**Lolita: Characters, themes and symbols**

1. Major characters

Humbert Humbert uses language to seduce the readers of his memoir, and he almost succeeds in making himself a sympathetic pedophile. He criticizes the vulgarity of American culture, establishing himself as an intellectual. His ironic, self-mocking tone and his complicated word games divert readers’ attention from the horrors he describes. His skill with language makes him a persuasive narrator, often able to convince readers to see his perspective. These linguistic skills, along with his distinguished appearance, erudition, and European roots, enable him to seduce the women around him as well. Humbert has never wanted for love.

As a young boy, Humbert embarks on a short-lived, un consummated, and ultimately tragic romance with Annabel Leigh, a “nymphet” (a prepubescent girl between the ages of about nine and fourteen). Since then, he has been obsessed with the particular type of girl Annabel represents. He marries adult women in an effort to overcome his craving for nymphets, but the marriages always dissolve, and the longings remain. Despite his failed marriages, his mental problems, and his sporadic employment, Humbert still attracts attention consistently from the opposite sex, though he usually disdains this attention. He claims to have loved only Lolita, and his obsession eventually consumes him.

Humbert is a completely unreliable narrator, and his myopic self-delusion and need for sympathy make many of his statements suspect. He claims Lolita seduced him and that she was in complete control of the relationship. However, Humbert, as the adult, clearly has the upper hand. He controls the money and Lolita’s freedom, and he often repeats that Lolita has nowhere to go if she leaves him. When Lolita occasionally shrinks from his touch, he views her reluctance as an example of her mercurial nature, rather than as a child’s repulsion at an adult’s sexual advances. Humbert claims that his feelings for Lolita are rooted in love, not lust, but his self-delusion prevents him from making this case convincingly. Alternately slavish and domineering, Humbert has little control over his feelings and impulses. He never considers the morality of his actions, and he refuses to acknowledge that Lolita may not share his feelings. As his relationship with Lolita deteriorates, Humbert becomes more and more controlling of her and less and less in control of himself. He considers Quilty’s love for Lolita deviant and corrupting, and he murders Quilty to avenge Lolita’s lost innocence, a seemingly drastic act of denial of his own complicity in that loss. Only near the end of the novel, when he admits that he himself stole Lolita’s childhood, does Humbert allow the truth to break through his solipsism.
Lolita

Although the name Lolita has become synonymous with underage sexpot, Nabokov’s Lolita is simply a stubborn child. She is neither very beautiful nor particularly charming, and Humbert often remarks on her skinny arms, freckles, vulgar language, and unladylke behavior. Lolita attracts the depraved Humbert not because she is precocious or beautiful, but because she is a nymphet, Humbert’s ideal combination of childishness and the first blushes of womanhood. To nonpedophiles, Lolita would be a rather ordinary twelve-year-old girl. Her ordinariness is a constant source of frustration for Humbert, and she consistently thwarts his attempts to educate her and make her more sophisticated. She adores popular culture, enjoys mingling freely with other people, and, like most prepubescent girls, has a tendency toward the dramatic. However, when she shouts and rebels against Humbert, she exhibits more than the frustration of an ordinary adolescent: she clearly feels trapped by her arrangement with Humbert, but she is powerless to extricate herself.

Lolita changes radically throughout the novel, despite aging only about six years. At the beginning, she is an innocent, though sexually experienced child of twelve. Humbert forces her transition into a more fully sexual being, but she never seems to acknowledge that her sexual activities with Humbert are very different from her fooling around with Charlie in the bushes at summer camp. By the end of the novel, she has become a worn-out, pregnant wife of a laborer. Throughout her life, Lolita sustains an almost complete lack of self-awareness. As an adult, she recollects her time with Humbert dispassionately and doesn’t seem to hold a grudge against either him or Quilty for ruining her childhood. Her attitude suggests that as a child she had nothing for them to steal, nothing important enough to value. Her refusal to look too deeply within herself, and her tendency to look forward rather than backward, might represent typically American traits, but Humbert also deserves part of the blame. Humbert objectifies Lolita, and he robs her of any sense of self. Lolita exists only as the object of his obsession, never as an individual. The lack of self-awareness in a child is typical and often charming. In the adult Lolita, the absence of self-awareness seems tragic.

Clare Quilty

Mysterious, manipulative, and utterly corrupt, Quilty is Humbert’s doppelgänger. He serves as a kind of mirror image of Humbert, reflecting similar traits and thoughts but embodying a darker side of those characteristics that Humbert stridently disavows. Quilty and Humbert both adore nymphetts, but they act on their adoration in very different ways. While Humbert slavishly worships and idealizes Lolita, Quilty takes her for granted and wishes to denigrate her through pornography. Humbert paints himself as a man in love, while Quilty is, in many
ways, a more typical pedophile. Both Quilty and Humbert are men of letters, well read and very persuasive, but Quilty has a much more successful career. Quilty is also far less subtle than Humbert about his nymphet obsession. Quilty’s professional success and reputation perhaps allow him to get away with his deviant behavior, though he is well known for his predilection for young girls and has already faced charges. At his final encounter with Humbert, Quilty’s baroque speech, cavalier attitude, and persistent game-playing imply that he, like Humbert, is not quite sane. He dies in the middle of an attempt to bribe Humbert with a variety of perverse pleasures.

Physically, Quilty appears infrequently in the novel, but his presence asserts itself through a relentless series of hidden clues. These clues, which include initials, place names, titles, and many other references and suggestions, build and intensify, creating a dense cloud above the actual story that eventually bursts when Lolita identifies Quilty as her lover. The clues reinforce the idea that Quilty is Humbert’s double, since he exists more as a shadow than as a living human being. That Lolita adores the intangible Quilty and remains unmoved by solid, present Humbert represents one of the novel’s crueler twists, and suggests that Lolita may indeed have had her eye on a future outside of Humbert’s control.

Charlotte Haze

A typical middle-class, middle-aged American woman, Charlotte Haze aspires to sophistication and European elegance, but her attempts fall comically flat. She is religious and not particularly imaginative. Charlotte sees Humbert as the epitome of the world-weary European lover of—and in—grand literature. He represents her chance to become the woman she dreams of being, but her vulgar, self-conscious stabs at sophistication, such as her tendency to drop celebrity names and mispronounce French phrases, make Humbert cringe. Humbert usually refers to her derisively as Mama or the Haze woman. Charlotte’s love letter to Humbert traffics mainly in self-pitying martyrdom and melodramatic gestures. Nabokov portrays Charlotte with so little sympathy that the tragic elements of her character almost disappear. She dies, after all, knowing that the man she loves lusts after her own daughter.

Charlotte is not particularly fond of Lolita. Although Lolita’s adolescent tantrums certainly don’t make her a very likeable child, Charlotte’s distain signals a greater lack of motherly concern than normal. Charlotte seems to see Lolita as a threat, almost as competition, and she sends Lolita to camp to keep her from hindering her romantic plans for Humbert. Humbert, of course, sees Charlotte only as an obstacle to his romantic plans for Lolita. Though Charlotte is not an overtly kind
and wonderful mother, her presence does protect Lolita—when Charlotte dies, Humbert is free to kidnap Lolita and change her life forever.

2. Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Themes

The Power of Language

Nabokov revered words and believed that the proper language could elevate any material to the level of art. In Lolita, language effectively triumphs over shocking content and gives it shades of beauty that perhaps it does not deserve. Lolita is filled with sordid subjects, including rape, murder, pedophilia, and incest. However, Humbert Humbert, in telling his story, uses puns, literary allusions, and repeating linguistic patterns to render this dark tale in an enchanting form. In this way, Humbert seduces his readers as fully and slyly as he seduces Lolita herself. Words are his power, and he uses them to distract, confuse, and charm. He is a pedophile and a murderer, but he builds up elaborate defenses and explanations for his actions, and his language shields him from judgment. With Lolita, Nabokov’s ultimate achievement may be that he forces readers to be complicit in Humbert’s crimes. In order to uncover the actual story of pedophilia, rape, and murder within the text, readers have to immerse themselves in Humbert’s words and their shadowy meanings—and thus they must enter Humbert’s mind. By engaging so closely with Humbert’s linguistic trickery, readers cannot hold him at a far enough distance to see him for the man he truly is.

The Dispiriting Incompatibility of European and American Cultures

Throughout Lolita, the interactions between European and American cultures result in perpetual misunderstandings and conflict. Charlotte Haze, an American, is drawn to the sophistication and worldliness of Humbert, a European. She eagerly accepts Humbert not so much because of who he is, but because she is charmed by what she sees as the glamour and intellect of Humbert’s background. Humbert has no such reverence for Charlotte. He openly mocks the superficiality and transience of American culture, and he views Charlotte as nothing but a simple-minded housewife. However, he adores every one of Lolita’s vulgarities and chronicles every detail of his tour of America—he enjoys the possibilities for freedom along the open American road. He eventually admits that he has defiled the country rather than the other way around. Though Humbert and Lolita develop their own version of peace as they travel together, their union is clearly not based on understanding or acceptance. Lolita cannot comprehend the depth of Humbert’s devotion, which he overtly links to art, history, and culture, and Humbert will
never truly recognize Lolita’s unwillingness to let him sophisticate her. Eventually, Lolita leaves Humbert for the American Quilty, who does not bore her with high culture or grand passions.

**The Inadequacy of Psychiatry**

Humbert’s passion for Lolita defies easy psychological analysis, and throughout *Lolita* Humbert mocks psychiatry’s tendency toward simplistic, logical explanations. In the foreword to *Lolita*, John Ray, Jr., Ph.D., claims that Humbert’s tale will be of great interest to psychiatry, but throughout his memoir Humbert does his best to discredit the entire field of study, heaping the most scorn on Freudian psychology. For example, he enjoys lying to the psychiatrists at the sanitarium. He reports mockingly that Pratt, the headmistress of Lolita’s school, diagnoses Lolita as sexually immature, wholly unaware that she actually has an overly active sex life with her stepfather. By undermining the authority and logic of the psychiatric field, Nabokov demands that readers view Humbert as a unique and deeply flawed human being, but not an insane one. Humbert further thwarts efforts of scientific categorization by constantly describing his feelings for Lolita as an enchantment or spell, closer to magic than to science. He tries to prove that his love is not a mental disease but an enormous, strange, and uncontrollable emotion that resists easy classification. Nabokov himself was deeply critical of psychiatry, and *Lolita* is, in a way, an attack on the field.

**The Alienation Caused by Exile**

Humbert and Lolita are both exiles, and, alienated from the societies with which they are familiar, they find themselves in ambiguous moral territory where the old rules seem not to apply. Humbert chooses exile and comes willingly from Europe to America, while Lolita is forced into exile when Charlotte dies. She becomes detached from her familiar community of Ramsdale and goes on the road with Humbert. Together, they move constantly and belong to no single fixed place. The tourists Humbert and Lolita meet on the road are similarly transient, belonging to a generic America rather than to a specific place. In open, unfamiliar territory, Humbert and Lolita form their own set of rules, where normal sexual and familial relationships become twisted and corrupt. Both Humbert and Lolita have become so disconnected from ordinary society that neither can fully recognize how morally depraved their actions are. Humbert cannot see his own monstrosity, and Lolita shows only occasional awareness of herself of a victim.

Though Humbert sweeps Lolita away so that they can find a measure of freedom, their exile ultimately traps them. Lolita is bound to Humbert because she has nowhere else to go, and though Humbert dreams of leaving America with Lolita, he eventually accepts that he will stay in America until he dies. Though each of
them undergoes one final exile, Lolita to Dick Schiller and Humbert to prison, it is clear that they are first and foremost exiled from their own selves, an exile so total that they could never return to their original places in the worlds they once left. Exile in *Lolita* is tragic and permanent.

**Motifs**

**Butterflies**

Images of and references to butterflies and lepidopterology, the study of butterflies and moths, appear throughout the novel, emphasizing not only the physical similarities between the fragile insect and young Lolita but also the distant and clinical way in which Humbert views his lovely prey. He effectively studies, captures, and pins them down, destroying the very delicate, living quality he so adores. Virtually every time Humbert describes a nymphet, he uses such terms as *frail, fragile, supple, silky, or fairy-like*, all of which could just as easily describe butterflies. Like butterflies, nymphets are elusive, becoming ordinary teenagers in the blink of an eye. Lolita, in particular, undergoes a significant metamorphosis, changing from innocent girl-child to exhausted wife and mother-to-be. Next to such delicate and mercurial creatures, Humbert becomes aware of his own monstrosity, often referring to himself as a lumbering brute.

**Doubles**

Quilty is Humbert’s double in the novel and represents Humbert’s darker side. Humbert is evil in many ways, but Quilty is more evil, and his presence suggests that the line between good and evil is blurred rather than distinct. Humbert and Quilty seem near opposites for much of the novel. Humbert adores and worships Lolita, while Quilty uses and ultimately abandons her. Humbert presents his own feelings for Lolita as tender and Quilty’s as depraved. However, the men are more similar than different. Both are educated and literary. Both, of course, are pedophiles. Humbert sees himself as the force of good, avenging Lolita’s corruption, yet he himself originally robbed Lolita of her innocence.

By the end of the novel, Humbert and Quilty become even more closely identified with one another. When Humbert and Lolita play tennis one day, Humbert leaves to take a phone call, and Quilty sneaks in on the game to briefly become Lolita’s partner. Lolita eventually leaves Humbert for Quilty, but her new life is hardly an improvement. When Humbert finally confronts Quilty, the men become one and the same as they struggle with each other. Humbert, describing their fight, says, “We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us.” His jumbled use of the first-person and third-person plurals indicates that he and Quilty are no longer
distinct from one another. The already blurred line between the two men has now disappeared entirely.

**Games**

Almost all the characters in *Lolita* engage in games. Sometimes they consist of innocent amusement, such as when Humbert tries to interest Lolita in tennis and dreams of making her a tennis star. Humbert also plays many silly games with Lolita to get her attention and to keep her compliant. This sense of play reinforces the fact that Lolita is still a child and that Humbert must constantly entertain her. Games also distract characters from more serious issues and allow them to hide sinister motives. Humbert and Godin play chess so that they can pass the time without revealing their true selves. Quilty, in particular, plays word games with his hotel aliases, leaving puzzles for Humbert to decipher. The characters play games to hide the feelings they cannot reveal, to further their own ends, and to dissuade those who seek to discover the truth, including readers. Though the games start out as innocuous and childlike, they soon become deadly manipulations.

**Symbols**

**The Theater**

The theater becomes a symbol of artifice and artistry in *Lolita*. Humbert blames Lolita’s newfound ability to lie on her experience in the school play. Quilty uses the same school play to bring Lolita to him, and Lolita is awed by the theater because of Quilty’s influence. This is particularly poignant for Humbert, as he himself was never able to interest Lolita in any artistic endeavors. Ultimately, *Lolita* itself can be seen as a marvel of stagecraft: using language, theater requires an audience to willingly suspend its collective disbelief, in order to place themselves imaginatively in the world of the play. Like a theater audience, a reader may be aware of the craft and artifice involved in the narrative’s construction, but he or she nonetheless becomes a willing participant in the illusion. This involvement takes on a darker tone for the reader of *Lolita*, as the force of Nabokov’s artistry manages to make an incestuous pedophile not only understandable but also oddly sympathetic.

**Prison**

Even though Humbert writes *Lolita* from his prison cell, his confinement begins long before his murder of Quilty. From the moment he loses Annabel and realizes that he worships nymphets, Humbert understands that he is in a prison of his own making. He knows that his proclivities are forbidden by society, so he must put forth a respectable façade and hide his true desires. Nabokov also uses the concept
of the prison metaphorically to symbolize Humbert’s secret self. Humbert is initially imprisoned by his secret love for nymphets, then by his love for Lolita. By the end of the novel, however, Humbert has completely flouted all of society’s rules and thus escapes from his confinement. At that moment, though his body languishes in a real, physical prison, he finds himself free of the prison of respectability, and can thus reveal—and revel in—his true self for the first time. The prison, paradoxically, becomes a symbol of his psychological freedom.