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THE LOLITA TREE:
A FAMILY ROMANCE

A mysterious thing, this branching structure of life: one senses in every past instant a parting of ways, a 'thus' and an 'otherwise,' with innumerable dazzling zigzags bifurcating and trifurcating against the dark background of the past.

(Vladimir Nabokov, The Eye 28)

The *Lolita Tree* is a parody of a typical family tree, denoting relationships between characters connected not only through bloodlines and marriage, but also through incest, sexual exchanges, stillbirth, murder and mistaken identity. While the tree does not visually represent every single character in the novel, it does attempt to illustrate the tangled roots and branch-like structure of Nabokov's *Lolita* by focusing on obvious, as well as some more obscure(d) character-relations. The tree itself, however, is not meant to depict a 'branching structure of life,' but rather one of death, or the parody of death, as well as the parody of incest. *The Lolita Tree* is infected at the root, its branches gnarled and deadened by deviancy, deception, duplicity, and disguise, yet it also is a tree that navigates, albeit sketchily, the complex staging of a family romance.

Originally intended to reflect a ‘gothic’ aesthetic, the artist’s final version of the tree embodies more of a comically-driven style than an explicitly macabre one. This lends itself well, however, to the parodic qualities of the novel: while the visual representations of the characters are primarily based upon Nabokov’s textual descriptions of them (except in cases where no descriptions were given), their features are overemphasized, even to the point of becoming laughable, affecting a visual lampoon of the characters themselves. Humbert Humbert, for example, is rendered quite haggard, yet still vaguely handsome. With his receding hairline, wide-eyed stare and slightly bared teeth, Humbert is drawn as a dumb-founded lecher, rather than as the “great big handsome hunk of movieland magic” he imagines himself to be (*Lolita* 39). Adjacent to Humbert is Dolores Haze, rendered in all her nymphet glory. Her portrait adheres to Humbert’s initial descriptions of her, not as Dolores, however, but as his reincarnated Annabel: “It was the same child – the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair” (*Lolita* 41). Following suit, Annabel Leigh is illustrated with an immediately apparent resemblance to Dolores; long-lashed and pouty-mouthed, she is Dolores’ – or rather Lolita’s – twin sister, bound together in Humbert’s memories and in death. Though both characters die prematurely of ‘natural’ causes – Annabel of typhus, Dolores in childbirth – their deaths are highly unnatural, as each girl is recurrently murdered and resurrected not only by Humbert’s pedophilic fantasies, but also by the novel itself. As Nabokov indicates through John Ray, Jr. in the preface to *Lolita*, Dolores (by then Mrs. Richard F. Schiller) is dead before the novel begins. Annabel is also long deceased, yet she is consistently conjured up in Humbert’s memory and imagination, albeit as a hybridized entity. “Annabel Haze, alias Dolores Lee, alias Loleeta” (*Lolita* 176) is nymphet-prototype and successor fused; Humbert grafts the image of Annabel onto Dolores, and the image of Lolita onto Annabel (though Lolita, not Dolores, “eclipse[s...] her prototype” (*Lolita* 40)). Annabel can be viewed as both sister and mother to Lolita; not only is she Lolita’s predecessor, but Humbert also traces the conception of his pedophilic desire back to his thwarted childhood romance with her – the seed that spawned this ‘family romance.’

Many of the characters in *The Lolita Tree* are illustrated with a deliberately visual verisimilitude to one another: Humbert’s features are recognizable in Clare Quilty’s;

Clare Quilty's in Ivor Quilty's; Clare and Ivor's features are recognizable in Gustav Trapp's, and so on. While the characters' specific relationships are not explicitly noted in the tree itself, they are nonetheless hinted at by their "family resemblance." Charlie Holmes, Dolores' first lover, is a younger, pimply-version of Dick Schiller, Dolores' husband; Rita invokes Monique, and Valeria is a "complex ghost" (*Lolita* 269) of Charlotte. The five main portraits in the tree, however, belong to Humbert, Dolores, Annabel, Clare Quilty and Charlotte Haze. The decision to place their portraits in more prominent positions of the tree and render their images larger than the rest, derived from it being impossible to choose a single patriarch and matriarch, as the family unit in *Lolita* is so decisively perverted. Though Dolores is effectively orphaned after the accidental death/murder of her mother, Humbert assumes the role of her stepfather, as well as her biological father. After convincing John and Jean Farlow that he and Charlotte had had a love affair in the spring of 1934, the year of Lolita's conception, Jean exclaims, "Don't you understand? Humbert is Dolly's real father" (*Lolita* 107). Humbert's father-role, however, is consistently disturbed, not only by the sexual nature of his relationship with Dolly, but also by the figure of Clare Quilty, who is both a pseudo-relative of Humbert's¹ and a surrogate father to Lolita. As Quilty states before Humbert murders him, "my dear Mr. Humbert, you were not an ideal stepfather, and I did not force your little protégée to join me. It was she made me remove her to a happier home" (*Lolita* 301). Quilty's assertion that his was a happier home for Dolly signals that he was a better father to her than Humbert, even if he was Humbert's equally, if not more depraved rival and alter-ego. Because Clare is "practically impotent" (*Lolita* 316), he "had no fun with...Dolly"; he neither raped nor kidnapped her, which made him a far more effective, albeit ironically so, stepfather (ibid.). Thus, Clare and Humbert occupy dual patriarchal positions on the tree, and Dolores, Charlotte and Annabel share the matriarchal positions.

The grotesque fetus situated underground *The Lolita Tree*, which is connected through an umbilical-like root to the tree, is both symbolic of Dolores' murdered childhood and the stillborn daughter that dies in childbirth. Furthermore, the tree itself is an artistic homage to all the ghosts that haunt the pages of Nabokov's "parody of silence

¹ As indicated in Humbert's conflation of Cue and the invented Trapp, who bore in Humbert's mind a faint resemblance to a distant cousin of his father, Gustave Trapp.

and death” (*Lolita* 126): Charlotte, run over by a car; Quilty, shot to death; Charlie Holmes, killed in Korea; Humbert’s mother, struck by lightning; Valeria and Mrs. Schiller died in childbirth; Dolores Haze vanished during her childhood; Humbert Humbert died in prison – and the list goes on.

The tree also acknowledges the novel’s puppet-master, and the novel’s metatextual qualities; the androgynous image of Vivian Darkbloom is not only a reference to Lo’s clever gender-swapping of Clare and Vivian in order to deceive Humbert (“Vivian is the male author, the gal author is Clare” (*Lolita* 235)), but a visual nod to Vladimir Nabokov, a/k/a Vivian Darkbloom. The shadowy profiles of Humbert’s parents, who remain unnamed throughout the novel, are indicative of Humbert’s own relatively obscure family origins, “a pocket of warmth in the darkest past” (*Lolita* 10). Gaston Godin also appears in the tree, not only because he is the closest thing Humbert has to a ‘friend,’ but also because the two characters are linked by their mutual pedophilic desires. John Ray Jr. occupies one of the upper-most branches of the tree in order to highlight his coded presence within the novel; while he is not literally connected to any of the characters, he is in fact connected to all of them, as his foreword not only indicates the fates of Humbert and Dolores, among others, but it also labels *Lolita* as a work of art that “transcends its expiatory aspects” (*Lolita* 5). As the theme of art runs through *Lolita*, with Humbert self-positioned as the ‘artist,’ John Ray Jr.’s foreword disrupts a didactic reading of *Lolita*, even as it advocates for it.

The *Lolita Tree* contains twenty-six illustrated portraits of characters from the novel. All the characters are linked in some form, either through sexual interactions with one another, through family relationships, accidents, or by death. As this project was a collaborative effort, I would like to acknowledge the work of my illustrator, Brent Braaten, who not only adhered to the guidelines I set forth for how the tree was to be drawn and how each character was to be represented, but also took some creative licenses of his own.

WORKS CITED

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