

## Enjoy your double

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This paper explores the uncanny status of the moral monster as Other in Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel *Lolita*. Using Jameson's concept of the 'quilting point' as a collective site of cultural anxiety, it will examine the constructions of moral monstrosity as a projection of cultural tensions.

In *Grimaces of the Real*, Žižek examines the concept of the 'double' in relation to the uncanny, writing that 'The double is "the same as me," yet totally strange, his sameness increases his uncanniness' (Žižek 1991, p. 55). In *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert takes on the role of a 'moral' monster, through his efforts to legitimise his love for Lolita and to disavow the monstrous nature of his deviant actions. As Humbert attempts to deny his monstrosity, he projects his guilt both outwards—onto Clare Quilty, who comes to function as Humbert's double—and inwards, through internal denial, that is to say, existence in 'bad faith'. The uncanny nature of Humbert's monstrosity is reinforced by the 'mirror' effect created by his relationship with Quilty. Humbert projects his guilt onto his double in an attempt to absolve himself, but this, instead, creates a contrast that reinforces the moral deviance of his actions. The nature of Humbert's monstrosity results in a moral ambiguity that allows him to be presented as a quilting point for a range of critical interpretations. As a result of this 'quilting', Humbert becomes a site for the playing-out of a number of cultural tensions that he has indirectly come to represent, causing him to take on the role of a cultural Other.

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Žižek writes that ‘The crucial question is not “What does the phantom signify?” but “How is the very space constituted where entities like the phantom can emerge?”’ (Žižek 1991,

p. 63). The double represents one possible answer to this question of how the space is ‘constituted’ where the monster can ‘emerge’ as a cultural Other. In *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert appears as a monstrous Other, and this is reinforced through the use of doubling in the relationship between Humbert and Clare Quilty. Clifton outlines the similarities between Humbert and Quilty, stating that:

Quilty is indeed something of a coarse parody of Humbert, like him a middle-aged nympholept and self-indulgent sensualist; he too has pretensions as an artist and a fairly highbrow education in literature.

(1982, p. 160)

Quilty’s initial appearance is in the form of a magazine advertisement pinned to Lolita’s wall, and the connection between Quilty and Humbert is demonstrated even at this point, as Humbert says of the picture ‘the resemblance [to himself] was slight’ (Nabokov 1971, p. 69). Appel further examines the links between Humbert and Quilty in his introduction to *The Annotated Lolita*, stating that ‘Quilty is so ubiquitous because he formulates Humbert’s entrapment, his criminal passion, and his sense of shame and self-hate’ (Appel, in Nabokov 1971, p. ix). In this sense, Appel acknowledges that Quilty has ‘power’ in that his actions reveal, as a reaction, Humbert’s monstrous nature. Quilty acts as a mirror for Humbert’s monstrous nature, becoming a ‘figure whom Humbert perceives as a mocking distortion of himself’ (Clifton 1982, p. 160). Despite the surface links between them, Humbert initially says ‘it would have been too foolish even for a



lunatic to suppose another Humbert was avidly following Humbert and Humbert's nymphet' (Nabokov 1971, p. 217). However, once Humbert becomes aware of Quilty's perversion—which reflects his own—it is used by Humbert in an attempt to deny his monstrosity. 'It does appear that Humbert is punishing and destroying himself in Quilty' (Clifton 1982, p. 160).

As a reflection of Humbert's perversity, Quilty provides a point of comparison that highlights Humbert's monstrous nature. Žižek's construction of the double as "the same as me," yet totally strange' (1991, p. 55) is evident in the parallels between Humbert and Quilty. Despite the characteristics which Humbert and Quilty share—both 'nympholepts', both artists—Humbert insists on acknowledging their difference, even as he acknowledges their similarities. Quilty is simultaneously presented by Humbert as both his brother, and a guilty conscience which needs to be exorcised. Appel describes Quilty as being 'a projection of Humbert's guilt and a parody of the psychological double', (in Nabokov 1971, p. ix) and Humbert's recognition of Quilty as his double reinforces his attempt to deny his guilt through projecting his monstrosity onto Quilty. In his acknowledgement of Quilty as his double, Humbert attempts to show that it is Quilty who is truly monstrous, and that he, along with Lolita, is Quilty's victim. Dawson examines this link in *Rare and Unfamiliar Things: Vladimir Nabokov's 'Monsters'*, and writes, 'Humbert would like to believe that it is Quilty who bears the monstrosity of the pedophilia that links them' (Dawson 2005, p. 123). Kauffman also examines the links between Humbert and Quilty describing Quilty as Humbert's *doppelgänger*:

Quilty is the doppelgänger, the figure traditionally presented not just as a double, but as a brother ... Quilty is the figure onto whom



Humbert projects his guilt in an attempt to evade responsibility for the crime of incest. (1993, p. 163)

However, Humbert, as he attempts to present himself as innocent, or belonging to the 'good' side of this double relationship, falters in his narrative. Appel writes:

In traditional *Doppelgänger* fiction the Double representing the reprehensible self is often described as an ape ... but 'good' Humbert undermines the doubling by often calling himself an ape, rather than Quilty. (in Nabokov, 1971, p. ix)

The *doppelgänger* relationship between Humbert and Quilty creates a link between the two characters that allows Humbert to construct Quilty as his brother, the sinner. It is the closeness of their link which allows Humbert to project his guilt onto his double, for in their 'sameness' lies Humbert's evidence that Quilty is also capable of the atrocities which we have seen him commit. By projecting his guilt onto Quilty, his 'brother', Humbert is attempting to deny his monstrous nature, not only to the reader, but also to himself. In this sense, he is a model of Sartre's philosophical concept of bad faith.

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre defines bad faith as:

One determined attitude which is essential to human reality and which is such that consciousness instead of directing its negation outward turns it towards itself. (Sartre 1974, p. 47)

Bad faith can also be seen as a state of denial within oneself, as outlined by the question 'What are we to say to the being of man who has the possibility of denying himself?' (Sartre 1974, p. 47). In this sense, Humbert's attempts to deny his monstrous nature cause him to exist in bad faith. Murdering Quilty is not simply revenge for Quilty's



treatment of Lolita, but also an attempt by Humbert to 'kill' his guilt and responsibility. Appel examines Humbert's denial of responsibility, stating that, 'As a "symbolic" act, the killing [of Quilty] is gratuitous,' and that Quilty 'rightly balks at his symbolic role'.

'I'm not responsible for the rapes of others. Absurd!' he tells Humbert, and his words are well taken, for in this scene Humbert *is* trying to make him totally responsible. (in Nabokov 1971, p. xi)

Sartre outlines the distinction between lying and an existence of bad faith, stating that 'We shall willingly grant that bad faith is a lie to oneself, on condition that we distinguish the lie to oneself from lying in general' (Sartre 1974, p. 48). Bad faith differs from lying in that it is

lying with intent, a deception constructed with knowledge rather than ignorance.

Humbert denies responsibility for his actions, precisely because he knows he is guilty. In his bad faith existence, Humbert believes that by killing Quilty—the 'projection of his Frankensteinian fantasies' (Bullock 1993, p. 98)—he can remove his guilt, and continue to deny his monstrous nature. However, as Dawson writes,

It is not until Quilty is dead and he must face the fact that he has not shed his own monstrosity that Humbert realizes that his monstrosity extends far beyond his pedophilic obsession. (2005, p. 123)

In this sense, although Humbert appears to believe that murdering his 'brother' will absolve him, Quilty's death leaves Humbert no longer able to deny his guilt by projecting his monstrosity outwards. However, as well as attempting to displace his guilt onto his double, Humbert also attempts an internal denial by choosing to exist in a constructed, aesthetic world. Sartre writes that 'The goal of bad faith ... is to put oneself out of reach;



it is an escape' (1974, p. 65), and in his aesthetic world Humbert attempts to create an existence where his monstrosity can become normalised. Humbert also attempts to prove that he is not incapable of a normal existence, in particular, normal sexual intimacy; rather, that he prefers the aesthetic 'bliss' of his constructed existence:

I am ready to believe that the sensations I derived from natural fornication were much the same as those known to normal big males consorting with their normal big mates ... The trouble was that those gentlemen had not, and I *had*, caught glimpses of an incomparably more poignant bliss. (Nabokov 1971, p. 18)

Humbert's main concern is to create an existence where his love for Lolita becomes acceptable. In his bad faith existence, his paedophilia becomes 'nympholepsy', and he attempts to present himself as an artist, a madman, harmless and concerned only with the

aesthetic; what McGinn describes in *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction* as an 'aesthetic paradox':

He is the author of a sublime narrative, glittering with verbal effects and charged with dense emotion ... Yet he also possesses ... a grotesque and squirming soul that hides its deformity in outward displays of artiness and civility. (1997, p. 109)

Dawson examines the nature of Humbert's nympholepsy in relation to a 'normal' existence, writing that



Humbert's love is impossible because he is a grown man and Lolita is a little girl. His love for her is the aberration known as pedophilia and therefore impossible to maintain in the 'normal' world. (2005, p. 119)

If the goal of bad faith is 'to put oneself out of reach', then it appears that Humbert, rather than face the true nature of his impossible love, exists in his aesthetic world in an attempt to prove that the monstrous nature of his nympholepsy is normal. Whiting examines this idea in *The Strange Particularity of the Lover's Preference*, stating 'It is ... to the condition of nympholepsy, Humbert's neologism for his own particular brand of pedophilia, that he looks to explain his acts' (1998, p. 838). Humbert uses his aesthetic world to create an existence where his love can exist apart from the standards of the 'normal' culture that defines it as monstrous. His initial defence is that he is 'no "brutal scoundrel"' and, as Frosch says:

Nympholepsy is aesthetic as well as sexual ... Humbert does not wish merely to tell us about sex, which anyone can do; he wants to ... fix the borderline between the 'beastly and the beautiful' in nymphet love. (1982, p. 177)

Because his love for Lolita is impossible in a normal context, Humbert must bring her into his bad faith existence, and his attempts to aestheticise her as a nymphet come at the expense of disregarding the 'real' girl, Dolores Haze.

Humbert denies that he is concerned with sex; that instead he wants only to 'fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets' (Nabokov 1971, p. 134). However, as Frosch states, 'Lolita is an inherently unpossessible object ... she will only be a nymphet for a brief time' (1982, p. 171). In *Lolita and the Dangers of Fiction*, Winston writes that



Humbert, in his desire to 'fix' Lolita as a nymphet, 'attempts to force [her] into the invariable pattern of a literary character, and therein lies his crime and his sin' (1975, p. 424). Humbert acknowledges the temporal nature of Lolita as a nymphet, stating:

I knew I had fallen in love with Lolita forever, but I also knew she would not be forever Lolita ... The word 'forever' referred only to my own passion, to the eternal Lolita reflected in my blood. (Nabokov 1971, p. 65)

However, despite this acknowledgment, Humbert puts aside the 'real' Dolores Haze in favour for his love of the 'eternal' Lolita. Dawson states that Humbert is 'a monster because ... he was incurious about the pain of others' (2005, p. 124), and likewise, in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Rorty describes Humbert as a 'monster of incuriosity' (p. 161). He outlines how, through writing about 'cruelty from the inside', Nabokov 'help[s] us to see the way in which the private pursuit of aesthetic bliss produces cruelty' (1989, p. 146). Humbert refuses to see Lolita as an ordinary child, instead, remaking her in the image of his nymphet mythology, and in the act of 'solipsizing' her, he denies the representation of her real presence. As Kauffman writes, 'She is ... the object of his appropriation, and he not only appropriates her but projects onto her his desire and his neuroses' (1993, p. 156).

Humbert attempts to deny his monstrosity by projecting the responsibility for his crimes outward upon Quilty, while, at the same time, attempting to normalise his moral deviance through the creation of his 'bad faith' existence. Humbert represents a 'moral' monstrosity, in that his transgressions are not physically obvious but, instead, are revealed through his treatment of Lolita, and through his attempts to deny that this treatment is aberrant. Appel states:



Rather than undermining Humbert's guilt, the Double parody in *Lolita* locks Humbert within that prison of mirrors where the "real self" and its masks blend into one another, the refracted outlines of good and evil becoming terrifyingly confused. (in Nabokov 1971, p. xiii)

Humbert, as an unreliable, 'poet' narrator, creates a 'prison of mirrors', where there is no 'real' or 'true' interpretation of his actions. In *Signatures of the Visible*, Jameson, using the example of the killer shark in *Jaws*, explores the idea of a 'symbol' providing a point for the quilting of numerous representations:

Critics have tended to emphasize the problem of the shark itself and what it 'represents' ... none of these readings can be said to be wrong or aberrant, but their very multiplicity suggests that the vocation of the symbol—the killer shark—lies less in any single message or meaning than in its very capacity to absorb and organize all of these quite distinct anxieties together. (1990, p. 26)

In this sense, the variety of interpretations of the monstrous Other creates a site where a series of anxieties become projected, and 'quilted' together.

Žižek further explores this idea, writing that the monster, rather than symbolising fears or tensions, 'literally annuls them by occupying itself in the place of the object of fear', becoming "'more" than a symbol ... the feared "thing itself"' (1993, p. 149). Humbert represents a sense of 'moral panic' which is reflected in the critical responses to the text.

The ambiguous nature of his monstrosity allows him to become a symbol upon which moral outrage and cultural tensions can be projected. Kauffman describes Humbert's



narrative as ‘an exercise in what Humbert calls “poetical justice”’, and she states that he ‘writes simultaneously to set the record straight, to settle the score, and to ensure that the last word is his’ (1993, p. 152). Humbert’s bad faith existence is reinforced by his position as a quilting point, as it is his misprojections within the narrative that allow for the various interpretations of his character. Humbert’s position as a quilting point is revealed in the range of critical responses to his monstrosity. Humbert is seen by Kauffman as an incestuous monster, and she writes that

*Lolita* is not about love but about incest, which is a betrayal of trust, a violation of love ... the inscription of the father’s body in the text obliterates the daughter’s. (1993, p. 152)

Trilling describes Humbert as an anti-hero, stating that ‘his lack of all admirable qualities leaves perfectly clear ... the force of the obsessive passion of which he is capable’ (1980, p. 327). And McGinn outlines the internalised nature of Humbert’s deviance, describing him as ‘hardly a human being at all but an alien creature squinting through treacherous eyes’ (1997, p. 109). Humbert’s position as a ‘quilting’ point also reinforces the internal nature of his monstrosity. As a moral monster he represents a kind of monstrosity which comes from within: a monster who reflects and provokes moral outrage through his transgressions. He is uncanny in that he is not only Other but also Self, and he becomes an element which can never be fully expelled. As a ‘quilting’ point he becomes a site for cultural tensions which may not have been directly represented within his direct actions and narrative, but which have been projected upon him as he takes his place as a cultural Other.



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