

**TRANSNATIONAL VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S LOLITA APPROACHED VIA
KELLY'S PERSONAL CONSTRUCT**

**THEORY, JUNG'S PSYCHO-ANALYTICAL THEORY AND NEMOIANU'S THEORY
OF THE SECONDARY**

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Abstract: The paper focused on Nabokov's Lolita suggests, through these two proper names, the transnational dimension of this novel due to the fact that the novelist was born in Russia, educated in Cambridge, lived first in Germany, then in France and finally in the United States and embraced most of the previous literary experiments (surrealism and dadaism) from these countries, polishing them up through his verbal and intellectual refinement. For decoding the profound psychological implications of Nabokov's Lolita, Kelly's personal construct theory will be turned to account through its considerations on the self "as if" it were a community of selves (the logical and the emotional one) and on the fact that personal reality is in "feeling, in felt engagement, not in the events described" (Kelly in Mair, 184). Since any good piece of writing should be concerned with transformations of awareness, at least in the readers, Nemoianu's theory of the secondary will be also employed by us in order to show that construction and deconstruction paradoxically go hand in hand. Jung's archetype of the shadow will be finally exploited by us in order to show that only through reconstructing oneself, through surfing the dark side of one's personality, one experiences the annihilation of the dark self, its death, followed by a symbolical moral rebirth.

Keywords: Vladimir Nabokov, George Kelly, personal construct theory, Jungian psychology, archetypes, theory of the secondary.

When it comes to decoding and interpreting the complex psychological patterns in Nabokov's "Lolita", which through these two proper names suggest the transnational dimension

of this literary contribution, a preliminary presentation of the novelist's life experience needs to be given.

Vladimir Nabokov was born in 1899 in Saint Petersburg in a Russian aristocratic family, studied in Cambridge in the UK and left for Germany in order to avoid exile (due to the 1917 October Revolution in Russia). Although he wrote many novels, poems, plays, critical essays, a biography of Nikolai Gogol and translations from and into the Russian language, he was hardly known in 1962 when *Lolita* was published. After having lived for a while in Germany and in France, he finally left for the United States where he earned his living working as a university professor, his summer hobby being entomology. The background of the author's evolution as a writer has been shortly commented upon, because his life experience had a major impact on Nabokov's way of writing. This happens due to the fact that his interest in psychological patterns and forms of consciousness or non-consciousness finds its source in the fact that he is an European first attracted and then disappointed by several American behavioral patterns (Vargas, 221), which he could hardly accept or understand.

The body of analysis consists of the novel's subject matter which, simple as it seems, hides a complex psychological pattern: the seduction of a twelve-year-old girl – Dolores Haze, also called Delly, Lo or Lolita, by her Swiss step-father, known under the pseudonym Humbert Humbert, and their so-called love story throughout various states, towns and lodgings from the United States, its dénouement, and his consequent fall.

Critic Llosa Vargas' reading of the novel insists on its explicit meaning, which arises from his considering *Lolita* the written confession of Humbert Humbert addressed to those judges who were appointed to try him for murdering Clare Quilty, the dramatist and screen-player with whom Lolita runs away after the two-year incestuous relationship with her step-father. This problematic relationship was based on his abnormal predilection for precocious girls, a predilection that was amplified and materialized in his intention of seducing Lolita, who was living with her rich and widowed mother, Mrs Charlotte Becher Haze, in a New England village. To get covert access to Lolita, Humbert befriends, seduces and marries her mother. Soon after their marriage, however, Charlotte dies in a car accident and Humbert then becomes the legal guardian of Lolita. Their "semi-incestuous" (Vargas 219) relationship dramatically comes to an end. Lolita is hospitalized in Elphinstone for neurotic recovery and taken away from there

by the dramatist Clare Quilty. Humbert desperately looks for them and finds them, kills Clare, and is then caught and put on trial for his murder.

In telling this sordid satire, Nabokov's novel offers a lot of details, some of them alarming and rather frightening. In order to understand the author's hidden intentions regarding the topic and its moral and social connotations, a psychological approach via George Kelly's writing will be closely analyzed as part of the methodology of this paper, followed by a few considerations on Jung's insights, further extended by applying Nemoianu's theory of the secondary.

Kelly, in his major contribution, *A Psychology of Personal Constructs*, draws attention upon how a person as "a personal scientist" can get involved in an unusual "personal inquiry" (Mair 184) into the "unknown" (184) and make sense of the self as well as of the surrounding world.

To get involved in personal inquiry means, according to Kelly, to explore aspects of imagination and to regard behavioral issues in relation to various aspects of the human psyche. Mair's article on Kelly insists on the psychologist's concept of the self "as if" it were "a community of selves" and on the fact that personal reality is in "feeling, in felt engagements, not in the events described" (184).

Following Kelly's methodology of becoming more fully concerned with feeling, the image that best articulates what is being felt is that of the divided self of Humbert. The repetitive pattern "Humbert, Humbert" (the main character's name) can be further considered from the perspective of Kelly's "communion of selves": the logical and the emotional, divided fragmentary, split and yet unconceivable in separation.

Following Kelly's model, we gradually get to what the private inner self of Humbert is feeling. Moreover, we become familiar with a "mirage of abstractions" (Vargas 220) which, for the sake of convenience, can be regarded as a "tight box-like" (Kelly in Mair, 184) place. Such an approach centered upon a concrete image facilitates an imaginative journey on the part of the reader because the image of the box is easier to visualize compared to the character's life conceived as a "mirage of abstractions" (Vargas 220). As such, the private inner self of Humbert can be imaginatively approached following Kelly not only as looking at the "box-like" (184) emotional environment, but as being in the box.

It is here that methodology becomes art and part of the research component proper of this paper. Humbert's confessional story regarding his assumed guilty behavior in relation to the

main characters in the novel might look incredible unless we bear in mind the fact that Nabokov plays upon various ingenious games which turns reality into a “labyrinth of words” (Vargas, 221) with hidden and mysterious connotations.

“Searching for understanding” (Mair 196) is characteristic for Kelly’s psychological perspective and involves a mixture of feeling and imagination. For Kelly, feeling represents “an activity of intimate exploration, involving touching and being touched by experience” (in Mair 196). Such an approach encourages us to further question the character’s life bodily and “holistically” (196) in order to turn to good account and to surface significant changes in the character’s and readers’ awareness. Moreover, in order to analyze how the character’s life can turn into a “transforming journey” (Kelly qtd. in Mair, 201) we should identify the circumstances under which Humbert is caught up in the violence of his incredible life events which led him to murder Clare Quilty.

The deep structure and the profound significance of the novel are closely related to the libertine, drunkard, and doped dramatist Clare Quilty who seduced Lolita and enticed her to run away with him. Since Kelly’s basic assumption is that “man is a form of motion,” (Kelly in Mair, 185) this potential fluidity will be exploited by us in the sense that Humbert’s private self is not only *in* the box (in the emotional and irrational background of the book), he *is* the box, physically and spiritually identifying himself with Clare, the victim. (Kelly proposed the box experiment to his assistant who was suffering from neurosis, suggesting her to imagine that she is no longer in the hospital room, but in the box. She was asked to further contemplate that the box cards changed into skin and to conceive herself as being the box proper which took her directly into her mother's womb. There, she could identify what went wrong in her relation with her mother and so she got cured).

Getting back to Humbert's identification with Clare, Vargas' opinion on this matter perfectly suits our interpretation. Vargas regards Clare as Humbert’s “double” (220), mainly because Humbert was several times hospitalized in a mental asylum and as such, his story reads as his “schizophrenic invention” (220). We assume that one of Nabokov’s linguistic devices that encourage such an unusual reading is the characters’ names: the repetitive pattern Humbert Humbert, on the one hand, and, Clare Quilty, on the other. Through a slight alteration of Clare into Clear and of Quilty into Guilty, we get to the image of a character suffering from the

monomania of persecution related to his maniac neurosis (probably the main reason for having often been hospitalized).

As such, Humbert's journey in search of Lolita can be regarded as an imaginative journey meant to revive the two happy years spent in her company by reiterating their former itinerary where Humbert pretends to keep finding delusive traces and messages from Clare. Such traces only prove the two characters' "subliminal complicity" (Vargas 222). In terms of similitude, both Clare and Humbert are fond of writing, of fictionalizing and are equally attracted by little precocious girls, in general, and, by Lolita, in particular. What is even more shocking is the fact that a large part of the novelist's concern is to analyze Humbert's preparations for killing Clare. Nabokov's descriptions are full of postmodern devices such as humor, digressions, linguistic games and literary allusions, all fully analyzed by Vargas, which make the reading of the novel enjoyable.

The search for understanding meaning (the most significant part of the research component), takes us back to regarding and commenting upon the novel as Humbert's written confession addressed to the judges meant to put him on trial and convict him; as such, we assume that there is a double trail – a judicial and a moral one. The end of the novel also represents the end of Humbert's process of psychic and moral disintegration, due to his "remorses" (Vargas 223). His split personality, consisting of the lucid accusatory conscience, on the one hand, and, on the other, his "abject and defeated body" (223), through Kelly's "community of selves" (185) are to be regarded as incompatible and yet incapable to live in separation.

Vargas' reading reveals the fact that Humbert Humbert did not actually kill Clare Quilty, but himself. Echoing Vargas, we will psychologically approach the end of the novel and employ Kelly and Jung as two interesting entries to provide further proofs in favor of the previously mentioned assumption of Vargas.

Kelly, in his psychological inquiry, closely exploited by us, implies that the box (Humbert's emotional background) is made of skin and not only this, but it feels like a womb (in Mair, 202). The womb is regarded by Jung as standing for death. Humbert's death can be explained via the archetype of the shadow. Therefore, Humbert seems to have identified himself with a social mask (that of the well-off and well-meant step-father), experiences the inflation of the persona, being entirely deprived of his individuality. Only by facing the shadow, the dark side of his personality, one can experience the annihilation of its coercive force. The bringing to

conscious view of the dark side of one's personality also signifies the annihilation of the dark self, its death (in our case, through having killed Clare Quilty, Humbert has symbolically and neurotically annihilated his dark self).

Kelly associates such experiences with "transformations of awareness" called by him "enchantment" (205). So, enchantment is a "raised and transformed state of consciousness" "which appears in "recognizing and living in relation to an ideal or a set of values that can take you through dangers and difficulties that would otherwise have seemed impossible to face" (Kelly in Mair 205).

Humbert's dark self and its overriding force can be also approached via Nemoianu's theory of the secondary. In Nabokov's *Lolita*, the theory of the secondary can offer us an extensive reading of this novel in association with the phenomena of corruption, decadence, disorder, relaxation and indolence, which seem to have molded Humbert's personality. Since the secondary stands for the "vivid and complex negativism" (Nemoianu qtd. in Buciu 12), these features are indirectly revealed in Nabokov's novel through the narrator's instinct of conquering women and of controlling them.

For properly understanding Nemoianu's theory of the secondary, a short presentation of this issue needs to be inserted in our paper. Buciu, in his approach to Nemoianu's theory of the secondary, claims that the basic theoretical model belongs to Max Weber, but the background is one borrowed from Hegel. The same Buciu argues that Nemoianu celebrates the secondary, claiming that "our unique access to the essential, to the principle can be only accomplished resorting to the secondary and to indirect strategies" (in Buciu, 12). Nemoianu also claims that "marginalism is more abundant than centralism, diversity is more abundant than clarity" (in Buciu, 12).

Buciu also shares Nemoianu's conviction that the secondary is first and foremost in the foreground, "that it is the winner" (12). The secondary challenges the principal and the question is whether the secondary is another type of the principal. Since the principal is classified as "recessive", Nemoianu speaks about "the assertion of the secondary in front of the principal" (12), adding that "the secondary has overturned and defeated the principal" (12).

Equally interesting in Nemoianu's argument that "the secondary consolidates the principal by opposing it" (12). The argument that "the secondary is another type of the principal" (12) is relevant because it has become "autonomous" and "self-divisible", according to the

Romanian philosopher's opinion. Consequently, it seems that the principal has almost disappeared, being "recessive, overturned" (12). Since the theory of the secondary is a theory of submission and decadence, the secondary has been approached as a "vivid, complex negativism" (12), its necessity arises from its "dissimilarity and details" (12). It is "indefinable and shift", but within the "limits of the national and the necessary" (12). Buciu shares Nemoianu's opinion regarding the "mythical function" of the secondary in the sense that "it is the winner because it has lost, illustrating failure as success" (12). Buciu concludes saying that "this is the paradox of the historical and philosophical secondary" (12). To our further surprise, the article reveals "the defeated and retrograde reaction" and "regression". It shows us the way towards the future, which, in postmodern literature and history is the way towards "liberation" and "individualism" (12). All these features are relevant for our approach because, although women are of secondary importance in Nabokov's *Lolita*, they are the actual winners. Instead of being controlled, they control and influence Humbert's life.

In Nabokov's *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert is driven, in all his actions, by his need to be the master of all those with whom he gets in touch. Moreover, his most intense actions and emotions prove to be not only the result of his abnormal physical desires but rather of his psychological need to possess, to control and why not, to win. By the end of the novel, these features prove to be the real causes of his emotional and psychological troubles, because instead of mastering women, *Lolita* in particular, he is controlled and subjugated by them.

From the very beginning of the novel, Humbert uses every opportunity to reveal his power of seduction: "I was, and still am, despite *mes malheurs*, an exceptionally handsome male... I could attain any adult female I chose" (25). Seduction seems to be the best way of beating the competition with other men. Yet, he also seems to intend to control women for "unconventional reasons" (Vargas 219). For instance, when he decides to marry Valeria early in the story, he insists on the reasons which made him choose her as follows: "It occurred to me that... all the conventions of marriage... might help me, if not to purge myself of my degrading and dangerous desires, at least to keep them under pacific control" (24). On the next page, he admits he has chosen her mainly because of "the imitation she gave of a little girl" (25).

We also learn soon that Valeria's altered physical condition (she grew older and fatter), made him lose his interest and respect for her. When he learns that she is having an affair and wants to divorce him, he explodes in fury for two different reasons: first, a woman whom he

considers to be completely controlled by him dares to take actions and affect his “comfort” (29), and second, another man has intruded upon his territory.

“Affected” (Vargas 221) as he was, Humbert is still able to continue to live, moves to America (despite having been periodically hospitalized in mental institutions), and finally meets Charlotte Haze, clearly intending to use her in order to get to Lolita. He assumes that controlling Charlotte by marrying her would bring him closer to Lolita, only to realize that Charlotte is completely out of his control, which frightens him and even starts passively contemplating her murder. Her “convenient” (Vargas 221) dying in a car accident makes him the legal guardian of Lolita.

Humbert’s behavior, a mixture of corruption, decadence, physical and mental disorder, can be regarded as a valuable instance of “the assertion of the secondary in front of the principal” (which stands for order, empathy and progress) in the words of Romanian philosopher Nemoianu (in Buciú 12).

Humbert’s relation with Lolita is described by Nabokov as consisting of two parts. In the first part, he becomes her legal guardian and she has no other option but him, while, in the second part, he loses her. The first part, focused on Humbert’s physical involvement with her, can be read in relation to Nemoianu’s theory, in terms of the power component.

Interestingly, the scenes describing their relationship induce the idea that both Humbert and Lolita have and exert a certain amount of power. Lolita is endowed with some sort of sexual power that enthralls Humbert and he seems to be weak enough and needs to allow him to be subjugated by her. His weakness and loneliness can be also associated with his mother, whom he very much misses and who seems to have been the only positive person in his life. If we regard his mother as belonging to the category of the principal in terms of its positive connotations, then, Nemoianu’s argument that “the secondary consolidates the principal by opposing it” (qtd. in Buciú 12) is relevant.

From this perspective, Humbert’s feelings for Lolita can be regarded as the expression of true love, as he tries to retrieve the memory of his mother and make it last through this young and innocent creature. Even so, their relationship is constantly threatened by fear of discovering that she does not love him, which brings about his state of insecurity, further increased by her unwillingness to cooperate. He continues to strive to keep her for himself for several, almost

paradoxical reasons: for reminding him of his previous adolescent innocence, for sexual fulfillment, and last but not least, for his need to control her.

Lolita's departure can be again interpreted via Nemoianu's theory where it is mentioned that the way towards the future is towards "individualism" and "liberation" (12). Her choice of liberating herself from him makes him experience shame of proving himself a failure as a lover, father and male competitor.

Humbert's obsession for control ends with his killing Quilty, that image which symbolically mirrors Humbert's dark hidden self, his shadow. Such an interpretation can be further commented upon via Nemoianu's theory. According to Nemoianu, the "mythical function" of the secondary arises from the fact that "it is the winner because it has lost, illustrating failure as success" (in Buciu, 12). At the end of the article dedicated to Nemoianu's theory of the secondary, Buciu concludes saying that "this is the paradox of the historical and philosophical secondary" (12), which, as we have already shown, is also relevant as concerns Nabokov's *Lolita*.

To this, we would add that literature tends to be "constructivist" in the sense that it attempts to stop "the entropic tendency towards the decline" (in Buciu 12), offering us examples and teaching that the ultimate purpose of our life is not selfishness, but selflessness. This can happen through reading and interpreting literature via interdisciplinary approaches, because such approaches offer us suggestions and solutions for personal enlightenment.

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