

Lolita

Student Name

The story of *Lolita* is one of the most controversial tales ever written in the 1950's. Classified as an erotic novel, *Lolita* portrays the relationship between a middle aged professor, Humbert Humbert and a young adolescent, Dolores Haze. This story has a strong sense of allusions in reference to what is considered right and wrong in sexuality and psychiatry. As summarized through *Spark Notes*, it is said that, "Humbert's passion for Lolita defies easy psychological analysis, and throughout *Lolita*, Humbert mocks psychiatry's tendency toward simplistic, logical explanations," (Spark Notes, 2015). Humbert is a character who is very intelligent but has a psychological vulnerability to Lolita. His desire for her is described as love but is also portrayed as a dark obsession that leads Humbert to thinking violent thoughts and committing acts that he views as justifiable to keep Lolita safe and under his control. The book, in addition to the 1962 film by Stanley Kubrick and the 1997 film by Adrian Lyne, both focus on Humbert's perspective in this dark romantic tale. They portray Humbert in a way that calls to question Humbert's true state of mind. The emphasis of this research will be to compare the styles that each director takes in bringing this story to screen, from the psychological view of the story in relation to sex and alienation, to each director's vision as far as its development.

Kubrick and Lyne both begin the story with events that happen at the end of the movie. This method, known as 'in medias res,' gives the audience the end result of a film before diving into the scenes that lead to the conclusion. Several scenes are portrayed very similarly while the most notable is the use of narration. Humbert's diary is highly significant in both films because it gives the inner details that Humbert hides from others. *NPR* writer Bret Anthony Johnson states that, "the prose is by turns passionate and playful, while the narrative is simultaneously lyrical and unsettling and erotic and violent," (NPR, 2006). Humbert is initially a man who is fascinated by pedophilia and murder. However, the director alter the audience view of him by building up

Humbert's image as Lolita's only living guardian and showcasing his interactions with others who simply view him as an overprotective father. Lyne's view of Humbert is also darker than Kubrick's, due to the flexibility he had for the development of the movie. While Kubrick had to paint the characters in a more modest light due to the context of the story and the current age of movie developments, what he lacked in showing off physically he redeemed by having the Humbert be very straightforward in his descriptions. Lolita is more modest in dress in Kubrick's film and her sexual nature is shown through her personality and interactions with others. In Lyne's film, Lolita's state of dress is very provocative and he focuses a lot on capturing innocent moments of physical intimacy between her and Humbert.

A large focus of the story is the theme of sex. Humbert is highly attracted to young Lolita due to the fact that she acts as symbol of both innocence and sexuality. The physical connection between the two characters is highly dramatized through language used by Humbert. Both movies do not portray any sex scenes so the way that the audience understands the taboo relationship between Humbert and Lolita is through his entries within his diary, where he directly communicates about his desires and encounters with Lolita. Lyne manages to take his movie a step further and profile scenes where Lolita dresses half naked as well as when she and Humbert are naked together in bed while fighting over the money he was going to give her. Humbert's view of his relationship with Lolita defies the ways of psychology because he doesn't view his attraction as a way that can simply be explained through psychological reasoning. He views himself as bewitched by Lolita and it is within this strong desire that he finds himself becoming more psychologically vulnerable to her charms. Researcher Aurora, blogger for *Once Upon A Screen*, comments that, "Humbert starts off as creepy as he ends up even after the long and tiresome journey we are made privy to," (Wordpress, 2014). Humbert's attraction grows to

such vigorous heights that he soon describes how his relationship with Lolita takes a turn as he is forced to pay for her services and unable to easily manipulate her. Lolita is highly sexually active and drawn to various male characters in her life, from the boy she encounters at camp, to Humbert, and to Claire Quilty, a significant character in Lolita and Humbert's life. Although Quilty and Humbert both share the trait of being attracted to young girls, it is Quilty's sexual fascinations that contribute to Humbert's viewpoint that he is the antagonist that is responsible for Lolita's defiant behavior and exploitations. *Spark Notes* continues to mention that, "Humbert sees himself as the force of good, avenging Lolita's corruption, yet he himself originally robbed Lolita of her innocence," (Spark Notes, 2015). Kubrick portrays Quilty in a comical way but is very direct in showcasing his lust for Lolita, whereas Lyne shows Quilty to be very mysterious with his intentions until the very end when he and Humbert have their confrontation. The two are very similar in nature despite Humbert's denial. Just like Quilty, Humbert's strong arousal for Lolita was the driving force of the decisions he made, from marrying her mother Charlotte, to isolating her from others, and committing murder. Quilty wanted control of Lolita just as much as Humbert did and he always knew that the two were one in the same.

Alienation is another theme that Kubrick and Lyne focus on. Both adaptations do not go into detail about Humbert's past except for his previous marriage. Kubrick showcases Humbert as being happily divorced while Lyne brings out a darker side to the character as he reminisces on his first love, a young girl who had died of a chronic illness. Humbert's desire for Lolita is what drives him to be cautious of her association, especially towards the opposite sex. He is very obstinate when she communicates with other people, and even more so when he realizes that they are being followed. Lolita attaches herself to Humbert because he is the only person in her life she can now count on after the death of her mother. However, her focus is easily swayed at

the arrival of Quilty. To keep her attention on him, Humbert tries to engage her in various activities as well as appeal to her desire for money. This is how he manipulates Lolita into doing what he wants, although he tries to justify his actions by constantly taking on the father role and presenting himself as the proper guardian for Lolita. Johnson further stated that, “in a lesser writer's hands, we could easily dismiss Mr. Humbert as a monster, but Nabokov denies us that all-too comfortable option,” (NPR, 2006). Although initially, Humbert is trying to keep Lolita isolated mentally and physically so that she has no one to turn to other than himself, his character is painted in such a way that the audience can't help but feel empathy towards him. Both directors portray Humbert as a loving father like character despite his obsession towards Lolita and the villain of the story who is trying to break up their relationship is profiled as Quilty, who also is the only person who can see past Humbert's façade. After Lolita is taken from him, the isolation further drives Humbert mad causing his sanity to be questioned. Humbert sees Lolita as his salvation but at the same time, he becomes withdrawn from her once he sees the change within her by the end of the film where she has changed from his young nymphet to an older and more modest woman.

Lyne and Kubrick are very true to the story of *Lolita* and keep many events the same as the book. While Lyne is able to focus more on the sexuality of the story than Kubrick, both successfully deliver Humbert in a way that causes the audience to empathize with him rather than condemn him for his actions. They paint a story about lust and violence into one that is about love and the crime of passion. As noted by Elizabeth Janeway of the *New York Times*, “Humbert is the hero with the tragic flaw. Humbert is every man who is driven by desire, wanting his Lolita so badly that it never occurs to him to consider her as a human being, or as anything but a dream-figment made flesh 3/4 which is the eternal and universal nature of

passion,” (NY Times, 1958). By the end when Humbert realizes that his Lolita is gone he no longer sees value in his life. Both directors show Humbert as then experiencing suicidal tendencies, as he now views his crime of murdering Quilty as a waste. Humbert was chasing after a fantasy that could never be fulfilled and didn’t consider the fact that Lolita’s affection for him could differ from his own.

References

- Debating Kubrick's LOLITA (1962). (2014, September 12). Retrieved November 2, 2015, from <http://aurorasginjoint.com/2014/09/12/debating-kubricks-lolita-1962/>
- Janeway, E. (1958, August 17). The Tragedy of Man Driven By Desire. Retrieved November 2, 2015, from <https://www.nytimes.com/books/97/03/02/lifetimes/nab-r-lolita.html>
- Johnson, B. (2006, July 7). Why 'Lolita' Remains Shocking, And A Favorite. Retrieved November 3, 2015, from <http://www.npr.org/2006/07/07/5536855/why-lolita-remains-shocking-and-a-favorite>
- Lolita: Theme's Motifs and Symbols. (n.d.). Retrieved November 2, 2015, from <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/lolita/themes.html>