

# Books by the Stack



## **Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov**

A novel that studies the moral disintegration of a man whose obsessive desire to possess his step-daughter destroys the lives of those around him.



**Why you'll like it:** *Modern classic. Unreliable narrator. Character-driven. Disturbing.*

**About the Author:** Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov was born in 1899 in St. Petersburg, Russia. He attended Trinity College, Cambridge. When he left Russia, he moved to Paris and eventually to the United States in 1940. He taught at Wellesley College and Cornell University. Before he moved to the United States, he wrote under the pseudonym Vladimir Serin. Among those titles, were *Mashenka*, his first novel and *Invitation to a Beheading*. The first book he wrote in English was *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. He is best known for his work *Lolita* which was made into a movie in 1962. Nabokov died in 1977.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. *Lolita* begins with an earnest foreword, purportedly written by one John Ray, Jr., Ph.D., author of *Do the Senses Make Sense?* (whose initials – J.R., Jr. – echo as suspiciously as “Humbert Humbert”). Why might Nabokov have chosen to frame his novel in this fashion? What is the effect of knowing that the narrative’s three main characters are already dead – and, in a sense, nonexistent, since their names have been changed?
2. Why might Nabokov have chosen to name his protagonist “Humbert Humbert”? Does the name’s parodic double rumble end up distancing us from its owner’s depravity? Is it harder to take evil seriously when it goes under an outlandish name? What uses, comic and poetic, does Nabokov make of this name in the course of *Lolita*?
3. Humbert’s confession is written in an extraordinary language. It is by turns colloquial and archaic, erudite and stilted, florid and sardonic. It is studded with French expressions, puns in several other languages, and allusion to authors from Petrarch to Joyce. Is this language merely an extension of Nabokov’s own – or is Humbert’s language appropriate to his circumstances and motives? In what way does it obfuscate as much as it reveals? And if Humbert’s prose is indeed a veil, at what points is this veil lifted and what do we glimpse behind it?
4. Humbert attributes his pedophilia (or “nympholepsy”) to his tragically aborted childhood romance with Annabel Leigh. How far can we trust this explanation? How do we reconcile Humbert’s reliance on the Freudian theory of psychic trauma with his corrosive disdain for psychiatrists?
5. In the early stages of his obsession Humbert sees Lolita merely as a new incarnation of Annabel, even making love to her on different beaches as he tries to symbolically consummate his earlier passion. In what other ways does Humbert remain a prisoner of the past? Does he ever succeed in escaping it? Why is Lolita singularly impervious to the past, to the extent that she can even shrug off the abuse inflicted on her by both Humbert and Quilty?

- 6.** How does Humbert's marriage to Valeria foreshadow his relationships with both Charlotte and Lolita? How does the revelation of Valeria's infidelity prepare us for Lolita's elopement with Quilty? Why does Humbert respond so differently to these betrayals?
- 7.** We also learn that Humbert is mad – mad enough, at least, to have been committed to several mental institutions, where he took great pleasure in misleading these psychiatrists. Is Humbert's madness an aspect of his sexual deviance or is it something more fundamental? Can we trust a story told by an insane narrator?
- 8.** Can Humbert ever be said to "love" Lolita? Does he ever perceive her as a separate being? Is the reader ever permitted to see her in ways that Humbert cannot?
- 9.** Having plotted Charlotte's murder and failed to carry it out, Humbert is rid of her by means of a bizarre, and bizarrely fortuitous, accident. Is this the only time that fate makes a spectacular intrusion on Humbert's behalf? Are there occasions when fate conspires to thwart him? Is Humbert in a sense guilty of Charlotte's death?
- 10.** Humbert is not only Lolita's debaucher but her stepfather and, after Charlotte's death, the closest thing she has to a parent. What kind of parent is he? How does his behavior toward the girl increasingly come to resemble Charlotte's? Why, during their last meeting, does Lolita dismiss the erotic aspect of their relationship and "grant" only that Humbert was a good father?

*(Questions provided by the publisher)*



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