic style alone, *Lolita* will never fall from shelves.