

## A Study on Lolita's Ethical Choices

Weihua Gao

Jiangsu University Jingjiang College, Zhenjiang 212013, China

### Abstract

**Lolita's life is short and tragic. The teenage girl's ethical choice of three men in her life directly determines her fate. Based on the ethical literary criticism proposed, the article tries to analyze the different ethical choices Lolita has made over three men who appeared in her life, and explains how these choices influence her fate through the natural will choice to Humbert, the free will choice to Quilty and the rational choice to Dick. Lolita completes her final ethical choice by her rational will choice which realizes the ultimate ethical redemption of her soul.**

### Keywords

**Lolita, ethical choice, natural will, free will, rational will.**

### 1. Introduction

*Lolita*, one of Nabokov's most representative novels, has received great artistic controversy since its publication. It is this artistic controversy that makes this great work flash with artistic light in different countries and different times. "Ethical value is the most basic value of literature, which reflects the essential characteristics of all literary values." (Nie Zhenzhao, 2014:13) Rereading this great work on the theoretical basis of ethical criticism of literature in the new era can better reflect the philosophical thinking on the ethical significance of the new era. Lolita's ethical choices over Humbert, Quilty and Dick outlines the short and tragic life of this charming teenage girl. Lolita's natural will chooses to enter into a complex and tangled ethical relationship with Humbert; and her free will cannot resist the temptation of the mysterious Quilty; after leaving Humbert and Quilty, Lolita wisely chooses to marry Dick and gives birth to a child. Three men have a great influence on Lolita's life. Lolita constructs her tragic destiny path through her own ethical choices. The ethical choices of Humbert and Quilty based on natural will and free will has brought her a miserable life experience. The choice of rational will over Dick finally reflects Lolita's correct ethical choice and realizes her own ethical redemption.

### 2. Lolita's Natural Will Choice Over Humbert

Humbert's fascination with teenage girls led him to eventually rent Mrs. Haze's house in order to get closer to the widow's daughter, Lolita. At first, Lolita regarded Humbert as a kind elder. Since Lolita is in a single-parent family, the lack of love from her father makes her interested in Humbert, a fatherly man who suddenly arrived home. Lolita is in her mother's bedroom trying to get the dust out of her left eye. Humbert licks out the grains of sand with the tip of his tongue, which, though in some ways rekindle Humbert's desire and vexation for Lolita, is nothing more than an ordinary family event for Lolita. "She laughed, and brushed past me out of the room." (Nabokov, 2000:46) In response to Humbert's intimate act, Lolita reacts more like a difficulty solved with the help of a paternal role. At this point, Lolita's feelings for Humbert exist more as a fatherly emotional experience.

One evening, Humbert and Mrs. Haze were sitting on the porch talking. Lolita squeezed herself between Humbert and her mother. Humbert spoke more cheerfully of his expedition to the North Pole. Lolita listened intently, but often slipped her ballerina toy into Humbert's knees and

kept moving herself. Her mother had to throw the doll into the room. In this scene, Lolita seems to revel in a family with two healthy parents: joining in parents' chat, coquetry beneath parents' love. Lolita's feelings for Humbert are more like feelings for her absent father, rational and precious. One rainy morning, Lolita's soft, melodious laugh came from outside Humbert's study: " 'Don't tell Mother but I've eaten all your bacon' " (Nabokov, 2000:52) These little things in life reveal Lolita's true feelings for Humbert: an elder to lean on and a friend to trust. From this point, Lolita's ethical needs for Humbert are in line with his growth needs.

Mrs. Haze was driving down town to buy a present for her friend, and in consideration of Humbert's taste in textiles and perfume, she decided to ask him to go with her. As Humbert got into his car, Lolita shouted from the living room window, " 'You! Where are you going? I'm coming too! Wait!' " (Nabokov, 2000:53) It was like a playful little girl who was afraid her parents would sneak out without her. Then Lolita climbed quickly into the car, "shivering with glee." (Nabokov, 2000:53) In a way, Lolita has come to accept Humbert as her absent father.

Lolita's feelings for Humbert are also gradually changing. Lolita was about to close the sedan door on the morning when Mrs. Haze took her to the campsite. When she looked up at Humbert by the window and hurried to Humbert's room. "in her Sunday frock, stamping, panting, and then she was in my arms, her innocent mouth melting under the ferocious pressure of dark male jaws, my palpitating darling! The next instant I heard her - alive, unraped - clatter downstairs. The motion of fate was slammed." (Nabokov, 2000:70), Lolita's intimate kiss farewell to Humbert breaks Lolita's inner moral restraint on Humbert being a substitute for the absent image of father. Lolita unwittingly treats Humbert as if he were her lover. This kiss is far more than an expression of the daughter's love for her father, but more like nostalgia for the lover who is about to leave.

However, the death of Mrs. Haze in a car accident brings great pain to Lolita, which also invisibly affects Lolita's ethical choice. The unaccompanied Lolita's feelings for Humbert gradually change. What started out as father-daughter affection gradually changed into something more intimate. Humbert picks up Lolita from Camp Q and hides the news of her mother's death from her. In the car, Lolita acts even more flirtatiously. "Hardly had the car come to a standstill than Lolita positively flowed into my arms. ... but she, with an impatient wriggle, pressed her mouth to mine so hard that I felt her big front teeth and shared in the peppermint taste of her saliva." (Nabokov, 2000:119) Lolita's ethical choice of Humbert has now been gradually replaced by her natural will choice. "The natural will is the most primitive will that approximates the animal part, such as the sexual instinct." (Nie Zhenzhao, 2014:42) Lolita's affection for Humbert is beyond what a daughter should feel for her father, even her stepfather. Lolita even ventured to ask Humbert, " 'Say, wouldn't Mother be absolutely mad if she found out we were lovers?' " (Nabokov, 2000:120) Within Lolita the ethical constraints are much more relaxed.

Humbert takes Lolita to different motels to hide the news of her mother's death. Humbert stayed at a motel called The Enchanted Hunters the night he picked up Lolita from Camp Q. "Then she crept into my waiting arms, radiant, relaxed, caressing me with her tender, mysterious, impure, indifferent, twilight eyes - for all the world, like the cheapest of cheap cuties." (Nabokov, 2000:128) Lolita is lustful for Humbert, even though she is an underage girl. Lolita had this experience when she was at Camp Q. What's more, Lolita agrees that the experience is " 'sort of fun' and 'fine for the complexion' ." (Nabokov, 2000:146) It can be seen that Lolita's free will dictates her ethical choice of Humbert: Humbert becomes her lover. This emotional experience is an unbalanced one. If one succumbed to the will of nature, one would be reduced to an animal, and the consequences of allowing one's own life to be dominated by one's own primitive desires would be terrible.

In the absence of a father, and the unfortunate death of her mother, Lolita reduced to a homeless child. Under these circumstances, Lolita followed Humbert on an extensive tour of The United States. During this Pan-American journey, Lolita's relationship with Humbert becomes complex.

Lolita's emotional needs for Humbert are gradually dominated by a desire for possession. This natural will makes Humbert a slave to her own body, and Lolita begins a life with Humbert being her lover. Different from Humbert's trying to possess Lolita in the hotel at the very beginning and deliberately showing the ethical relationship as father and daughter, Lolita completely abandons her rational ethical restrictions on herself and shows Humbert's her natural possessive desire. In the ethical choice of Humbert, we see the influence of Lolita's "free instinct and primitive desire on one's destiny." (Nie Zhenzhao, 2010:19) Ignoring the constraint of moral will on self-behavior, natural will takes the most primitive principle of happiness as the standard. Once the balance is broken on normal emotional needs, the result of natural will will be tragic.

### 3. Lolita's Free Will Choice Over Quilty

"Free will is the part that approaches rational will, as the conscious pursuit of a purpose or demand." (Nie Zhenzhao, 2014:42) Lolita's choice of Quilty is due to her free will, which reflects Lolita's most primitive love and conscious pursuit of Quilty. Although Quilty was not directly involved in most of Lolita's life, he influenced her fate with a ghostly presence.

Lolita chose Quilty because of her free will. The depiction of Quilty in the text is quite indirect. In Humbert's excerpt: "Quilty, Clare, American dramatist." (Nabokov, 2000:33), and Mrs. Head, referring to the dentist: "Our neighbor, in fact, Dr. Quilty. Uncle or cousin, I think, of the playwright." (Nabokov 2000:66) And on the wall of Lolita's bedroom were posters that read, "A distinguished playwright was solemnly smoking a Drome." (Nabokov 2000:73) and Humbert's first encounter with Quilty at the Enchanted Hunters: "Suddenly I was aware that in the darkness next to me there was somebody sitting in a chair on the pillared porch. I could not really see him..." (Nabokov, 2000:134) The profile of Quilty basically describes his character: dark, cunning and gives a negative emotional experience. Quilty appears as a hidden figure, but his presence has a huge impact on the fates of Lolita and Humbert.

Lolita had indirect contact with Quilty at a very young age. The posters hanging in her room, and Lolita's keen interest in drama, allude to a later connection to Quilty's fate. Lolita's first contact with Quilty is at The Enchanted Hunters, "but visibly burning to point, at the lone diner in the loud checks, in the far corner of the room." (Nabokov, 2000:129) When Quilty's car followed Humbert's, Lolita made contact with Quilty. This gradually leads Lolita's free will choice over Quilty. "Free will is the outward manifestation of human desire, and rational will is the outward manifestation of human reason." (Nie Zhenzhao, 2014:42) As Lolita's love for drama and other arts, Quilty, as a playwright, is a great attraction for her. Under the domination of natural will, Lolita chooses to disappear from Humbert's world and comes to Quilty's arms.

Lolita's infatuation with Quilty fades with his weird behavior. Because of Quilty's dirty behavior, Lolita finally leaves Quilty. In the relationship between Lolita and Quilty, Lolita's ethical choice is based on a direct choice of free will. Quilty, on the other hand, lets Lolita make some weird, dirty porn. Lolita refuses to participate and is chased away by Quilty. But in Lolita's mind, Quilty "was a great guy in many respects." (Nabokov, 2000:293) This fully testifies to Lolita's conscious love and free will for Quilty. But Quilty has no genuine affection for Lolita, whom he sees as a dispensable part of his erotic film. Lolita's free will represents a certain ethical screening. This not only contains the pure and persistent side of Lolita, but also reveals the lack of rational thinking and brings about a tragic fate for herself. In the end, Lolita breaks free of free will, leaves Quilty and begins her own life of rational choice.

### 4. Lolita's Rational Will Choice Over Dick

"The rational will is the part that is close to the moral will, such as the standards of good and evil in judgment and choice, and the code of ethics. (Nie Zhenzhao, 2014:42)" Lolita's choice of

Dick is based on the rational will, which reflects Lolita's inner judgment of good and evil and morality. In Lolita's eyes, Dick was the commonest, the simplest, the kindest man to be committed to life, unlike Humbert and Quilty. Dick took a job with his mechanical major in Alaska and would move there with Lolita. At this time, Lolita is also pregnant. Her future with Dick is full of hope, there will be a child and a completed family.

Humbert suffers greatly from Lolita's disappearance. This led Humbert to spend the next few years searching for Lolita until he heard from her. "I guess he'll come right for Christmas. This is a hard letter to write. I'm going nuts because we don't have enough to pay our debts and get out of here." (Nabokov, 2000:282) The letter mentions that Lolita, who is married and pregnant, is in debt and wants to borrow some money from Humbert. At this point, Lolita, from a rational point of view, reunites with Humbert not because of emotion, but because of the difficulties of life. Due to the financial difficulties, they turned to Humbert for help. It was a huge message to Humbert that at least he would be able to see Lolita again. "I was again on the road, again at the wheel of the old blue sedan, again alone." (Nabokov, 2000:283) Humbert, excited and worried by the letter, followed Lolita's address to find her. At this moment, Lolita's feelings for Humbert is no longer under the control of free will, but out of the need of rational will. Also based on rational will, Lolita chooses to marry Dick rather than return to Humbert. Because Lolita's relationship with Humbert is deformed and unhealthy. Similarly, her feelings of Quilty's, on the one hand, though full infatuation and love, but in the face of Quilty's unreasonable demands, she finally broke free of the shackles of free will, leaving Quilty.

Dick, a war veteran, "Arctic blue eyes, black hair, ruddy cheeks, unshaven chin... He had nice sad eyes with beautiful lashes, and very white teeth." (Nabokov, 2000:290) When Humbert met Dick, Dick was busy repairing the house. "in a rather primitive vista, a dark-haired young stranger in overalls, instantaneously reprieved, was perched with his back to me on a ladder fixing something near or upon the shack of his neighbor." (Nabokov, 2000:287) Compared with Humbert and Quilty, Dick was the only young man with a healthy heart and a healthy personality. And the only one who, ethically speaking, can live a normal life with Lolita. Lolita chooses to marry Dick and gives birth to a child based on her own rational will, which reflects her inner view of good and evil and morality. Dick was a hardworking man, and Lolita dreamed of a bright future with him in Alaska.

Although Humbert eventually struggles to get Lolita back into his arms, Lolita's relentless refusal undoubtedly tells Humbert her inner choice: to live a hard but hopeful life with Dick rather than to live an ethically free life with Humbert or Quilty. This reflects Lolita's final growth and ethical choice. It is an intellectual and moral choice. Although she was pregnant and living a hard life, Lolita was happy in her heart. "Under normal circumstances, we are always happy with our physical pleasures. And in the process of returning to normal qualities, we even experience pleasure from the opposite, such as bitter things..." (Aristotle, 2003:219) Lolita's choice over Dick as her life partner is based on her rational will, which reflects Lolita's inner growth and reflection on ethical choices.

Lolita's ethical choice over Dick also reflects Lolita's yearning for a happy family to some extent. Lolita grew up in a fatherless family from the start. From childhood to adulthood, she did not get the father's care and love. Lolita's mother falls in love with Humbert after meeting him and wants to send her to the camp so she can be alone with Humbert, without much caring for Lolita's growth. Lolita actually grew up in a family where both father and mother were absent or relatively deficient, which also affected Lolita's psychology invisibly. For example, it appeals to something like Humbert's paternal and lover needs; the rebellious love of Quilty. Lolita eventually marries Dick, and although living on a tight budget, they will move to a new place. Dick will have a good job, Lolita is pregnant, and they will have a truly completed family. This means something to Lolita: to live in love and hope. When Lolita resolutely rejects Humbert's last fantasy, her ethical choice is rational, and she is old enough to have the standards of ethical

judgment. At this moment, Lolita is the most morally rational Lolita with the standards of good and evil in her heart.

## 5. Lolita's Self-ethical Redemption

If we look at Lolita's life from an ethical perspective, we will find that her life is unique and controversial. Humbert enters Lolita's world as a tenant at the beginning. But Lolita, in the absence of paternal love, seeks in some way a paternal concern in Humbert. "But the adolescent rebellion and the pressure of the real environment make them deeply restless, or they have the admiration and love for the handsome and promising young talents around them, or they have the attachment and admiration for the tender and caring middle-aged men." (Liu Ge, 2016:104) If Lolita's mother had not passed away, if Lolita had not gone on a Pan-American trip with Humbert, would Lolita have become a happy step-daughter? But in fact, Lolita has more emotional needs for Humbert than a stepdaughter would normally have. Lolita's repeated physical contact with Humbert had broken Humbert's inner line of ethics, which actually allowed Lolita to make her own ethical choices wildly. The natural will comes from the desires of the heart, the most primitive physical desires. What Lolita does to Humbert is morally incestuous. This kind of behavior is taboo, and it can nourish terrible consequences. Lolita's ethical choice of Humbert is based on the most primitive desire, which will inevitably lead to the rupture of her relationship with Humbert when the primitive desire cannot be realized. Lolita's sudden disappearance from Humbert's world illustrates this point. The choice based on natural will is a wrong ethical choice, and Lolita's choice has caused her soul great suffering and trauma.

On the ethical level, free will has a higher requirement than natural will. Because free will is closer to rational will and consciously pursues its own ends, it is not based entirely on the most primitive animalistic desires. Lolita had been fascinated by Quilty even before she met Humbert. This fascination is pure without primal desire. The poster in Lolita's house shows that Lolita is more like a starstruck teenager. Lolita does not know much about Quilty's real personality and life. When Lolita decides to leave Humbert, she begins her life with Quilty. A secret connection with Quilty begins before Lolita gets sick and is taken to the hospital. It was also Lolita's conscious approach to Quilty, whom she had always had a crush on. Quilty's life and morals proved to be more chaotic and inferior. This leads to the reveal of Quilty's true nature and Lolita leaves again.

Compared with Humbert, the literature professor, and Quilty, the playwright, Dick seemed ordinary and real: a worker with mechanical expertise who had found a good job in Alaska. Lolita's life with Dick is not described much. But through Lolita's letter to Humbert. "DEAR DAD: How's everything? I'm married. I'm going to have a baby. I guess he's going to be a big one." (Nabokov, 2000:282) In a few short sentences, Lolita informs Humbert of her current life and marital status. Between the lines is Lolita's longing for a better future: a family, a kid, and the hope for the rest of life. This should be the most normal life. Lolita chooses Dick as her husband and is about to start a family. her choice of Dick is based on the rational will, which accords with ethics and the standards of good and evil. She did not tell Dick about his relationship with Humbert and allowed no one to ruin her life with Dick. In this sense, Lolita has grown into a person of complete ethical value and rational judgment, a completely different Lolita from the one she was with Humbert or Quilty. Through the final rational choice, she completely bid farewell to her chaotic self of ethical choice and realized her moral redemption. Although Lolita eventually dies in childbirth, by uniting with Dick, she achieves her own ethical choices and redemption.

## 6. Conclusion

Lolita's life is a life of ethical choices. The ethical choices over different men around her determines her destiny and meaning of life. The natural will choice of Humbert's distorts Lolita's physical and mental health; the free will choice of Quilty achieves Lolita's inner pursuit to some extent, but Quilty's despicable behavior makes Lolita feel physically and mentally tortured, and finally she quits; the marriage with Dick is the result of Lolita's rational will choice, which is healthy and full of hope, and represents Lolita's ultimate rational and moral ethical choice. "Ethical choice is a way for people to choose good and reject evil and become a moral person." (Nie Zhenzhao, 2014:6) Through the final choice of rational will, Lolita completed the transformation of herself, realized the final ethical choice, purified her soul, and completed the ethical self-redemption, although her life was short and tortuous.

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