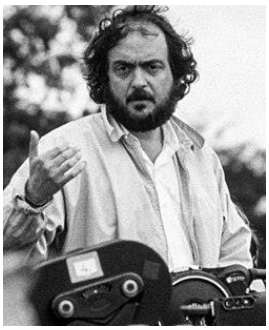
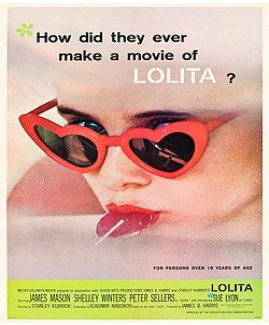
HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Sexuality in Cinema

Lolita (1962)
Stanley Kubrick (1928-1999)



Director Although Kubrick's films are often perceived as highbrow, art-house productions with esoteric themes, many of them do, in fact, address fundamental social problems. The director kept abreast of current affairs and, while his storytelling was subtle and his cinematography was distinctive, he used cinema to critique social practices and political policies. He had a near-constant focus on the common man, with all his flaws and undesirable impulses, and was attuned to the ways that he was mistreated by authority and institutions. Social hierarchy and class divisions breed inequalities. Kubrick would accept that social institutions are necessary to curb man's violent and sexual impulses, but he wondered if the price we paid for social order was an equally undesirable suppression of individual freedom.



Film Based on Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel of the same name, *Lolita* was released in 1962 to a flurry of accolades and condemnation. Where the novel often defies static categorization, the film is very obviously a black comedy, relying on Peter Sellers' gag of playing multiple characters and some slapstick moments to keep the mood light despite the implications of Humbert and Quilty's pedophilic desires. Despite (or, perhaps, due to) controversy, *Lolita* was a box-office hit, earning a neat $9.2 million on the film's ~$2 million budget. With a total of 9 award nominations and two wins, *Lolita* spurred Kubrick's career in the direction of *Dr. Strangelove* and *A Clockwork Orange*, both of which relied on dark comedy to critique society, and away from the serious and stoic productions like *Paths of Glory* and *Spartacus*.

Background While the screenplay is credited to Nabokov, very little of his actual treatment makes it onto the screen. His first attempt at a screenplay of his novel written in 1960 was over 400 pages in length and led to the first comment that the film couldn't be made: Producer James B. Harris was quoted as saying, "You couldn't make it. You couldn't *lift* it." In spite of his public politeness about the film, in several interviews and comments to friends, Nabokov betrayed that he didn't like the film much and felt it failed to get across his complex ideas, especially that of the unreliable narrator. Much controversy has followed the film even into the modern era. While the initial uproar came from a repressed society which feared any discussion of sexuality but especially that which is taboo, modern critiques focus on Kubrick and other's frankly salacious comments that 13-year-old Sue Lyon was an 'obvious sex object.'

MAIN CHARACTERS

Humbert Humbert – a professor who lusts after Lolita

Charlotte Haze – a widow who marries Humbert

Dolores "Lolita" Haze – Charlotte's teenage daughter

Clare Quilty – a playwright and lover of Lolita

SYNOPSIS

Humbert Humbert, a middle-aged professor in small-town America, is sexually attracted to young Lolita, the daughter of Charlotte, in whose house he rents a room. Widowed Charlotte falls in love with Humbert and demands that he leave the house unless he marries her. Humbert marries Charlotte, but only in order to stay close to Lolita, and soon has his prayers answered when Charlotte is killed in an accident after discovering his disturbing diary containing confessions of his pedophilia. Humbert and Lolita embark on a sexual relationship, which has its ups and downs. When rumors of their abnormal relations grow, Humbert takes her away on a road trip, during which they are followed by a mysterious car. Everything comes to a sudden end when Lolita is spirited out of a hospital bed by a man (Quilty) who claims to be her uncle. Humbert is devastated at his loss. Years later, he receives a letter from Lolita. She is married with a child and wants money to go to Alaska, where her husband has job prospects. In their final meeting, she reveals to Humbert the truth of their relationship. Quilty was her true lover, who deceived Humbert, playing various roles. Angered, Humbert tracks Quilty down and kills him.

PLOT



Mansion – A car rolls through heavy fog until it approaches a huge castle-like mansion. The reckless driver speeds into the courtyard and throws on the brake before stepping out and entering the building through the front entrance. Inside the home looks almost abandoned: Mismatched furniture sits piled together under sheets, packed crates litter the foyer, but there are signs that someone has been drinking, and heavily. After looking around the squalid manor for a moment, the man begins shouting: “Quilty! Quilty!” Beneath a sheet on a chair, someone stirs, knocking over a wine bottle. “Huh?” Quilty mutters, hungover. “What?” He rises, draping the sheet around him like a toga. The man confirms that the other is Quilty and begins slowly interrogating him, while Quilty demands the two play “lovely Roman ping-pong like two civilized senators.” Begrudgingly, the man agrees, picking up a paddle. Eventually, Quilty asks who the man is, and he simply replies, “You know who I am.” After a few more attempted rallies, the man, surprised, says, “You really don’t remember me, do you?” Quilty ignores the question, prattling on about ping-pong.



Murder – “Do you recall a girl named Dolores Haze?” The man asks Quilty. “Lolita!” Quilty remembers, chuckling. “I remember that name alright.” Without a word, the man draws a revolver, the sound of the hammer clicking back piercing the air. Quilty tries to use humor to defuse the situation, grinning while saying, “Gee, you’re some sort of bad loser, captain.” The gun still leveled at him, Quilty says he’s “dying for a drink” before wandering deeper into the house. The man follows. “You’re dying anyway, Quilty,” the man says in an angry growl. Quilty continues to deflect with his odd sense of humor, diving into characters in an attempt to distract and weasel his way out of trouble. The man hands Quilty a letter listing his complaints, which Quilty reads with his trademark humor. Unable to stomach the goofy man any longer, he snaps back the letter and begins shooting at Quilty. Only one shot hits his leg. As the man reloads, Quilty drags himself up the stairs. The man pursues and shoots Quilty as he tries to hide behind a painting.



Years earlier – A title card reads, “Four years earlier.” We’re shown a Lockheed Constellation flying past New York City. The man who shot Quilty narrates his actions, stating that he’s traveled to America to seek his fortune, “where so many Europeans had found a haven before.” A montage shows his journey by plane, train, and automobile to Ramsdale, New Hampshire. As his taxi pulls up to a boarding house, he explains that his expertise in French poetry landed him a position at a college in Ohio, and Ramsdale was meant to be a stop

along the way there. Soon after his arrival, the landlady, leads him up the stairs, showing him the room he'll be renting and the rest of the house, talking about the town and calling him Mr. Humbert. Eventually, she shows him *her* bedroom, inquiring about any "Madame Humbert" in his life. He says he's divorced, and she expresses her interest vaguely but obviously. Humbert tries to be polite about not being interested, but it's difficult to avoid Mrs. Haze's advances. Needing the rent and trying to get Humbert to stay, Mrs. Haze leads him out to the garden.



The garden – Outside, rock and roll blares from a tiny little transistor radio as a young woman sunbathes on the lawn in a bikini. She looks up to see Mrs. Haze and Humbert walking outside. The older man is obviously taken with the beautiful teenager, and Mrs. Haze introduces them. Whereas moments ago Humbert was trying to escape the house to find different lodging, he suddenly decides to stay. Mrs. Haze finds his turnabout strange and asks what changed his mind. Humbert says it was her garden and the offer of cherry pies, stoking her pride. That evening, mother and daughter take their new tenant out to the drive-in theater. Humbert revels in the young Lolita squeezing his hand in terror at the monster movie on screen. Later that night, Humbert teaches Mrs. Haze to play chess, and Lolita gives them both a good night kiss. Sometime later, Humbert finds himself hypnotized watching Lolita practice her hula hoop in the garden. Mrs. Haze interrupts the moment with a flashbulb camera, asking Humbert, "See how relaxed you're getting?" She is oblivious to his attraction to her daughter.



Summer dance – In an auditorium, the Ramsdale high school throws a summer soirée. Students spin slowly on the dance floor as the camera drifts down from the balcony above, picking out Lolita and her date. She sees her mother among the chaperons and asks her date to come say hello with her. Mrs. Haze introduces Lolita's date to Humbert. He has to fight to keep the jealousy from tinting his expression as the young couple dances back out into the crowd. "I think tonight's the night!" Mrs. Haze says, telling Humbert that Lolita's date is going to ask her to go steady. Another couple of chaperons approach them. They chat amicably, despite Humbert showing clear displeasure with the over-familiar nature of the man's conversation and physical presence. The husband asks to dance with Mrs. Haze, who accepts since Humbert doesn't dance. The wife tells Humbert about how his presence has been good for Mrs. Haze, asking him not to repeat what she's said. The conversation moves to vague suggestions of swinging. The others return, and Humbert leaves to find punch glasses. While the parents discuss sending their daughters to Camp Climax, Humbert takes a moment to spy on Lolita on the dance floor.



A chat with Quilty – Finding a seat to rest after their dance-floor exertions, Mrs. Haze and the other couple spy a famous person dancing: Clare Quilty. Mrs. Haze is overcome with fanatical delight, and she butts in on Quilty's dance partner. Quilty quickly absconds after realizing what has happened, but Mrs. Haze doesn't relent, forcing the man to talk to her. She remembers him from the talk he gave at her literature club… and what the two did afterward, but Quilty doesn't remember her, though he feigns interest in her for the sake of pleasing a fan. "Listen," he interrupts, "didn't you have a daughter with a wonderful, lovely name?" She confirms that Lolita is her daughter, and Quilty seems oddly delighted. A bit later, Mrs. Haze and Humbert sit on the balcony, drinking punch and eating cake. The other parents appear and invite Lolita to stay the night with their daughter. Mrs. Haze quickly accepts after the usual polite refusals. Humbert, realizing what's going on, begins to protest, saying they should come and chaperon, but the parents won't hear it. Mrs. Haze takes the cake away from Humbert, saying they'll go home for a "cozy little dinner." Humbert grimaces.



Dinner for two – Humbert busies himself setting the table when Mrs. Haze appears in a new dress. “I hope I didn’t keep you waiting too long,” she coos, putting on a little show for him. “I thought I’d change into something… cozier.” Humbert tries to brush her off, but she won’t hear it. Humbert changes his tactics, saying he feels as if he’s become a member of the family, trying to deliver advice about raising Lolita. Mrs. Haze laughs at him and his talk of Lolita growing up too fast: Girls exploring relations with the opposite sex is just the nature of growing up, she explains. She slaps him on the shoulder, calling him, “charmingly old world.” Charlotte is only interested in getting closer to Humbert, asking to teach him some new dance moves as a samba record plays. When he finally gives in, Mrs. Haze realizes that Humbert’s face reminds her of past lovers, including her late husband. Realizing what’s coming, Humbert begins to panic slightly, unwilling to be with Mrs. Haze but also unwilling to insult or slight her lest it lead to losing access to Lolita.



Home early – “Take me in your arms!” Mrs. Haze says, holding Humbert close. “I can’t live in the past, not anymore, Hum.” A voice comes from the stairway: “Hi.” It’s Lolita, home early. “Cha-cha-cha?” Lolita asks mockingly, approaching her mother. “Did you come back for something?” Mrs. Haze asks. “Mona’s party turned out to be sort of a drag,” Lolita says. “So I thought I would come by and see what you two were doing.” Mother and daughter begin to fight as Mrs. Haze realizes Humbert is going to start paying attention to Lolita, telling her to head to bed when he offers to make the girl a sandwich. Lolita protests, but Mrs. Haze tells her to take it upstairs. Lolita mentions Quilty, saying “all the girls are crazy about him.” Humbert returns with her sandwich, and Lolita sits down, cramming it into her face. Mrs. Haze demands she go to bed, and the two fight for a moment before Lolita retreats to her room. “Oh, that miserable little brat!” shouts Mrs. Haze. “The idea of her sneaking back here and spying on us!” Humbert defends Lolita, and Mrs. Haze blurts out some embarrassing feelings. He avoids her by going to bed himself.



Breakfast – Humbert writes in his diary, his voice narrating: “What drives me insane is the two-fold nature of this nymphet… This mixture in my Lolita of tender, dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity. I know it is madness to keep this journal, but it gives me a strange thrill…” Downstairs, Mrs. Haze works hard makingbreakfast. She walks to the dinner table, where Lolita loads up a cereal bowl. Her mother makes some comment about her getting too fat when she dumps sugar on her cereal. Mrs. Haze shouts more commands at the girl, who makes a face when she leaves with Humbert’s breakfast tray. Before she makes it to the stairs, she is interrupted by a phone call and asks Lolita to take the tray. On her way up the stairs, Lolita eats some of Humbert’s food. Knocking on the door, she announces herself with her mouth full. Humbert quickly locks his journal away. “Don’t tell mom,” she says, “But I ate all your bacon.”



Poem – “What were you writing?” Lolita mumbles through a mouthful of toast. “A poem,” Humbert replies. Lolita doesn’t believe him, saying the notebook looked “sorta like a diary” when she saw it. Humbert says writing poems in a diary is one of his “little idiosyncrasies.” Lolita comments that he’s probably scared someone will steal his ideas and sell them to Hollywood, and he changes the subject, offering to read another poem he enjoys; an ode to Edgar Allan Poe. “I think it’s a little corny, to tell you the truth,” Lolita says, still snacking on Humbert’s breakfast. Surprisingly, she has a good critique of a clumsy rhyme, and Humbert praises her: “If you were my student, I’d give you an A+.” Humbert shifts the subject again, asking if Lolita’s friend was disappointed that she left early the night before. She starts to

gossip and stops herself, thinking he'll tell her mother. When Humbert promises that he'd always keep Lolita's secrets, she gives him a strange "reward", attempting to feed him his fried egg the way a Roman slave would feed grapes to her master. From downstairs, Mrs. Haze calls for Lolita, telling her to put on a dress. "Sieg Heil," Lolita says sarcastically.



Glorious surprise – Mrs. Haze rings a hand bell. "I have a glorious surprise for us," she says to Humbert, seated across the table. "One of your dramatic sweets?" Humbert guesses. After a few more guesses, Mrs. Haze tells Humbert that Lolita is going to summer camp. While the main idea behind the plan is to keep Lolita away from boys, it's clear Mrs. Haze wants more time alone with Humbert. A nervous twitch develops on Humbert's face, which he blames on a toothache when Mrs. Haze notices. Using his fake toothache as an excuse, Humbert heads to bed early.



Packing for camp – Birds chirp in the early morning light as Lolita loads into the station wagon that will take her and her friend to summer camp. Humbert is stirred awake by the noise of car doors and thumping luggage. He rises from his bed and watches from his top-story window, and Lolita looks up to meet his eyes. "I'll be right back," she says to an adult before running back inside. Tense music plays, rising to a romantic swell as Lolita meets Humbert at the top of the stairs in a big hug. She plants a kiss on his cheek, lamenting that she won't see him again since he has to move on to his college job in the fall. "I guess this is goodbye," she says, sadly. Outside, the station wagon honks. "Don't forget me," she says before running back outside. Thinking he's alone in the house, Humbert wanders into Lolita's room as romantic music plays. He smells her pillowcase and lies in her bed before he's interrupted by Mrs. Haze's maid. She gives him a letter, an ultimatum. Laughing, Humbert reads that she wants him to leave or to marry her.



Secrets and insecurities – In her bed, Mrs. Haze stirs, her arm outstretched to the rumpled covers on the other side of the bed. "Hum?" she shouts sleepily. "Hum, baby?" Writing in his diary in his room, Humbert sighs and takes his activities to the bathroom for added privacy. In a voice-over, Humbert narrates, "The wedding was a quiet affair. And when called upon to enjoy my promotion from lodger to lover, did I experience only bitterness and distaste? No. Mr. Humbert confesses to some titillation of his vanity." Mrs. Haze, now Mrs. Humbert, finds him locked in the bathroom and declares, "Sweetheart, I don't want any secrets between us. It makes me feel insecure." "Can't this wait until I come out of here?" Humbert asks from the bathroom, still writing in his diary. She asks what he does for so long in the bathroom, and he deflects. She starts talking about his past lovers, saying he didn't tell her about all of them. "Charlotte," Humbert says, "if it would make you any happier, I will sit right down and make a complete list of every woman I have ever known. Whining, Charlotte tells Humbert that she's lonely and that it's healthy to be jealous.



Faith – After sending her downstairs to make coffee, Humbert stashes his diary back in his room. She appears suddenly, saying that none of his other lovers ever mattered because they were "profane" and their love is "sacred." back in Charlotte's bedroom, she asks Humbert if he believes in God while he takes a swig from a bottle of liquor. "The question is," he chokes out, "does God believe in me?" Charlotte crosses the room and pulls something from out of a drawer, saying, "If I ever found out that you don't believe in God, I think I'd commit suicide." From the bag in her hand, she pulls out a revolver bought by her late husband. Humbert reacts to the sight of the gun, and Charlotte says it isn't

loaded. After getting her to put the gun down, Humbert begins kissing and holding Charlotte while looking at Lolita's picture on her nightstand.



Lolita, calling long distance – A phone call interrupts their kissing and discussion of fantasies. "This is Mrs. Charlotte Humbert. I'll accept the charges," Charlotte says to the person on the other end of the phone. "It's Lolita, calling long distance," she tells Humbert. Shouting as if to cover the distance between them, Charlotte talks to her daughter about the honeymoon and Lolita losing her sweater. "Yes, he's here," she says eventually, looking at Humbert. "What do you want to thank him for? Candy?" After covering the receiver with her hand, Charlotte begins chastising Humbert for sending Lolita candy without her permission. He ignores her at first before exploding in a list of complaints about how Charlotte tries to control and emasculate him. Charlotte throws the phone at him before storming off. When he picks up the phone, he only hears a buzzer.



Loaded revolver – While finishing off the bottle of liquor, Humbert notices that there are bullets in the revolver. Gingerly, he picks up the gun and swings out the cylinder and drops the bullets on the floor. His thoughts play out in a voice-over as he dreams about committing a 'perfect murder' to gain control of Lolita. "Just minutes ago, she said it wasn't loaded," he thinks. "What if I playfully pulled the trigger, then?" As he slots the bullets back into the cylinder, he dreams up what he would say to the police to make them believe his story. Loaded revolver in hand, Humbert begins looking around for Charlotte. He thinks she's in the bathroom drawing a bath, but when he opens the door, she isn't there. He finds her in his study.



"**No longer your dupe"** – Seated at his writing desk, Charlotte pours over his diary, holding it close to her face to decipher his minute script. "That's my diary," Humbert says somewhat playfully. "We don't read other people's diaries, now do we?" Charlotte lashes out at him when he tries to take the diary away. "The Haze woman," she says with an angry chuckle, "the cow, the obnoxious mama, the brainless baba. Well this stupid Haze is no longer your dupe." She begins hurling insults back at him, threatening to throw the diary out the window for all to see, while throwing papers at him. Charlotte tells Humbert that she's leaving, and he can have the house, "but you are never seeing that miserable brat again!"



Cocktail – Charlotte sprints down the hall and locks herself in her bedroom. From the other side of the door, Humbert tries to gaslight her, shouting that she's insane and hallucinating. "I'll get you a drink," Humbert stammers before running downstairs. Speaking to her late husband's portrait, she says that she should have listened to his request to not remarry. "Why did you go and die on me!?" she shouts at his ashes. Picking up the urn, she holds it, begging forgiveness. "You were the soul of integrity," she sobs. "How did we produce such a little beast?" In the kitchen, Humbert rushes around, pouring a mixed drink and shouting up through the floorboards, trying every manipulation tactic he can, saying the diary was fiction and that they can just talk these things out. The phone rings, and Humbert rushes to answer. "What?" he asks with confusion. "But my wife is upstairs in the bedroom. Is this some sort of prank?"



Siren – “Charlotte! There’s a man on the phone who says you’ve been hit by a car!” Humbert shouts up the stairs, laughing softly. The wind blows the front door open, and Humbert puts down the phone to shut it. Outside, an ambulance siren wails as rain pours. Humbert steps outside to see what all the hubbub is about, as neighbors in raincoats rush after the speeding siren. Humbert rushes up to find Charlotte lying in the middle of the road and several emergency workers clearing people away from the scene. The man who hit her says it wasn’t his fault, that he swerved to avoid a dog, and Charlotte ran into the road without looking. “Are you the lady’s husband?” the EMT asks Humbert. “I’m afraid she’s dead.”



Condolences – Sometime later, in his bathtub, Humbert tries to drink a cup of liquor off of his chest while the jaunty theme “Lolita Ya Ya” plays. After failing a few times, he lifts the cup with his hand. Suddenly, a voice comes from downstairs: “Humbert?” Humbert closes the shower curtain part way and invites his unexpected guests up. It’s his neighbors, who shower him with condolences. One of them sees the revolver placed on the bathroom sink and believes the worst, while Humbert goes through the motions of expressing the expected amount of grief. The doorbell rings, and another man enters, walking hesitantly into the bathroom. He is the father of the man who drove the car, and to make amends, he offers to pay for Charlotte’s funeral which Humbert accepts. The man leaves happily.



Camp Climax – After a montage of highway footage, Humbert eventually arrives at Camp Climax. Teenage girls ride horses, work cleaning sports gear, and walk to the nearby river in their bathing suits. Humbert is shocked to see a teenage boy enter the office with an armful of towels. “Do you work here?” Humbert asks, and the boy strikes up a conversation with him while he works. He’s the son of the owner, and he performs a lot of odd jobs around the camp. He admits to knowing Lolita, but denies knowing her well. The camp owner enters and tells Humbert that Lolita is packing her things, but they “haven’t told her anything.” The film jump cuts to Lolita in the station wagon quizzing Humbert about “the big mystery.” Humbert doesn’t respond with any emotion, saying, “There’s no big mystery, it’s just that I didn’t want to talk in front of the other girls at your camp. It’s your mother.” “She give me time off for good behavior?” Lolita jokes. “She’s sick,” Humbert replies. He explains their itinerary, saying they’ll have to stay overnight in at least one hotel, as it is a long drive and he has plans for later.



Hotel – In the dark of the night, the lights of a hotel shine bright. Inside, Mr. Quilty approaches the front desk with his companion from the summer dance. Quilty strikes up a conversation with the clerk, finding out that he was an actor, before talking about some upcoming play he’s writing. With veiled sexual overtones, Quilty changes the subject to “letting off excess energy” talking about how his companion practices Judo with him and throws him all over the place with a strange glee in his voice. Soon thereafter, Lolita and Humbert enter. “Wow,” says Lolita. “This looks swank.” Quilty notices her and quickly exits. After a bit of talking, Humbert is able to get a room for himself and Lolita: The hotel is full up due to a police convention. In the room, Humbert strikes up an awkward conversation about sharing space, and Lolita tells him to go see about a cot so they don’t have to share a bed.



Patio – Back in the hotel lobby, Humbert sips on a glass of cognac while inquiring about the cot. Quilty listens nearby, hiding his face behind the funny pages of a newspaper. Seeing Humbert wander out onto the patio, he follows. Quilty strikes up a stilted, awkward conversation, pretending to be a policeman. He eventually quizzes Humbert about Lolita and his intentions for her. Quilty insinuates repeatedly that he'd love to have a "lovely, pretty, little girl" like Lolita. Humbert doesn't seem to take too much notice, more frustrated by the man's prattling than anything else. The strange conversation ends with Quilty trying to talk his way into Humbert and Lolita's hotel room. Humbert excuses himself after this uncomfortable, one-sided conversation.



Cot – Outside a hotel room, a bellhop knocks. Humbert stops him, whispering that Lolita is inside, and they should try not to wake her. In an almost perverse reversal to the tense and telling conversation on the patio, a slapstick scene unfolds as Humbert and the clumsy bellhop attempt—poorly—to quietly set up the cot. They fall over each other and make quite the racket, yet Lolita remains asleep. Sometime later, Humbert hovers over Lolita like a vampire over its sleeping victim. She stirs, simply saying, "Hello." She sits up and realizes that the cot has come. With that, she scoots to the center of the bed and tells Humbert, "Well, good night." With a deep, disappointed sigh, Humbert gets into the cot for the night. As he prepares to fall asleep, the cot collapses under his weight.



Morning – Birds chirp and Lolita groans. Sunlight pours in through the window. The girl rolls over and slides from the bed before crossing to the cot. Kneeling by her stepfather, she is silent for a moment before harshly whispering, "Wake up, Humbert! The hotel's on fire!" Humbert stirs and begins to panic as Lolita goads him more: "The hotel's on fire! Quick! It's burning right down to the ground!" She grins and giggles as Humbert realizes it's a prank. "What time is it?" Lolita asks, grabbing at Humbert's wristwatch. "It's breakfast time," Humbert replies. He plays with her hands for a moment, noting the mobility of her finger joints, which she demonstrates further before teasing him about his unshaven face. Lolita, while hungry, refuses to go downstairs for breakfast, deciding to tell Humbert—in veiled terms and whispers—about a sexual encounter she had at camp with the owner's son. The camera fades as Lolita lowers herself toward Humbert's waist.



"**How long until we get to Lepingsville?"** – Lolita sits beside Humbert in the front seat of the station wagon, sipping a soda and munching on some chips. "You ever kiss the Blarney Stone?" she asks, suddenly, and Humbert says he never had the chance. "I wish I could," she says, and Humbert suggests planning a trip to Ireland. "Let's tell mother," Lolita says, grinning. "Tell mother what?" Humbert asks. "You know what," Lolita says. "No," replies Humbert, "I don't think that will be very funny." Lolita chats a little more before asking, "How long until we get to Lepingsville?" Humbert says they may not make it this evening. Satisfied with his answer, Lolita asks if they can see a movie in the evening and begins talking about her taste in film. She then asks Humbert to stop at a gas station so she can phone her mother, but Humbert makes some poor excuses, and Lolita gets angry. Seeing no other way out of the situation, Humbert tells Lolita her mother is dead. She giggles at first, but her smile fades when she realizes it's not a joke: "Your mother is dead," Humbert repeats.



Tears – Another night on the road. Another motel. In this one, Lolita sobs in the adjoining room while Humbert lies sleeplessly on his bed. Eventually, she comes sobbing into his room and lies on his bed. Humbert sits up and away from her, saying, “Try to stop crying.” Lolita keeps sobbing. “Everything’s going to be alright,” Humbert tries next. “Nothing will ever be alright!” Lolita says between sobs. “I’m sure we’re going to be very happy, you and I,” Humbert says, leaning down toward the girl, stroking her hair. Lolita continues to lament the loss of her mother, and Humbert tries to get her to stop crying with the promise of trips and gifts. Nothing seems to calm her down. Eventually, Lolita asks for a handkerchief and starts to calm down. She crawls onto Humbert’s lap, and he cradles her. “Promise you’ll never leave me?” Lolita asks, still near tears. “I don’t wanna ever be in one of those terrible places for juvenile delinquents.” Humbert promises and holds her close, rocking her. “Cross my heart and hope to die,” he repeats as the screen fades to black.



Beardsley – Over shots of the city, Humbert narrates: “You must now forget about Ramsdale and poor Charlotte and poor Lolita and poor Humbert, and accompany us to Beardsley college, where my lectureship in French poetry is in its second semester.” Fiddling with a nail polish bottle and wads of cotton, Humbert paints Lolita’s toenails. “Why were you so late coming home from school yesterday afternoon?” Humbert asks. Lolita thinks for a moment before responding, “Was I late? That’s right. Michelle and I stayed to watch football practice.” “In the frigid queen?” Humbert responds, clarifying when Lolita looks confused. “I was driving around, and I thought I saw you through the window.” Lolita complicates her lie, saying she and her friend went for a malt after. “You were sitting at a table with two boys,” Humbert says, a protective growl in his voice. They start fighting about dates, Lolita saying her seeing boys wasn’t a date. Humbert changes the subject, asking where she was on Saturday. She claims she was at piano lessons, and Humbert has trouble believing her. Eventually, Lolita asks Humbert’s permission to be a part of a play, and the fighting continues when he says no.



Dr. Zemph – Later that night, Humbert’s station wagon rolls to a stop in front of his house. He walks into the home and is surprised to find a man sitting on the couch in the dark. “Good evening, Dr. Humbert,” a German-accented voice says. The man stands and introduces himself as Dr. Zemph. “I am the Beardsley high school psychologist,” he explains. “Your little daughter opened the door to me on her way to her piano lesson, and she said I was to wait in here until your arrival.” The two men sit and get down to business. Dr. Zemph wants to know if anyone has talked to Lolita about “the birds and the bees.” Zemph speaks at length about the sexuality of teenagers. He then moves to a list of complaints the teachers have about Lolita in the classroom. “In our opinion,” Dr. Zemph says, “she is suffering from an acute repression of the libido, of the natural instincts.” He then threatens a home visit. Zemph suggests giving Lolita some freedom in extracurricular, perhaps the school play, to avoid having strange men observing them. Humbert relents, saying he’ll let Lolita do more.



Play – The lights of Beardsley high school shine in the night as mysterious music plays. Inside, Lolita stands backstage in costume, waiting for her cue. Separated by a curtain, Quilty stands nearby, watching her. She performs in her final scene before running back out for a curtain call. Among several other parents, Humbert rushes backstage, applauding. Lolita’s piano teacher strikes up a conversation, praising her and telling Humbert, “No wonder you decided to suspend her piano lessons.” Humbert is confused: He did no such thing. “She hasn’t had a lesson for four weeks,” the teacher says. Her demeanor shifts a bit as she begins coming on to Humbert, who politely brushes her off. He

walks towards Lolita who grins, saying, “Oh, hi dad! How did you like it?” In front of her friends, Humbert confronts her about the piano lessons she hasn’t been attending and takes her home: No cast party for her. From across the stage, Quilty watches with interest.



The truth about Saturday afternoons – Back home, Lolita tries to storm upstairs, but Humbert stops her. She starts screaming as he pulls her into the living room, and she doesn’t let up. Humbert shuts the back door, so the neighbors can’t hear, and he goads her, “Let’s hear how loud you can shout! Come on! Come on!” The teenager looks away from him, brooding. Humbert sits beside her and asks what she’s been doing the last four Saturdays. She lies again, saying she was at piano lessons, and Humbert calls her out. With an icy stare, she tells him “the real truth,” that she’s been going to extra rehearsals. Like the teenager she is, she tries to turn his accusations that she’s been spending time with boys around on him: “You’re sick.” Humbert tries to calm things down, offering to leave and go wherever she wants, but the row starts again in earnest when Lolita says she wants to stay for the play’s run.



Knock at the door – A knock comes at the door, and the two stop shouting. The knocking comes again, more frantic this time. Humbert opens the door, finding a neighbor standing outside. She complains that the noise is disturbing her dinner party with the church minister, and Humbert does his best to defuse the situation. Lolita takes the chance to escape the house, simply saying, “Good night.” The neighbor insinuates that people are snooping around, trying to figure out what’s going on between Humbert and Lolita. She invites Humbert over for dinner, but he declines. A bit later, Humbert finds Lolita calling someone in a nearby phone booth. He interrupts the call and pulls her back home. She does make some reconciliation, saying she hates school and the town saying they can move away tomorrow, wherever she wants. Humbert giddily agrees, and they walk home arm in arm.



Road trip – Romantic music swells as the station wagon winds its way down a road. Humbert narrates: “The brakes were re-lined, the water pipes unclogged, the valves ground. We promised Beardsley College that we would be back as soon as my ‘Hollywood engagement’ was at an end. Inventive Humbert was to be, I hinted, chief consultant in the production of a film…” As the station wagon pulls through a little dirt-track town, a black sedan pulls out of a crossroad, tailing them. In the station wagon, Lolita yawns and stretches while Humbert keeps his eyes on the road. He seems to notice the car, but pays it little mind. Darkness begins to fall, and Humbert narrates his concerns about the pursuer. The next day, Humbert stops for gas and heads inside to use the bathroom. From the window at the sink, he sees Lolita talking to a man in a car. Back on the road, the black sedan appears again, tailing the station wagon from a distance.



Pursuer – In the station wagon, Lolita complains about the cold, climbing clumsily into the back seat to reach her sweater. She asks why Humbert is driving so fast, and he replies that he’s trying to lose a pursuer. “What?!” she says. “I haven’t seen it for at least a quarter of an hour,” he says. “I think we’ve lost it. I didn’t want to scare you, but this car has been following us for the past three days, and last night it was parked outside the hotel.” Lolita insinuates that he’s crazy, but Humbert knows what he saw. Humbert interrogates Lolita about the man at the gas station, but she doesn’t say anything helpful. Suddenly, a tire blows out, and Humbert brings the car to a swerving stop. In the distance, the car appears. It slowly creeps up behind the station wagon and parks. Both shiver in the cold as they look at the car in the mirror. Humbert begins having heart attack symptoms: A pain in the arm, trouble breathing.

“It’s probably just gas pains,” Lolita says, recommending they stop by a doctor in the next town. Suddenly, the car behind them starts and pulls away. Humbert says he’ll change the tire now.



Hospital – Sometime later, Humbert enters a hospital with a bouquet and some books. He coughs wetly, and a nurse greets him, saying she was just about to give Lolita some medicine. “She’s much better today,” the nurse says. “Her temperature is normal, and her cough’s gone.” They enter a room where Lolita lies in bed reading from a magazine. Humbert stoops to kiss her cheek and asks how she’s feeling. “I feel fine,” says Lolita. Seeing the bouquet, she calls the flowers “gruesome” before saying, “but thanks anyway.” Humbert is shocked to find a note on Lolita’s table, accusing her boyfriends of sneaking in to see her. “Does your father think you get notes from *my* boyfriend?” the nurse asks, taking the note before leaving the room. Narrowly avoiding another row, Humbert gives Lolita some books. Haughtily, Lolita accepts the gifts, vaguely complaining about Humbert’s controlling attitude. “When did the doctor say you can leave the hospital?” Humbert asks. Lolita claims the doctors want her to stay for 48 more hours. The nurse returns to tell Humbert to move his car: He’s parked in a staff spot. He then kisses Lolita on the cheek, who tells him goodbye with a strange finality.



Late night call – Humbert’s station wagon sits outside a rented bungalow. Inside, the telephone rings. Coughing, Humbert emerges from under his blankets and answers, knocking things around the room. A familiar voice comes through the other end: Quilty. “Eh, how are you, professor?” Humbert doesn’t know who it is. In his typical roundabout way, Quilty goads Humbert about “bizarre rumors” that are spreading about him and Lolita. Humbert demands the caller to identify himself. Quilty asks for a report on Humbert’s current sex life, and Humbert reacts with disdain, hanging up. Despite his poor condition, Humbert rises and leaves the bungalow.



Dr. Keegee – Tense music plays as Humbert winds through the town to the hospital. Coughing horribly, Humbert enters and demands to take Lolita home. The nurse refuses to let him do so without a doctor’s permission. They fight for a moment before the nurse calls Dr. Keegee, Lolita’s attending physician. The doctor appears and asks Humbert about his cough. Humbert simply repeats his demand, but the doctor reveals Lolita has already left the hospital. Irate Humbert barges onto the ward where he is confronted by orderlies who throw him to the ground. During the struggle, Humbert overhears that someone claiming to be Lolita’s uncle checked her out just a few hours earlier. Under the threat of a psychiatric hold and a police report, Humbert relents and retreats.



Letter – The camera focuses on a letter being written in a typewriter. “Dear Dad,” it begins. “How’s everything? I have gone through much sadness and hardship. I’m married. I’m going to have a baby. I’m going nuts because we don’t have enough to pay our debts and get out of here. Please send us a check.” The screen fades to black and tense music plays over a montage of driving shots. Humbert’s station wagon winds its way through city streets to a simple two-story house. Outside, he parks, pulling the revolver from his glove compartment and stowing it in the pocket of his coat. He walks up to the door and knocks, his hand clutching the gun in his pocket.



Mrs. Schiller – The door opens, and Humbert looks shocked. “Gee!” says Lolita, a bit older and much more pregnant than when we last saw her. “What a surprise.” “This is what Mrs. Richard T. Schiller looks like…” Humbert says, a dangerous edge to his voice. Lolita invites him in and goes through the motions expected of a hostess—taking one’s coat and offering drinks—before apologizing about asking him for money after so many years apart. Humbert asks her to point out her husband, and she does, afterward asking Humbert not to mention their past and to follow her lead. “This isn’t the man who took you from the hospital?” Humbert asks, confused. “Of course not,” Lolita replies, before giving him a quick breakdown of her life: She explains that Quilty had been following them the whole time because she was his lover. She gushes about Quilty’s genius, and Humbert reacts angrily with each new reveal. Lolita tells Humbert she and Quilty parted after his failure to get her a part in Hollywood and her refusal to be in his “art films”.



Dick – Coming back inside from working on a project, Lolita’s husband, Dick, knocks on the window. His friend who was working the saw has cut his thumb, and Lolita moves to help him. In passing, Lolita introduces Humbert as her stepfather, and Dick is excited to meet the man who helped raise his wife. Dick opens a couple of beers, offering one to Humbert, who declines. Lolita takes it and sits with him on the couch. When Humbert says he must be going, Lolita butts in, “Why don’t you tell him ‘bout Alaska?” Dick excitedly enthuses about an opportunity for him and Lolita far up North. He’s hoping Humbert can give them enough money to “get in on the ground floor” of some business just starting up in Alaska. His thumb bandaged, Dick’s friend returns, and the two return outside to work on their project. Alone with Lolita, Humbert begs for Lolita to run away with him. “You must be crazy,” Lolita says, telling him to leave. “Don’t make a scene,” she continues as he begins to cry. Through stifled sobs, Humbert gives her the money she’s owed on the sale of her mother’s home. Humbert runs away to his car and speeds off.



Full circle – A car rolls through heavy fog until it approaches a huge castle-like mansion. The film has worked its way back to the beginning, and we see Humbert enter the mansion again. This time romantic music swells as he knocks over bottles, searching for Quilty. “Quilty!” he shouts as the scene begins to fade. “Quilty!” The music continues as an epilogue scrolls past the picture Humbert shot Quilty behind at the film’s beginning: “Humbert Humbert died of coronary thrombosis in prison awaiting trial for the murder of Clare Quilty.”

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Humbert Humbert

After earning his doctorate in French literature in Paris and divorcing his wife, a man calling himself Humbert Humbert moves to the United States to pursue a teaching career. When he falls for the teenage daughter of his landlady, his plans shift: He has to have Lolita. Using her mother’s attraction to his advantage, Humbert becomes Lolita’s stepfather and sole caretaker when Charlotte dies.

Dominant Humbert tries to hide it, but he’s a domineering man. He wants things to happen in the way he desires them. He wants to control others. Especially the women in his life. Every decision he makes after seeing Lolita, Humbert makes in order to try and control her. We see his domineering side come out first when Charlotte tries to chide him from sending Lolita candy without her permission. In a surprisingly long, loud, and angry tirade, Humbert tells Charlotte that he is fed up with her henpecking an emasculation. Internally, he throws fits when people bother him or things don’t go to plan. In this trait, we see one of the

more negative attitudes associated with mediocre or cruel men, showing us Humbert's true intentions and desires: He wants others to serve him and his desires first and foremost.

Confident While he doesn't deserve to be, Humbert is incredibly confident. He thinks himself smarter, quicker, more observant than everyone around him. While typically confidence in a character is a positive trait, in Humbert it is an obvious flaw. He is not smarter than everyone, nor more clever, and especially not more observant. His confidence blinds him to any evidence that Lolita or Quilty are up to something. In his confidence, we can see some of Nabokov's idea of the 'sin of incuriousness,' as Humbert simply assumes he can read people and their intentions with perfect accuracy. He is confident that things he finds annoying or doesn't notice don't matter. Humbert's confidence lasts until the end of the film, when Lolita rejects him for the final time. It is only then that Humbert's confidence falters.

Coward Ultimately, Humbert is a coward. At a point, everything he does is driven by a sense of fear. Even before he has singled out Lolita or Charlotte even suspects him of ill motive, Humbert acts like a hunted man. We see this trait most clearly during his pursuit on the road by Quilty. Here, Humbert puts himself and Lolita in obvious danger trying to evade detection. His fear of losing Lolita causes the events that allow Quilty to take her away, as his desire to not be seen driving his adoptive daughter to another part of the country causes them both to become sick, Lolita to the point that she is hospitalized. Ultimately, his cowardice shows at the film's end when he runs away from Lolita and his feelings. Instead of addressing the unrequited love or his impropriety as a middle-aged man who desires a teenager, he flees to Quilty's mansion, transferring all those fears and negative feelings onto his "romantic" rival and killing him.

Lolita Haze

Lolita is a fairly average teenage girl. She likes fashion, candy, and boys. Much like her mother, she uses her looks and sexuality to get what she wants.

Adventurous Lolita loves to do new things. She likes to meet new people and go new places. Humbert is able to manipulate her easily with the promise of trips or making new lives. It's this same adventurous nature that makes Lolita seem much more adult, as she wants to explore sexuality in much more depth than most girls her age. We're shown none of the typical hand-wringing or fear of pain that teenage girls typically go through when approaching becoming sexual beings. Lolita giggles, jokes, tempts, and even initiates sexual contact with grown men. At the film's end, she is still adventurous, wanting to experience motherhood with Dick and take part in the 'taming' of the Alaskan wilds.

Complainer As the typical teenager, Lolita is filled with complaints. This is one of her more normal traits. Whereas in some moments Lolita seems far older than she is, she is very much a brat. When her mother makes simple demands of the growing girl—often simple things like picking up after herself or getting ready for events on her own—Lolita makes faces, mocks Charlotte, and compares her to fascist figures like Hitler. After Humbert becomes her primary caretaker, she shifts her complaints onto him. In some ways, she is justified: Even if she doesn't know it, Humbert is trying to isolate her. But in others, she reacts in over-the-top ways, such as when Humbert takes her home after the play, not allowing her to go to the cast party because she was caught in multiple lies. This is Lolita at her most childish.

Secretive Lolita is incredibly secretive. She's so secretive, we don't learn about many of her secrets until she reveals them at the end of the film. Her unwitting mother often plays right into her little schemes, but Humbert is even more controlling, and Lolita's unwillingness to expose her plans to be with Quilty become a point of major contention. Just like Charlotte, Humbert assumes that Lolita is just a typical teenage girl trying to neck with teenage boys, and while there is some truth to that assumption, Lolita uses this assumption to her advantage, allowing her to meet with Quilty when she is supposed to be at piano lessons or play practice. She seems to enjoy keeping secrets and having the power to expose them, frequently teasing Humbert about "their relationship."

Clare Quilty

Quilty is an odd duck, even for a playwright. Everywhere he goes, a young woman is hanging off of him, and he frequently appears where you might least expect him. Unbeknownst to Humbert, Quilty and Lolita are lovers, and everything he does is an attempt to control Lolita.

Non-traditional Quilty is strange. Very strange. He speaks in an odd jabber, confusing most people who interact with him. He is also unable to act seriously in most situations, using humor to cover up his discomfort or real motivations. Whereas most fictional antagonists are well controlled, stoic, or overly-serious, Quilty is the opposite. He shows himself to be sexually promiscuous as well as experimental. Without even touching on the obvious taboo of pedophilia, Quilty is shown to enjoy acts like swinging, bondage, and sadomasochism. He is obsessed with sex, unable to drop the topic even when taking on the personas of policemen or Dr. Zemph. Whereas Humbert tries to appear as the traditional learned man, Quilty puts on no such disguise, allowing him much more flexibility and success in his plots.

Determined Quilty is shown to have some incredible determination. While we get some glimpses of this at the flash-forward that begins the film, we see him struggling with some sort of failure, making his determination not to face Humbert seem much more comic. Throughout the rest of the film, however, Quilty goes to great lengths to not be discovered by Humbert while pursuing him. Humbert is his rival when it comes to possession of Lolita, and Quilty does some frankly impossible things to enact a full-blown conspiracy against Humbert. He stalks them across the country, employs others to watch them, and impersonates police officers and family members in order to steal Lolita away from Humbert. In spite of his determination, his plans fail when Lolita refuses to work in his “art films” and runs away. When Humbert goes to confront Quilty, he is a broken man, likely in part due to failing to control Lolita.

Charlotte Haze

Charlotte represents Lolita’s future. She was once a young, pretty thing like her daughter, but after her husband’s death, she has struggled to find work and maintain relationships. Charlotte is jealous of Lolita’s youth and the attention she receives, especially when it’s from Humbert.

Angry/Jealous At least in this treatment of the novel, Charlotte wishes she could switch places with Lolita, who Charlotte sees as squandering her youth. This leads to many angry outbursts, especially when her daughter seems to be purposefully interrupting Charlotte’s alone time with Humbert. We see her anger directed fully at Lolita for most of the film, as the single mother consistently fails to manage her teenage daughter’s attitude and psychological needs. This comes mostly from jealousy: In Charlotte’s mind, Lolita has everything and Charlotte has nothing. She believes she’s given everything to Lolita and lost the rest when her husband died. It isn’t really clear what Charlotte has given beyond baseline parental responsibility. The second Lolita has a (frequently entirely valid) want or need, Charlotte snaps, turning to punitive measures like isolation and lost privilege. The last time we see Charlotte’s anger, it is entirely justified and aimed at Humbert. She discovered and read his diary. This anger, tinted by the jealously that—once again—a man she is interested in only has eyes for Lolita, becomes her undoing when she thoughtlessly rushes into the street and is struck by a car. In her attempt to expose Humbert as a dangerous pedophile, Charlotte meets her death.

Playful Charlotte’s more playful nature is apparent from her first appearance. She openly flirts with Humbert, although is responses are lukewarm at best, laughing and showing him around the house. She even shows him her bedroom, playfully blocking his path when he tries to step out before she’s finished grilling him about his marital status. As Humbert becomes a part of the household, Charlotte continues her playfulness, much to Humbert’s chagrin. She takes silly candid photos with a large flashbulb camera, interrupts his writing and spying on Lolita, and tries to get Humbert alone. Charlotte loves to dance and party, and she tries to push these desires on Humbert, who is totally unperceptive. In her playfulness, we’re introduced to Humbert’s personality traits and see how Charlotte covets youth and fears becoming old. Through her playfulness, she is a source of comedy and character development for the others.

THEMES

Society

Education A minor yet persisting theme in *Lolita* is education. Humbert's driving feeling of superiority comes from his education: He holds a doctorate of French literature and is a renowned translator. He uses his smarts to take advantage of others whenever possible. Everyone around Humbert is of lesser education, and he takes great satisfaction in this. Humbert's education blinds him to his mistakes and missteps, assuming others are simply too stupid to notice them. This last point is most clear when Humbert dreams up a 'perfect murder' while loading bullets into a revolver: He wants to use the excuse that the gun was loaded, and he didn't know, but he is getting his fingerprints all over every single bullet, disproving his claim of ignorance even before his plan can come to fruition. In many ways, education serves as a comic theme in the film.



Illustrative moment Early in the film, just after he's moved in, Humbert teaches Charlotte how to play chess. The well-educated man has a long history of playing, and he readily backs the new player into a corner she can't see. When Charlotte moves her queen, Humbert gleefully takes it, telling her she shouldn't have made that move. This is a perfect example of how Humbert uses his education to make himself feel superior and others inferior.

Gender This theme is well-explored in the film. We're shown dozens of examples of masculinity and femininity, both serious and comic. In spite of his taboo desires for a teenager, Herbert is incredibly repressed in his sexuality and his emotions, leading him to outbursts, such as when he yells at Charlotte that he feels henpecked. Charlotte and the other women show us older women and explore expectations of motherhood, marital loyalty, and passivity. Charlotte manages to go against all three, eventually regretting her choice when she learns that Humbert, the man she'd given those ideals up for, is a pedophile. Her neighbor candidly suggests swinging to Humbert. Lolita challenges the idea of feminine passivity, physically fighting with Humbert at several points in the film and refusing to back down when he tries to control her. Lolita, too, gives us a glimpse into girlhood, giving us all the rough edges and shocking charm of a 14-year-old. Men don't go unnoticed in this film. Humbert and Quilty are two different kinds of strange: Humbert is inattentive to anything outside his desire (in his case, a teenage girl), and Quilty refuses to take anything seriously. Both are shaped like desirable men, but deep down, they're both monsters and cowards. In a lot of ways, the examination of Gender in *Lolita* is about how appearances only run skin deep and people often defy expectations.



Illustrative moment Early in the film, when Charlotte finally gets a night alone with Humbert, we're shown a very clear moment where gender is at the fore. Coming downstairs after changing into a different, more revealing, dress, Charlotte puts on a little show for Humbert, spinning in place and asking his opinion. Humbert responds as expected, not because he believes it, but because it is expected of the role he's playing: Deep down, he is only getting this close to Charlotte in the hopes of stealing Lolita away. At this moment, we see the expectations for each of the sexes. Women serve as seducers of men who are stoic and receptive. These ideas quickly twist when Lolita returns home and disrupts them, throwing Charlotte into an unladylike screaming fit and Humbert into cowardly submission and avoidance.

Values/Norms/Taboos Social norms of the late 1950s are a persistent minor theme throughout the plot of *Lolita*. On her first appearance on screen, we see Charlotte struggle with her desire to get close with Humbert and her need to be seen as a good mother and moral woman. This follows her until her eventual death. Similarly, Humbert uses the disguise of a tenant and then a stepfather to cloak his desire to be with a teenage girl. Quilty breaks all societal norms he can, allowed to do so by his success: Rich creatives like him are expected to be abnormal. We're shown several examples of people discussing sexual experimentation such as swinging in veiled terms, and, though briefly, we're shown several

examples of marriage. One is Humbert's marriage of opportunity to get closer to Lolita. This unravels before it can really begin. Charlotte's neighbors have a permissive marriage, veiled comments from the wife hinting that swinging or cuckoldry might be a normal part of their marriage. Finally, the past marriage that left Charlotte a widow is held up as an ideal by her, a pure and godly marriage. When something pushes against social norms too hard, it often ends up a taboo. In this film, it's pedophilia, specifically Humbert and Quilty's desire to be with Lolita. A few times throughout the film, the consequences of Humbert's pedophilic desire are brought up, once as a threat from Charlotte after she discovers his diary, and several times as goading comments from Quilty in disguise.



Illustrative moment The clearest exploration of abnormal sexuality and other desires or actions that run against societal values comes at the halfway point of the film. After picking up Lolita from Camp Climax, Humbert stops at a hotel for the night. Inside, we're shown Clare Quilty chatting with the desk clerk. He seems to know the man well, and, with some slightly veiled language, the two speak suggestively about their favored sexual pastimes. Whereas the clerk has fairly typical sexual behaviors, Quilty admits to enjoying masochism with his female companion. This scene gives way to the lengthy patio scene where Quilty—pretending to be a police officer—speaks in veiled terms about his sexual attraction to Lolita, suggesting Humbert might feel the same way.

Psychology

Past We see this theme mostly through Charlotte. She misses her late husband dearly, and she holds him and their marriage up on a pedestal. One of his final wishes was that Charlotte not remarry, and she struggles to uphold this, causing her much guilt and mental instability. Portrayed with a moment of asynchronous storytelling, Lolita's action all technically takes place in the past, while this is never really addressed outside the first scene and the final epilogue. Past lovers and the jealousy associated with Humbert's dominates the final conversation Charlotte has with him. While she was originally drawn to Humbert because he somewhat resembled a man she used to dance with as well as her late husband, it is his past marriage and relationships before that cause her the most insecurity.



Illustrative moment while teaching Humbert to Samba while Lolita is away at a party, Charlotte looks into his face and becomes pensive. After a moment, she remembers a man from her past whom she used to dance with at the jazz clubs. The longer she looks, she is drawn into another memory, that of her late husband. In many ways, a desire to recreate her past loves is what initially draws her to Humbert and blinds her to his obsession with Lolita.

Beauty Beauty comes up several times through the movie. Early on, Humbert is captivated by Lolita's beauty. The teenager has leaned into the idea of feminine beauty, often reading magazines about makeup and fashion before implementing what she learns in her day-to-day life. We see him taking every chance to touch her, to stroke her hair and skin, and even to paint her nails, to accent her beauty himself. Charlotte feels less beautiful than her daughter, and this drives her to jealousy, especially when Humbert pays attention to Lolita over her. Quilty is also taken by Lolita's beauty, always referring to her as pretty in all of his different disguises. Beauty is a fleeting theme in this film, perhaps a comment on how it often runs skin deep or the nature of lust.



Illustrative moment At the film's beginning, we see Humbert struck by Lolita's beauty. In the garden of the Haze home, he sees Lolita sunbathing in a bikini. He cannot help but stare, her head shrouded in a halo-like hat, and her pose that of a Renaissance figure. From here, the film works to shatter this first impression of Lolita's beauty, but Humbert is keen to remember this moment.

Obsession We see obsession portrayed most clearly through Humbert, though Quilty is equally guilty of this flaw. Humbert cannot help himself when he moves into the Haze house, and he begins keeping a journal of his taboo thoughts because of the sick thrill it gives him. Humbert's obsession is purely sexual, and everything he does after entering the Haze home is driven by his obsession with Lolita and deep desire to possess her. While his actions in this story are obvious, Quilty mirrors him behind the scenes. Using multiple agents, Quilty stalks Humbert and Lolita on their cross-country trip, eventually kidnapping her from the hospital. We're shown a small moment of obsession at the summer dance, when Charlotte butts in on Quilty's dance and corners him in a conversation. Apparently, he had slept with her, but all he remembers is Lolita. Charlotte hasn't been able to forget him and frequently discusses his work with her local fan club. Lolita had her own romantic obsession with Quilty, leading to them becoming lovers. Through all these moments, we see obsession reduce people's competency, occasionally to the point of insanity, such as when Humbert kills Quilty over Lolita's rejection or when he plans the 'perfect murder' of Charlotte before she finds his diary.



Illustrative moment Humbert's obsession is most clear when we see him continuing his journal in Lolita's absence. He admits through his voice over that he was only in a relationship with Charlotte to cement his hold on Lolita. This admission and obsession with recording his taboo thoughts lead to Charlotte's death shortly thereafter when she finds and reads the journal.

Possessiveness/Jealousy These themes come up over and over throughout the film. Pervasively, possessive attitudes tint the decision-making of each of the main characters. It appears most clearly in Humbert and Charlotte, both in their relationships with Lolita and with each other. Charlotte works quickly to rein in Lolita after Humbert points out that she's 'growing up too fast.' This leads to a lot of conflict between the teenager and her mother, and only further drives Charlotte's jealousy. In an attempt to get closer to Lolita, to possess her, Humbert marries Charlotte. Her possessive attitude quickly shifts to Humbert, and she demands to know about all his past lovers, despite the jealousy it makes her feel. In spite of having just married her, there's no way for Humbert to prove his love that satisfies her possessive nature: She must be the only woman he has ever thought of. Where Humbert's possessiveness of Lolita is clear, more subtle possessiveness comes from Quilty and Lolita. Quilty's desire to have Lolita all to himself drives the thriller elements of the film. All the people following them, all the manipulation that forces Humbert into a paranoid mindset, are Quility's machinations. Quilty even kidnaps Lolita toward the film's end. Lolita, for her part, hints at her possessiveness of Quilty. She teases her mother after the summer dance, jealous of her mother's contact with Quilty on the dance floor and hinting at the reality of the situation with a simple "all the girls are crazy about him."



Illustrative moment Just after Humbert and Charlotte return from their honeymoon, Charlotte's possessive nature kicks in. She whines for affirmation of their love, sitting outside the bathroom and demanding there be no secrets between her and Humbert. Even though Humbert is a pedophile seeking to possess Lolita for his own dark desires, Charlotte's demands are particularly unhealthy and manipulative, especially in the context: Everyone expects some privacy while they're using the toilet. She even states outright that she thinks it's healthy to be jealous of a lover's past loves. In this moment, we see Charlotte's childish nature and the insecurities and the unhealthy possessive coping mechanisms she employs to avoid the feelings of loneliness or rejection.

Lust/Desire Lust and desire make themselves known quickly into the film. Humbert begins the film by committing a crime of passion: A murder based in jilted desire. His lust for Lolita causes him to commit to living in the Haze house, even though he wanted to escape Charlotte only moments before seeing her daughter. Many little hints of lust appear, mostly veiled in polite conversation, throughout the entire movie. The neighbors want to try swinging with Humbert and Charlotte, for example, and Quilty cannot stop talking about the topic of sex even when in disguise. The idea of taboo sexuality is explored from many angles, but censorship constantly stunts this exploration, resulting in a flat and confusing comic element instead of a true contemplation of lust and desire. Kubrick does his best to get around these confines, focusing on a desire for closeness and touch. Some of these seem genuine and freely given, such as when Lolita clutches Humbert's hand at the drive-in when scared by the monsters on the screen or when she curls up on his lap after learning her mother is dead, while others seem manipulative, such as the implied sexual encounter between Lolita and Humbert at the hotel or when Humbert paints her toenails. Such contact gives Humbert a sexual thrill, and Lolita behaves in a way likely learned from her mother, using her attractiveness and sexual behaviors to get what she wants. Both are examples of why humans desire to be close.

Illustrative moment One of the clearest moments of lust and desire comes just past the film's halfway point when Lolita sleeps in the hotel room. Seeing a chance to get close to Lolita, Humbert begins to crawl into the bed. He looms over her like a predator cornering its prey, pulling up the cover so he can lie beneath them next to her. The action of getting into the bed, however, wakes the girl, and Humbert loses his nerve, choosing instead to sleep on the cot.



Appearance

Deception/Dishonesty Deception theme is a key element for most of the film, especially in moments involving Quilty. While his deceptions are most frequent and obvious to the attentive viewer, he is far from the only person engaging in deception. Humbert deceives Charlotte into marriage as a way to get closer to Lolita. Lolita deceives first her mother, then Humbert into allowing her to spend time with Quilty in secret. She then manipulates Humbert into a position where she can be stolen away by Quilty posing as her uncle. Deception, while frequent, serves mostly as a plot device and is one of the more shallow themes in the film. Dishonesty is central to the plot of *Lolita*. We start with Humbert's dishonest reasons for living at the Haze home. While he outwardly just needs a place to live until the fall and his new job in a town in another state, internally, he hopes to have a sexual relationship with Lolita, and he doesn't tell anyone about these desires until well into the film when he and Lolita are insinuated to have their first sexual encounter. While Humbert's dishonesty is the most obvious to the viewer since he is the main character in the film, many others are incredibly dishonest. Some do this to hide their sexual proclivities, such as the Haze's neighbors who enjoy swinging, while others, like Lolita and Quilty, use dishonesty to cover their taboo activities. Discovered dishonesty is the main source of conflict in the film. For example, Charlotte discovering Herbert's diary causes her death, Humbert discovering Lolita's lies causes them to drive across the country, and Lolita's admission of her secrets at the film's end causes Humbert to kill Quilty.



Illustrative moment The most obvious deception in the film is when Quilty pretends to be Dr. Zemph. Here, posing as the school psychologist visiting on behalf of the school staff, Quilty manipulates Humbert into allowing Lolita to participate in the school play. Together, he and Lolita have conspired to assure they can meet in private for several hours every week.

Secrets Secrets are a frequent plot point in *Lolita*. Everyone has them, both in the film and in real life. Humbert's are the main focus of this film, and we're shown them in great detail. He is the only character with a voice-over, narrating to the viewer what is written in his diary. Here he details his every moment of lust for Lolita and his plans to make her his. Charlotte shares her secrets with Humbert, but when he

doesn't reciprocate, this makes her insecure, leading her to seek out his diary. Reading its contents as Humbert dreams of killing her in a 'perfect murder', Charlotte learns Humbert's deepest secrets. Unable to deal with what she's learned, she tries to abandon and expose Humbert, her rash actions leading to her death, covering Humbert's secrets once again. Quilty's secrets are well hidden. The only ones we see are those related to his desire to possess Lolita. At the film's end, Lolita reveals the secret that she was hiding for the whole film: She and Quilty were lovers. At every turn, secrets push the plot forward.



Illustrative moment early in the film, we're shown Humbert beginning to write his perverse diary. He narrates as he writes, explaining that keeping such a journal is foolish but it gives him a sick thrill. He believes that his small handwriting is enough to protect him if anyone were to stumble upon his writing, noting that only "only a loving wife" could decode it. This moment shows a deep secret and foreshadows its eventual discovery.

Relationship

Fatherhood/Parenting Humbert doesn't plan to become a father, not in the way most do. He sees marriage to Charlotte as a foot in the door to getting Lolita alone with him. Especially after Charlotte's death, he takes on the role, and he struggles. He cannot get the girl to respect his wishes, nor can he get Lolita to be honest with him. He spoils her, giving her gifts and trips whenever she wants, instead of trying to raise her. His sexual desires cause him to become a poor father. At the film's end, however, Humbert does redeem himself as a father when he gives Lolita the money she's owed on the sale of her mother's house as well as a gift from himself. With this money, Lolita can pay off her debt and start anew with her husband in Alaska. Whereas Humbert never expected to be in the role of parent, Charlotte reviles her role and her offspring. She is constantly shown trying to control Lolita or fighting with her, often over the pettiest things or Charlotte's own hang-ups. Never having matured herself, Charlotte is jealous of Lolita's youth and the attention she receives, making her a poor parent in many of the same ways Humbert will become.



Illustrative moment A moment that makes the themes of fatherhood in *Lolita* clear comes in the final third of the film. Here, Humbert must punish Lolita for her dishonesty, taking her home from the play instead of allowing her to attend the cast party. When they get home, Lolita tries to run to her room, but Humbert drags her to the living room, where he confronts her. While he wants to control and possess Lolita in a sexual context, he is also her caretaker and father. This is an unintended consequence of his plan to isolate Lolita.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Did the plot make it clear that Humbert and Lolita had a sexual relationship? Why or why not, and is this important to the story?

2. Would you say that the non-linear storytelling in *Lolita* added suspense, or would the story have been improved by conventional linear storytelling?

3. How is Nabokov's main theme of the 'sin of incuriousness' used in this film adaptation?

4. Imagine you are the director: How would you recreate the same effects of untrustworthy narration that are present in the novel? Did this adaptation of *Lolita* use those elements? Discuss.