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‘YOU CAN ALWAYS COUNT ON A MURDERER FOR A FANCY PROSE STYLE’: AN ANALYSIS OF RHETORICAL FEATURES IN NABOKOV’S *LOLITA*

In his most notorious work, *Lolita* (1955), Vladimir Nabokov tells the woeful tale of Humbert Humbert, a charming European writer and academic who emigrated to the United States, and his relationship with Dolores Haze, an American teenager. This essay proposes a rhetorical analysis of *Lolita*, briefly looking at the two opposing views of rhetoric in Plato’s *Gorgias* and Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* to expose the mechanisms and techniques upon which the rhetorical discourse in Nabokov’s novel is built. *Lolita* opens with a carefully constructed foreword by John Ray Jr., Ph.D., the fictional editor of Humbert Humbert’s manuscript, written in prison while he was awaiting trial, entitled “*Lolita: or the Confessions of a White Widowed Male*.”[1] The rhetoric of the novel begins in the very first line of the foreword: the title of the manuscript sets up the judicial topic by telling us that these are the ‘confessions’ of Humbert Humbert, as well as beginning the metaphorical trope of the narrator as a spider by hinting at the venomous black widow with the description of Humbert as a ‘white widowed male’ (this trope will be explored later in the essay). Due to this line of rhetoric running through the novel, which the narrator calls his “fancy prose style,”[2] it is tempting, upon a first, superficial reading, to side with Humbert; after all, he is appealing to the “[l]adies and gentlemen of the jury”[3] to prove his innocence, and he does so by resorting to the power of persuasion of rhetorical discourse and by writing what could be deemed a love story. Many early critics of Nabokov’s novel fell for Humbert’s seductive style and got tangled in his

[1] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita* (London: Penguin, 2000) [first published 1955], 3.
[2] Ibid., 9.
[3] Ibid., 9.

carefully woven web, ultimately trying to defend the poor narrator, corrupted by the twelve-year-old *femme fatale*.[4] However, I will argue that, if some readers become enchanted by Humbert Humbert's spell, others will move beyond the beauty of his language, and recognise the authorial rhetoric at work. Nabokov's aim, unlike his narrator's, is for his readers to notice the absence of the "real" Lolita from the text, without being distracted by Humbert's highly prosaic style and by his creation of "another, fanciful Lolita."[5] This is the main ethical concern of the novel: we, as learned readers, need to read between the lines and past the narrator's rhetoric to reclaim the identities of those characters, such as Dolores, that are obliterated by Humbert's solipsism. Nabokov leaves clues for his intended readers in the text, so that they can navigate through the language of the unreliable narrator and expose the truth. In this essay I explore both Humbert and Nabokov's rhetoric, grounding both in a textual analysis of the salient moments in the novel, and I assess their different outcomes on the reader's perspective.

Plato, in his dialogue *Gorgias* (ca. 380 BC), has Socrates debate with the eponymous sophist and rhetorician of Leontinoi. Gorgias speaks of rhetoric as the art that makes 'slaves'[6] of people and that gives 'to individuals the power of ruling over others.'[7] Socrates opposes this to dialectic, which attempts to reach the truth through a discussion between two or more individuals who have different opinions. He also opposes the persuasive quality of rhetorical discourse to the knowledge acquired through other arts, making the argument that, while the philosophical enquiry holds as its goal the obtainment of knowledge and truth, rhetoric works toward winning the audience's approval by convincing them of a certain thing, whether just or unjust. Socrates affirms that rhetoric "is the artificer of a persuasion which creates belief about the just and unjust, but gives no instruction about them."[8] Not only does rhetoric create belief, rather than knowledge, but it also does not instruct people on how to use this belief constructively. Thus, the rhetorician instils, by means of persuasion, true or false belief in his audience, and the audience is in turn liable to use their belief in an unjustly manner. The rhetoric

[4] For a discussion of reviews and essay that support this view, see Peter J. Rabinowitz, 'Lolita: Solipsized or Sodomized?; or, Against Abstraction - in General', in W. Jost and W. Olmsted (eds), *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2004), 325-339, 326-327; Leland De la Durantaye, 'Lolita in *Lolita*, or the Garden, the Gate and the Critics', *Nabokov Studies*, 10, (2006), 175-197, 175-180; Eric Goldman, '"Knowing" Lolita: Sexual Deviance and Normality in Nabokov's *Lolita'*, *Nabokov Studies*, 8, (2004), 87-104, 87-88.

[5] Nabokov, *Lolita*, 62.

[6] Plato, *Gorgias* (Infomotions, 2000), 7.

[7] Ibid., 6.

[8] Ibid., 9.

of the sophists is, for Plato, an instrument of deceit, rather than a wholesome art devoted to the pursuit of the truth.

Aristotle, Plato's disciple, takes a different stance on the question of the art of rhetoric. In his book entitled *Rhetoric* (ca. 370-320 BC), he defends the usefulness of the art of persuasion against Plato's accusations by stating four points: rhetoric is aimed at the truth, since 'things that are true and things that are just have a natural tendency to prevail over their opposites'; some audiences cannot be instructed, and as such cannot be convinced with an argument based on knowledge, as that implies instruction, and therefore the speaker must use 'notions possessed by everybody' as their mode of persuasion; the speaker must be able to argue on opposite sides of a question, so that they will be able to recognise and refute the wrong argument; men ought to be able to defend themselves with speech and reason, since this is the chief difference that distinguishes human beings from animals.[9] Aristotle defines rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion."[10] To Plato's objection that these means of persuasion may be used unjustly, Aristotle argues that several other things, such as 'strength, health, wealth [and] generalship' can be used for both just and unjust purposes, and can cause harm if misused.[11] He asserts that there are three divisions of rhetoric: political, ceremonial and forensic.[12] It is mainly with the latter that *Lolita* is concerned.

James Phelan observes that "[i]n fictional narrative such as *Lolita*, the rhetorical situation is doubled: Humbert tells his story to his narratee for his purposes, while Nabokov's telling of Humbert's telling to us accomplishes other purposes."[13] Nabokov held Lolita in high regard: he is quoted by Rabinowitz saying that of all his characters, she was one of his favourites,[14] and in an interview with Playboy he asserts, while discussing the choice of her name and nicknames, that Lolita's "heart-rending fate had to be taken into account together with the cuteness and limpidity."[15] Why, then, did Nabokov lend Humbert his eloquence,

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[9] Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (Infomotions, 2000), 3.
[10] Ibid., 4.
[11] Ibid., 3.
[12] Ibid., 8.
[13] James Phelan, 'Dual Focalization, Retrospective Fictional Autobiography, and the Ethics of *Lolita',* in G.D. Fireman, T.E. McVay and O. J. Flanagan (eds), *Narrative and Consciousness: Literature, Psychology and the Brain* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 129-148, 132.
[14] Peter J. Rabinowitz, 'Lolita: Solipsized or Sodomized?; or, Against Abstraction - in General', in W. Jost and W. Olmsted (eds), *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2004), 325-339, 326.
[15] Nabokov, *Playboy* interview.

allowing him to manipulate the superficial reader to such an extent that he comes to blame Dolly and sympathise with the self-proclaimed 'brute'?[16]

The opening of the novel is a masterpiece, containing a plethora of alliterations and other figures of speech that, from the onset, give Humbert's writing style the rhetorical quality of the great orators:

> Lolita, light of *my* life, fire of *my* loins. *My* sin, *my* soul. Lo-lee-**t**a: the **t***ip* of the **t**ongue **t**aking a **t**r*ip* of three steps down the palate **t**o **t**ap, at three, on the **t**eeth. Lo. Lee. **T**a.
>
> *She was* Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. *She was* Lola in slacks. *She was* Dolly at school. *She was* Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita.[17]

The alliterative /l/ and /t/ are prime examples of rhetorical figures: the /t/, when the sentence is spoken, allows the reader to feel the tapping of the tongue, so masterfully described by Nabokov, which happens at the end of her name, on the 'ta', while the repetition of the /l/ is particularly significant as it mirrors the first two syllables of 'Lolita'. Nabokov himself said: "[f]or my nymphet I needed a diminutive with a lyrical lilt to it. One of the most limpid and luminous letters is 'L.'."[18] The same alliteration repeated in his answer to his interviewer shows how skilful Nabokov was in captivating his audience with all those refined techniques pertaining to the rhetorical art. The second paragraph of the incipit of Humbert's confession is characterised by an anaphora, the repetition of "she was" at the beginning of the first four sentences. The anaphora emphasises the fragmentation of Dolly's identity: "Lo"[19] is what Charlotte Haze, her mother, calls her; "Lola" foreshadows Humbert's alliterative cry "Lo! Lola! Lolita!";[20] she is called "Dolly" at school, and consequently, thanks to Nabokov's meticulous care of details, those people who know her in that environment tend to call her

[16] Nabokov, *Lolita*, 47.
[17] Nabokov, *Lolita*, 9 (my emphasis).
[18] Vladimir Nabokov, '*Playboy* Interview', interviewed by Alvin Toffler (January 1964) [web], http://reprints.longform.org/playboy-interview-vladimir-nabokov, accessed 16 January 2019.
[19] Nabokov, *Lolita*, 38.
[20] Ibid., 236, also repeated without the emphasis on page 70.

Dolly; "Dolores," as highlighted by Alfred Appel[21] and by Nabokov himself,[22] derives from the Latin *dolor*, meaning 'sorrow' or 'pain', and adds a juxtaposing layer to the figure of the innocent girl-child, "little Lo."[23] The last sentence, beginning with a contrasting conjunction, would seem to signify a change, from the fragmentation caused by the anaphora, to a security ("in my arms") that is unchangeable ("she was *always* Lolita"). The euphony of the opening paragraphs, together with the last tender sentence, lure the reader into Humbert's web.

On subsequent readings of the novel, however, we will be warier of falling for that last warm, fatherly sentence. Partly, the wariness will stem from our knowledge that Humbert will not turn out to be a caring father; but Nabokov is here asking his readers to solve a yet subtler riddle. Who is Lolita? In order to answer that question, we must turn to one of the most memorable moments in the narrative, the scene on the davenport. The sequence opens with Humbert's preamble:

> I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay; I want them to examine its every detail and see for themselves how careful, how chaste, the whole wine-sweet event is if viewed with what my lawyer has called, in a private talk we have had, "impartial sympathy." So let us get started. I have a difficult job before me.[24]

But obviously Humbert's readers cannot 'see for themselves' with 'impartial sympathy,' as the narrative is carefully constructed by such a biased narrator. Nabokov's clue lies in the last sentence – why would Humbert have 'a difficult job before' him, if the event was, as he says, 'careful', 'chaste' and 'wine-sweet'? For, if he wasn't 'careful' with Dolly at the time, he would certainly have to be careful in constructing his version of the tale. It is a sunny Sunday; Charlotte has gone to church, leaving Lo at home with Humbert, where she joins him in the living room carrying a "beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple,"[25] a clear reference to Eve, temptation and the fall of mankind. This is the first time Humbert's creation of "his Lolita" is explicitly shown: after a playful struggle with Dolly, which leads to Humbert's

[21] Ibid., 332.
[22] Nabokov, *Playboy* interview.
[23] Nabokov, *Lolita*, 83.
[24] Ibid., 57.
[25] Ibid., 58.

allegedly secret ejaculation, he tries to convince the reader that "[w]hat [he had] madly possessed was not she, but [his] own creation, another, fanciful Lolita – perhaps more real than Lolita […], having no will, no consciousness – indeed, no life of her own."[26] Even this claim seems suspicious, when we are told that 'she cried with a sudden shrill note in her voice, and she wiggled, and squirmed, and threw her head back, and her teeth rested on her glistening underlip as she half-turned away' during the deed, and that afterwards she "stood and blinked, cheeks aflame, hair awry."[27] Dolly seems to be extremely aware of the effect that she has on Humbert, but he has to deny this fact, both to himself and to his audience, so that she can be "safely solipsized."[28] Humbert fails (or refuses) to acknowledge what Nabokov would like his ideal reader to recognise – namely that, by perceiving Lolita as his own creation, as art, he obliterates the reality of the little girl, Dolores Haze. What emerges from Humbert's rhetoric is the fake, imagined body of a 'nymphet,' the projection of Humbert's desire: the girl who, in his arms, is "always Lolita." What is concealed behind his rhetoric is the suffering of a little girl who has been deprived of her humanity. Thus, Humbert falls prey to the criticism that Plato levelled towards the sophists of using rhetoric to deceive the audience and conceal the truth, while Nabokov is a perfect exponent of Aristotelian rhetoric, using all the available means of persuasion to get his intended audience to read a novel that is not obscene or disgusting, but also to perceive the obscenity that lies beyond its fancy style.

In his essay "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," now always published with the text, Nabokov points us to 'the nerves of the novel, […] the secret points, the subliminal co-ordinates by means of which the book is plotted'.[29] He recalls "Lolita playing tennis," one of the few moments when Humbert stands aside, watching her play with a friend, and "Dolly Schiller dying" giving birth to a still-born baby girl.[30] Apart from emphasising the tragedy of her story, Nabokov is here highlighting those instances of Lolita stepping out of the nymphic prison that Humbert built for her and becoming Dolores Haze again, the American teenager. The author, however, reminds us that Dolly was not the only one trapped in Humbert's egoistic narrative, pointing to characters that most readers will, if not completely forget, at least disregard as secondary and unimportant, such as Maximovich, the ex-White Russian colonel with whom Humbert's first wife, Valeria, runs away, or Charlotte, or Gaston Godin, who plays chess with

[26] Ibid., 62.
[27] Ibid., 61.
[28] Ibid., 60.
[29] Ibid., 316.
[30] Ibid., 316.

Humbert and only speaks French, or again the Kasbeam barber, who takes up less than ten lines in the whole novel. The "very old barber" who gives Humbert a "very mediocre haircut"[31] is significant, since he reveals Humbert's greatest flaw, incuriosity. The old man tells the narrator of a 'baseball-playing son of his' and Humbert is so busy being annoyed by the barber spitting on his neck, wiping his glasses and showing him newspaper clippings that he fails to notice that his son "had been dead for the last thirty years."[32] This detail should remind the attentive reader of Charlotte's letter, conveniently edited by Humbert before being reported 'verbatim' in his confessions.[33] The narrator makes sure to include her "awful French" and her mawkish prose, but leaves out a passage, which he admits he 'more or less skipped at the time', about Lolita's brother, who died when she was four.[34] Even when presented with details concerning his beloved's life, Humbert is ready to gloss over them as soon as he realises that they don't fit into his constructed view of Lolita.

Richard Rorty refers to Humbert as "the monster of incuriosity," arguing that "the curious, sensitive artist will be the paradigm of morality because he is the only one who always notices everything."[35] Humbert, then, is the worst kind of artist: he is not interested in the world that surrounds him, but instead lives his life within the boundaries of his own fanciful creation, without taking any notice of the real people around him. If curiosity generates morality, then the ethical concern of the text is not simply paedophilia, but the complete lack of sympathy with other humans. As Rorty remarks, "the moral is not to keep one's hands off little girls but to notice […] what people are saying. For it might turn out […] that people are trying to tell you that they're suffering."[36] Towards the end of the novel, Humbert recalls a moment when Dolores said to a school friend that "what's so dreadful bout dying is that you are completely on your own."[37] After overhearing the thirteen-year-old's philosophical remark, Humbert admits that he "did not know a thing about [his] darling's mind."[38] In this passage, and in a few others, Nabokov is trying to allow his reader to get a glimpse of the real Lolita and to recognise

[31] Ibid., 213.
[32] Ibid., 213.
[33] Ibid., 68.
[34] Ibid., 68.
[35] Richard Rorty, quoted in Christine Clegg, 'Nabokov's "Monster of Incuriosity": Kindness, Cruelty, and the Ethics of Reading *Lolita* in the 1980s', in C. Clegg, *Vladimir Nabokov – Lolita* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), 91-114, 98-99.
[36] Ibid., 100-101.
[37] Nabokov, *Lolita*, 284.
[38] Ibid., 284.

that what the narrator describes is a mere construction of her body, and that her identity remains hidden between the lines of the text.

In *Rhetoric* Aristotle exposes the careful consideration of the nouns employed by the rhetorician to support his argument. He gives the example of 'pirates' who 'call themselves purveyors,'[39] thus diminishing the negative connotation that is attached to the former term. Humbert uses this technique often in *Lolita* and I will focus here on the term 'nymphet' and its derivatives in the novel. 'Nymphet' and 'nymphets' alone occur a total of 166 times throughout the text, and Humbert gives a definition by saying that

> between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as "nymphets."[40]

'Nymphet' is purloined from the figure of the nymph of classical mythology, an exceptionally beautiful minor female divinity who is dangerous to mortals, as they cannot resist her allure. Nabokov adds the suffix '-et' to designate young nymphs and, while this is not strictly a neologism, *Lolita* popularised its use to such an extent that, only a few years after the book was published, dictionaries included it to signify '[a]n attractive and sexually mature young girl' (Oxford Dictionary). Humbert, with this definition, is building his defence, identifying himself with the poor 'travelers', subject to the lure of these nymphets, who are described in derogatory terms as 'creatures' who are 'not human' but 'demoniac' and who use their charms to 'bewitch' the innocent adults. It follows logically, then, that 'lone voyagers' like Humbert should be called 'nympholepts';[41] however, this is the equivalent of Aristotle's 'purveyors', an elaborate, sugar-coated definition for someone who would usually be labelled as a 'paedophile' or 'pederast'. As Julian Connolly observed, "the word 'nympholept' seems more elevated and poetic than the harsher and more common 'pedophile',"[42] and as such serves

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[39] Aristotle, op. cit., 87.
[40] Nabokov, *Lolita*, 16.
[41] Ibid., 17.
[42] Julian W. Connolly, "Approaching *Lolita*," in J.W. Connolly, *A Reader's Guide to Nabokov's 'Lolita'* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 29-52, 32.

to disguise, behind his rhetorical references to dangerous mystical creatures, Humbert's own "true nature."

As observed by Alfred Appel Jr., Humbert "often characterizes himself as a predator, most often as an ape or spider."[43] The trope of the spider reappears, after the foreword discussed in the introduction to this essay, in Humbert's "exhibit number two," a "pocket diary bound in black imitation leather,"[44] in which he records the days spent as a lodger in the Haze household. In one of these entries he describes himself as "one of those inflated pale spiders you see in old gardens," sitting at the centre of his web, which spreads all over the house, trying to locate his Lolita, who is "the beautiful warm-colored prey"[45] of "Humbert the Wounded Spider."[46] His web, however, is not only woven for Dolly's sake, but also to capture the reader with his sticky rhetorical tricks – Nabokov's intended audience will not be charmed by the white widow(ed) male, patiently waiting in his '*luminous* web' for the '*warm-colored* prey',[47] but will recognise the horror of the predator/prey relationship behind Humbert's 'prismatic weave'.[48] The motif of the prey runs through the first part of the novel,[49] until its culmination in the Enchanted Hunters. The name of the hotel in which Humbert and Dolores consummate their relationship is yet another reference to Humbert the predator, the 'enchanted hunter.'[50] After Charlotte's death, Humbert retrieves his "prey"[51] from camp and heads towards the Enchanted Hunters Hotel, where he drugs Dolly so that she can stay asleep while he has his way with her. He lets the jurors know that he "was still firmly resolved to pursue my policy of sparing her purity by operating only in the stealth of night, only upon a completely anesthetized little nude,"[52] thus turning the abominable fact that he has just drugged a twelve-year-old girl to his advantage. His plan is ruined by Dr. Byron's prescription, which was not as strong as promised, as well as by Dolly herself who, upon realising that the only bed in the room is a double, is "on the brink of" disgust[53] and stays alert throughout the night. However, as told by our narrator, the morning brings a change in the wary child, "who seduce[s]" Humbert[54] and whose "refinements" in the

[43] Nabokov, *Lolita*, 357.
[44] Ibid., 40.
[45] Ibid., 49.
[46] Ibid., 64.
[47] Ibid., 49, my emphasis.
[48] Ibid., 49.
[49] Ibid., 42, 110, 124, 131.
[50] Ibid., 131.
[51] Ibid., 110.
[52] Ibid., 124.
[53] Ibid., 118.
[54] Ibid., 132.

matter of kissing throws the narrator into a "delirious embarrassment."[55] He then proceeds to tell us that he found "not a trace of modesty" in the "hopelessly depraved"[56] Lolita, who handles his "life […] in an energetic, matter-of-fact manner as if it were an insensate gadget unconnected with [him]."[57] Despite the mention of "certain discrepancies between a kid's life" and Humbert's, for which Lolita was not prepared,[58] the narrator's rhetoric reverses the roles espoused so far to make him appear the prey of this corrupt seductress, who does not display a touch of delicacy in handling poor Humbert and who 'ha[s] her way'[59] with him.

After these allusions, chapter twenty-nine concludes with Humbert informing us that he is 'not concerned with so-called "sex"' since '[a]nybody can imagine those elements of animality'; his endeavour is to 'fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets'.[60] This declaration again highlights the contrast between the pure professor, who refuses to describe the base, vulgar act of intercourse, and the 'perilous' nymphet who seduces and casts her spell on him. However, chapter thirty contains a metaphorical description of precisely those 'elements of animality' that Humbert was so reticent to mention. The narrator reimagines the murals decorating the dining room of the hotel as he would have painted them:

> There would have been a lake. There would have been an arbor in flame-flower. There would have been nature studies–a tiger pursuing a bird of paradise, a choking snake sheathing whole the flayed trunk of a shoat. There would have been a sultan, his face expressing great agony (belied, as it were, by his molding caress), helping a callypygean slave child to climb a column of onyx. There would have been those luminous globules of gonadal glow that travel up the opalescent sides of juke boxes. There would have been all kinds of camp activities on the part of the intermediate group, Canoeing, Coranting, Combing Curls in the lakeside sun. There would have been poplars, apples, a suburban Sunday. There would have been a fire opal dissolving within a ripple-ringed pool, a last throb, a last dab of color, stinging red, smarting pink, a sigh, a wincing child.[61]

[55] Ibid., 133.
[56] Ibid., 133.
[57] Ibid., 134.
[58] Ibid., 134.
[59] Ibid., 134.
[60] Ibid., 134.
[61] Ibid., 134-135.

Embedded in this flowery description are, for the attentive reader, hidden meanings and "fragments"[62] of past sequences: the lake refers to Hourglass Lake, where Humbert, Charlotte and Dolly spent a day sunbathing, during which "eyes did pry and tongues did wag";[63] the pursuing tiger and the 'choking snake' recall the motif of the predator/prey; the obscure 'callypygean' stands for "having shapely buttocks,"[64] which would have made the 'slave child' on the "column of onyx" more suggestive than it already is; the allusion to sexual glands is hidden in the euphonic 'luminous globules of gonadal glow' of the juke boxes, representing the American world of Dolores Haze; the alliterative /c/ in the activities of 'Canoeing, Coranting, Combing Curls' refers to camp Climax, where Dolly spends a few weeks in the summer and has her first sexual experience; "poplars, apples, a suburban Sunday" is a clear throwback to the scene on the davenport. Concluding the sequence, the last sentence brings us back to the act of intercourse, presenting a luscious metaphor for the penetration of a girl by an overexcited man: the ripples in the pool and the brilliant bright colours disguise the 'stinging red', 'smarting pink' pain of the sighing, wincing Dolores.

Plett, in his book on literary rhetoric, talks of figures of intertextual deviation, or meta-intertextemes, which "consist in accepting segments from a precursor text into a text and reconfiguring it."[65] Figures of this type are often employed in *Lolita*, starting from the beginning of the book, when Humbert Humbert recalls his first summer love:

> [T]here might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child. In a princedom by the sea. Oh when? About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer. […] Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied.[66]

"In a princedom by the sea" is an almost direct quotation of Edgar Allan Poe's poem "Annabel Lee," where the narrator tells the love story of two children "[i]n a kingdom by the

[62] Ibid., 134.
[63] Ibid., 56.
[64] Ibid., 382.
[65] Heinrich F. Plett, *Literary Rhetoric: Concepts-structures-analyses* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 281.
[66] Nabokov, *Lolita*, 9.

sea."[67] If, on the one hand, Humbert's unnecessarily complicated way of giving the time coordinates for his affair with the precursor of Lolita mirrors the first line of Poe's poem, "[i]t was many and many a year ago," on the other hand it shows that Humbert's obsession with Dolores is so potent that he measures time around her (this attitude is also reprised when Humbert uses her height to measure his gun,[68] as well as in other occasions throughout the novel). The narrator's mention of the six-winged angels is another reference to Poe's "winged seraphs of Heaven," who envy the pure, innocent love between the children so much that they kill Annabel Lee. Humbert's young love shares Poe's Annabel's fate, dying of typhus only a few months after their romance and leaving the thirteen-year-old Humbert unable to have healthy relationships in his youth. For the jury, "exhibit number one,"[69] as the narrator designates his romance with Annabel, is supposed to provide a pseudo-psychoanalytical excuse for his sexual deviance: the "little girl with her seaside limbs and ardent tongue" haunts him until, twenty-four years later, he breaks "her spell by incarnating her in another,"[70] namely Lolita. For the reader, however, the intertextual references to Poe's poem contribute to building the tragic character of Humbert's story and use *pathos*, as a mode of persuasion, to affect the emotional state of the audience.

Is Nabokov's *Lolita* a successful rhetorical exercise? In general, yes. Either Humbert Humbert or Nabokov succeeds in persuading the reader, who is called to judge the crimes committed by the narrator. The verdict, then, depends on the success of the rhetoric: if the reader is taken in by Humbert's 'fancy prose style,' the narrator's rhetoric will have worked, thus absolving him of his responsibility towards Dolores, while if the reader is convinced that, despite the sparkly ornaments of Humbert's language, the subject matter remains deplorable, Nabokov's rhetoric will have succeeded. Nabokov uses Humbert's rhetoric to render a story of rape and paedophilia not only not immediately repulsive, but also so wonderfully well written that it captivated most of its readers, as well as to condemn his narrator for his most serious crime, that of robbing the American starlet Dolly Haze of her childhood, of her voice and of her identity. The author, in line with Aristotle, lends Humbert Humbert his seductive style so that the readers can initially side with the narrator and thus, having been able to see the opposite sides of the question, they will be able to recognise and refute the wrong argument of which

[67] Poe's poem is provided by Alfred Appel Jr., the editor of *The Annotated Lolita*, 329-330.
[68] Nabokov, *Lolita*, 216.
[69] Ibid., 9.
[70] Ibid., 15.

Humbert is trying to persuade them. Nabokov is then asking us to find the real Lolita, without being led astray by the narrator's rhetoric. If Humbert's rhetoric is the art of persuasion and deceit criticised by Plato in *Gorgias*, Nabokov adopts the Aristotelian view of rhetoric, using all the available means of persuasion to get his intended audience to perceive the brutality that lies behind its fancy style.

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