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## The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name: How Language Is Used To Conceal Perversion And Desire In *Lolita* And *The Awakening*

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### Abstract

*The language used by authors and the characters they create is, of course, of the utmost importance when it comes to our understanding of texts and, throughout history, this language has been used as a shield behind which characters (and their authors) can hide. This paper focuses on the language of sexuality and shows how characters use language to conceal the true nature of their sexuality in two different ways through two different novels: Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. I argue that, in *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert uses language not only to hide his own perversions but that, in fact, he is successful in doing so, normalizing it in the process, generating sympathy for himself, and painting all those who oppose him as villainous. In *The Awakening*, we take a look at the representation of female sexuality, where Chopin hides the controversial matter of Edna Pontellier's sexual awakening and subsequent sexual autonomy behind an intense narrative style. In both cases, language is used in an attempt to protect oneself, either from judgement or persecution, when discussing the conventionally taboo subject matter of sexuality. And, in both cases, this attempt has been a futile one.*

**Keywords:** *The Awakening, Lolita, Paedophilia, Perversion, Romance, Sexual Awakening*

There are multiple ways one can interpret a “love that dare not speak its name”, a phrase from the last line of Lord Alfred Douglas’ poem “Two Loves” (28). The fact that this quote was used in Oscar Wilde’s obscenity trial is no secret and, keeping the implications of such an act brought about by the government (who, it may be presumed in this case, represented the public voice at the time) in mind, can this discussion move forward regarding the correlations between language and its portrayal of relationships considered taboo. The objective of this essay is to complicate the reasoning behind the usage of the type of language that is deemed essential to the representation of controversial modes of sexuality by paying particular attention to the linguistic features of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* and Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*. The literary anomalies, if they can be designated thus, which present themselves in both these novels, are crucial in their depiction of contemporary culture of the time while simultaneously useful in the implications of their portrayal of their respective protagonists.

Pifer argues that “Nabokov deploys the devices of artifice to break the reader’s identification with *Lolita*’s narrator” (186) but I believe that most readers would have an experience quite contrary to what

Pifer has stated. The protagonist Humbert Humbert's linguistic prowess forces the reader to don Humbert's own, purely subjective point of view, resulting in not only a certain disdain for Lolita's character but, almost shockingly for the reader, a sympathetic understanding of Humbert Humbert's saga of unrequited "love." This is evident from the start, not only from the use of the term "Lolita" to denote a "precociously seductive girl" (Merriam-Webster) in popular culture, but also in his own admission, stating, in the first chapter of the novel: "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style". (Nabokov 7) Despite this, the reader may find themselves in a state of commiseration, acting as a good indicator of how effectively Humbert's description has turned a victim of paedophilia into a seductress.

*Lolita's* narrator promulgates this notion further in several ways. His mellifluous (and, oftentimes, superfluous) use of language attempts to seduce the reader, to manipulate and control their perception, giving them the judicious label of "jury" (Nabokov7). The reader's experience is one "of sifting through its layers of images, associations, and allusions" (Pifer187) and what this achieves is constant distraction and deviation from the truth. This convoluted pretence of honesty (or, perhaps, confession) serves to distance Humbert from the "reality" of his actions while simultaneously getting closer to the sympathies of the reader. This is expected when one considers the fact that Nabokov himself referred to "reality" as "one of those words which mean nothing without quotes" (354), a philosophy very much taken advantage of by Humbert Humbert throughout his narration. As such, we must look at this narration as less of an act of confession and more of an act of persuasion which attempts to manipulate the reader into believing *his* truth above anyone else's, a task made easier by his position as the solitary source of information. His descriptions of himself as "an exceptionally handsome male" and intermittent mentions of his status as a sophisticated intellectual (Nabokov 25) are also crucial in moulding the reader's perception of him as respectable and trustworthy.

Another useful stratagem lies in his portrayal of other characters in the novel. Charlotte Haze, Lolita's biological mother, is referred to mockingly as "the Haze woman" (Nabokov43) and is clearly portrayed as someone who aspires for European sophistication and elegance through Humbert Humbert but fails, sometimes quite miserably, oftentimes humorously. Humbert describes her as the woman "who thinks she knows French" (Nabokov47) and as someone who is melodramatic and pining for his attention, as evident from the love letter he receives from her. It is important to note that the contents of this letter (Nabokov 76) are derived from Humbert's memory, and is further evidence of the subjective veil through which the reader is witness to the secondary characters, even though he claims he remembers the letter verbatim. Then there's Clare Quilty, who serves as Humbert's doppelganger; he remains a mere shadow throughout

the novel, mysterious and foreboding, presumably presented in this manner as a result of Lolita being in love with Quilty (Nabokov314). He is painted as a more stereotypical paedophile who takes advantage of her and tries to force her into lascivious acts (unlike Humbert himself, whose love for her is “true”).

The most important of these character assassinations is, of course, the one of Lolita herself: despite her physical beauty, her adolescent behaviour constantly frustrates him and, vicariously, the reader. She is seen as rebellious and insolent, completely invested in the superficiality of pop culture, an example of which is her inability to “read any other book than the so-called comic book or stories in magazines for American females” (Nabokov196). This pushes the reader into uncomfortable territory, where they may find themselves becoming comfortable with the idea of viewing Lolita as an uncouth seductress. Humbert invents an entirely new language to denote the type of young child he is attracted to, terming them “nymphets” (Nabokov14), another attempt to not only alienate Humbert’s victim, but also distance himself from the grotesque nature of his actions and his relationship with her.

But what is Humbert Humbert’s purpose in such literary games? What do they achieve, occurring frequently throughout the novel? An interesting example of this can be found in the constant use of doubles, repetition, and alliteration: Humbert Humbert, Clare Quilty as his doppelganger, Harold Haze, Gaston Godin). These games are a crucial part of Humbert’s narration, which tries not only to distract, but also to protect himself from the persecution of the readers he deems to be the “jury,” giving his paedophilia legitimacy. The hyperbolic language mimics the clichés of romance, and the unrequited nature of his love, especially his desperate pleas to Lolita (Nabokov317), allow Humbert Humbert to be even more relatable and empathetic. All the narrative can be, in the end, is a plea for innocence, and succeeds in “asserting and celebrating the humanness of those lovers” (Clancy 102). Considering the history of persecution that is all too well associated with literature and art that deals with the profane, one might even wonder if through the hazy density of the narration, Nabokov is protecting himself as much as he is Humbert Humbert.

As we move on to *The Awakening*, it is important to keep in mind that, “historically, pornography has been delineated by men and male preoccupations” (Michelson 168). This is relevant to put into context the radical nature of Chopin’s novel, making it one of the first novels to explicitly (to a certain extent) deal with female sexual autonomy. It is indeed a woman’s sexual “awakening,” and this is expressed invariably through the use of different kinds of language, which help the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, break free of the role society has appointed her, a role that her husband aptly describes as “mother-woman” (Chopin 8). Her initial experience of the frankness of self-expression is found in her meetings

with the Creole women, whose “freedom of expression,” which boasts a complete “absence of prudery,” and which she finds at first “incomprehensible” but later is “impressed” by (Chopin9). But this is merely a stepping stone: it allows her to be desensitized to the shocks of finding the truth of her own voice.

The other form of expression she finds is art, the epitome of which can be found in the character of Mademoiselle Reisz. Her character is the very essence of everything that Edna, at this point, aims to be: free from marital responsibilities, independent, and immersed in the world of art. Mme Reisz’s music evokes deep emotions in her, and Chopin’s emotive language provides stark images which represent Edna’s intertwined mental and sexual states, often heightening to a crescendo which borders on the orgasmic. A good example of this can be found when Edna recalls Mme Reisz playing her the piece Edna had herself entitled “Solitude” and it conjuring up the “figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him” (Chopin25). The persistence of imagery in this extract is undeniable; it wholly represents how she feels: alone, trapped, and wanting to be as naked as the man she imagines. In the same chapter, a transformation is witnessed with regards to the same piece of music. She waits for the old images to come but they do not; they have been transformed into the language of her sexual awakening: “the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body” (Chopin26).

Most important in her sexual journey is Robert Lebrun. Though their relationship remains physically unconsummated, his boldness of expression regarding his affections encourages her to break free from her husband who sees her as “a valuable piece of personal property that has suffered some damage” (Chopin2). Her feelings for Robert, utilizing the language of love, serve to “bewilder her” and move her “to dreams, to thoughtfulness, to the shadowy anguish which had overcome her” and it is of little surprise that she finds that “the voice of the sea is seductive,” since Robert is the one who taught her to swim. All this forces her to “recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (Chopin13). The language used here clearly indicates the gradual evolution of Edna’s sexual being; it is interspersed with the mimicry of an erotic revival. Stone asserts that “because [Robert] has aroused sexual desire in her, she eventually has an affair with another man, Alcee Arobin, an affair which functions as a rite of passage to sexual autonomy” (25). One cannot help but agree, as this allows her the freedom of expression, both verbally and physically, to let her desires take the lead.

But to adorn a layman’s approach: what is the point? Whereas Nabokov’s *Lolita* uses language to hide, Chopin’s protagonist uses it to break free. The linguistic features of the novel bring the truth of the matter,

despite subjectivity, to the forefront. It is no surprise that critics at the time found her representation oftentimes abhorrent, securing no sympathy for the protagonist. One critic deemed it a “very bad use in her writing,” one that will influence the youth in amoral ways (“Books of”15) and another goes as far as to say that “we are well satisfied when Mrs Montpelier deliberately swims out to her death” (“Book Reviews” 794). Though the subject matter is one that was radical for its time, Chopin refrains from explicitness: she brings about the awakening through the use of grandiloquence and metaphor.

To conclude, language provides a much-needed veil, a literary vanguard of sorts, for authors, though, it is evident, most of the time, and this has been unsuccessful as the controversies which follow them exhibit. This merges the author and narrator almost into one, especially in the case of *Lolita*: the language distracts, deviates, convolutes, but to protect the narrator as much as the author from persecution. The use of “resplendent language... problematizes the reader’s response by coercing us into empathy” (Rodgers) though, to what extent this is successful, is still up for debate. Language is used by writers in an attempt to bring about the subjectivity of its characters to the foreground of human experience and, thus, language alleviates their stature as morally sentient beings. Consequently, as most readers are paradoxically stuck between a position where they are repulsed by the act and where they find sympathy for the character, they cannot help but reduce their own harshness of judgement, thereby keeping the protagonist, and subsequently, the author, safe inside language’s embrace.

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