

NORMATIVE NARRATIVES AND DISABLED IDEOLOGIES IN NABOKOV'S  
*LOLITA AND LAUGHTER IN THE DARK*

by

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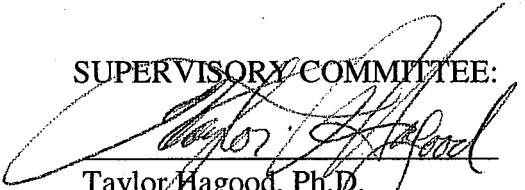
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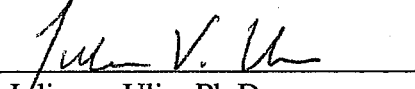
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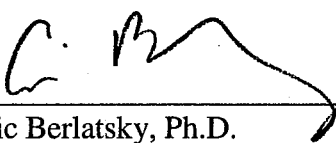
This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Taylor Hagood, Department of English, and has been approved by the members of his supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts.


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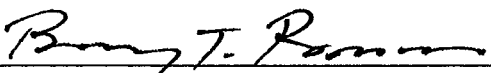
  
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## ABSTRACT

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The works of Vladimir Nabokov have traditionally functioned in a way that challenges its reader to question existing notions of normality. In his works, Nabokov has frequently utilized representations of disability as a means to comment or critique the human condition. Throughout this project I intend to demonstrate how the narratives in both *Lolita* and *Laughter in the Dark* function as a normative force which embodies the cultural attitudes regarding disability. This is accomplished through the enforcement of a normative reading by the narrative. It is clear then that Nabakov is attempting to subvert literary conventions by using nontraditional narrators to demonstrate the relativity of normality. Throughout this project, I will be focusing on Nabakov's use of narrator to distort the cultural line between disability and ability. Ultimately, the goal of this project

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CHAPTER ONE: THEORETICAL APPROACH TO DISABILITY STUDIES AND  
VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S *LOLITA* AND *LAUGHTER IN THE DARK*

[D]isability, like gender, sexuality, and race [is] a constructed category of discursive investment... physical or cognitive inferiority has [been] historically characterized as the means by which bodies have been constructed as “deviant”... This socially imposed relationship between marginalized populations and “inferior” biology situates disability studies in the proximity to other minority approaches.

—David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (3)

The disabled figure in literature has traditionally represented a form of cultural deviance. These figures tend to be representations of cultural attitudes regarding disability and usually suffer from a malady which can easily be associated with a singular personality defect in the character. For this reason, the disabled figure is usually one that is defined solely by disability and the cultural attitudes which surround it. For example, Captain Ahab's prosthetic leg serves as a constant reminder to the reader of his monomaniacal obsession with the white whale Moby-Dick. His missing leg connotes not only physical but also psychological insufficiency. This can create an impulse in the reader's mind to associate disability with a deviation from the established norms of society, and thereby a punishment for that deviation. In *Aesthetic Nervousness*, Ato Quayson writes that “[Historically] disability was closely aligned to disease and disease was often interpreted as a form of plague and punishment for past sins ... there persisted an idea of disability as a sign of divine disfavor” (7). The disabled figure in literature,

then, can be interpreted as a reflection of the disabled subject position in society. In other words, if we are to understand disability as a politicized and culturally constructed social identity, then it is easy to see how disability identity becomes subject to an oppressive social structure: a structure which marginalizes the disabled identity by perpetuating a standard of normality which excludes the disabled. Throughout this project, I shall show that the notion of normality defined against abnormality—or ability defined against disability—is deeply ingrained in the collective cultural subconscious. To say that life is reflected in art may be an over simplification, however art has traditionally functioned as a powerful medium for social commentary. This is apparent in Vladimir Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark* and *Lolita* as the narrative in each text places a normative frame around Albert Albinus and Humbert Humbert while they desperately attempt to escape it in order to be perceived as “normal.”

The works of Vladimir Nabokov have traditionally functioned in a way that challenges its reader to question existing notions of normality. In his works, Nabokov has frequently utilized representations of disability as a means to comment or critique the human condition. For this reason, I focus on Nabokov's *Lolita* and *Laughter in the Dark* as these two texts are particularly relevant to my discussion on disability and narrative. Both novels focus on a character whose specific disability (Humbert's heart condition and Albinus' blindness) reflects a larger social issue that Nabokov can comment on. Throughout this project I intend to demonstrate how Nabokov's narrative functions as a normative force which embodies the cultural attitudes regarding disability. This is accomplished through the enforcement of a normative reading by the narrative. Through

close readings of *Lolita* and *Laughter in the Dark*, it is clear then that Nabakov is attempting to subvert literary conventions by using a nontraditional narrator to demonstrate the relativity of normality. *Lolita* features a narrator, Humbert Humbert, whose life depends on his narration as it is being used in his defense for his murder trial. *Laughter in the Dark*, on the other hand, features a uniquely oppositional relationship between the narrator and the protagonist, Albert Albinus. Throughout this project, I will be focusing on Nabakov's use of narrator to distort the cultural line between disability and ability. Ultimately, the goal of this project is to demonstrate that current societal notions of normality and disability are outdated and arbitrary.

Historically, various cultures have shown a tendency to attach meaning to the disabled body. As was previously mentioned, ancient cultures believed that there was a link between the disabled and the metaphysical. For example, several texts in the Old Testament suggest that lepers are unclean and unfit to live near people without leprosy. The Greeks and the Egyptians, on the other hand, believed that disease and disability directly resulted from punishment from the gods. The result was that the diseased and disabled were relegated to the margins of society and, as Quayson writes, "have historically taken on the coloration of whatever else is perceived to also lie on the social margins of society" (Quayson 5-8). This belief continued throughout the Middle-Ages and the Renaissance Period as the disabled were systematically persecuted for the deviancy associated with disability. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, madness was associated with witchcraft. This led to a period of macabre witch hunts and witch trials. Often, the mere accusation of madness and witchcraft, as evidenced by the Salem witch trials, would lead

to execution. Quayson writes that this association between madness and witchcraft stems from the Greek and Egyptian belief that madness “reflected the proximity between the divine or metaphysical world and the human lifeworld” (8-9). The oppression of the disabled continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century as those who were cognitively disabled were systematically murdered in Nazi Germany (Mitchell & Snyder 3). While these events represent a variety of different historical time periods, each with its own construct of what disability is, it remains true that this long history of persecution has led to an urge to dissociate oneself from the stigmatized disabled identity. Even those with disabilities are encouraged to “pass” by hiding their impairments.

There is a direct connection between the associations of deviance with disability and the urge to dissociate oneself from disability. Consider the Victorian novella *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In this novella, Dr. Jekyll, an upright and well respected member of his community, devises a way to indulge his homoerotic fantasies without compromising his position in society. Victorian society, known for its repressed sexuality, would not have taken this lightly. Dr. Jekyll dissociates himself, quite literally, from the act by creating a monstrous doppelgänger through which he can experience his “leaping impulses and secret pleasures” (Stevenson 96). Consider the text’s description of Mr. Hyde:

There is something wrong with his appearance; something displeasing, something downright detestable. I never saw a man I so disliked, and yet I scarce know why. He must be deformed somewhere; he gives a strong feeling of deformity, although I couldn't specify the point. (10)

The purpose here is to associate grotesque monstrosity to perversion and deviance in the Victorian psyche. Indeed, the Victorians have historically used the disabled mind and body to characterize social constructions of “deviance.” For example, femininity was often associated with hysteria. Later on, as the Feminist movement sought to dissociate feminine identity from cognitive disability, theorists implicitly suggested that the disabled identity was a stigma that needed to be removed (Mitchell & Snyder 2). It is this cultural belief that establishes a paradigm which associates deviance with disability. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes, this paradigm creates “a hierarchy of bodily traits that determines the distribution of privilege, status, and power” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 6). Because of this, the impulse to, if possible, hide a disability from view becomes great. This impulse, which can be equated to the instinct of self-preservation, is acted upon by both Albert Albinus and Humbert Humbert as they desperately attempt to hide their disabilities from view.

This chapter, then, will focus on the critical theory which surrounds the discipline of disability studies and informs this project. I will be discussing the emergence of disability as a cultural identity and its relationship with the ideology of ability. I will also focus on the distinction between the medical model and the social model of disability studies, as well as the complex theory of embodiment. And to further my project, I will elaborate on existing terminology from Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Ato Quayson.

The emergence of disability as a cultural identity challenges existing ideologies and notions regarding identity. In *Disability Theory*, Tobin Siebers asserts that “the presence of disability creates a different picture of identity—one less stable than

identities associated with gender, race, sexuality, nation, and class [therefore] being human guarantees that all other identities will eventually come into contact with some form of disability identity” (5). This brings to light the temporary nature of able-bodiedness and a fear of becoming disabled. As Siebers notes, “a woman proud of her deafness will not automatically court the idea of catching cancer” (4). This anxiety regarding disability stems from the preference for able-bodiedness and the link between human identity and the body (4-5). Siebers refers to this concept of simultaneously preferring able-bodiedness and fearing disability as the ideology of ability. This ideology seems directly oppositional in the emergence of disability identity and disability theory provides an avenue for commentary and criticism. Siebers goes on to say that “at its most radical, [the ideology of ability] defines the baseline by which humanness is determined, setting the measure of body and mind that gives or denies human status to individual persons. It affects nearly all of our judgments, definitions, and values about human beings... (8). Through the ideology of ability, individual value is determined by the fitness of one’s body and mind. Those who are able are glorified if they display “intelligence, creativity, physical prowess, imagination, dedication, the eagerness to strive, including the capacity and desire to strive—in brief, the essence of the human spirit” (9). It is because this ideology is so deeply ingrained in the cultural subconscious that disability is often considered a medical issue rather than a social issue.

It is important to first note distinction between the medical model of disability studies, and the social model as it is this key distinction which elucidates the usage of disability studies in my project. In his article, “The End of Identity Politics and the

Beginning of Dismodernism” Lennard Davis highlights the nuances of disability identity as an unstable category. The political and academic movement surrounding disability studies is modeled after the civil rights movement, and is a first and second wave enterprise (10). A goal of both the first and second waves was to promote a sense of unity and collectivity by establishing an identity group known as “people with disabilities” (PWDs). However, as mentioned above, there is an urge to dissociate oneself from disabilities. In this case, the urge was to dissociate from the disabilities of others. The medical model was considered an effective and established paradigm with existing definitions for impairments, and thus the need to establish an identity group was not immediately apparent. Davis writes:

Wheelchair users saw no commonality with people with chronic fatigue syndrome or Deaf people. Given the American ethic of individuality and personal achievement, there would have been little incentive for PWDs to identify with the “handicaps” of others people. Rather, the emphasis would have been on personal growth, or overcoming the disability, and normalization through cure, prosthesis, or medical interventions. (11)

The cultural conception of disability served as impediment to the movement as American culture places an emphasis on self-reliance and a confidence on the medical model. However, as veterans from Vietnam returned from war, an activist movement similar to the civil rights movement of the 1960’s emerged for people with disabilities. This movement resulted in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

Since the 1980's, scholars have attempted to distinguish between the medical model and the social model of disability studies. The medical model defines disability as any flaw or defect in the individual human body. In order to achieve full capacity as a human being, the disability must be eliminated. This model promotes the notion that the quality of a person is determined by the able body and mind (Siebers 3-4). The social model differs as much of the discourse surrounded issues regarding the architectural environment and the attitudes surrounding disability (Quayson 2). As Quayson writes "the term disability is no longer taken as referencing the notion of a reduced ability deriving from an impairment, but speaks to the built and social environment that generate difficulties for the disabled person's capacity to live a full and fulfilled life" (2). Prior to this, the disabled were often considered to be victims of unfortunate circumstances (Davis 12). Lennard Davis explains the social model in this passage:

The social model... saw disability as a constructed category, not one bred into the `bone. The social model...sees a distinction between impairment and disability. Impairment is the physical lacking of an arm or a leg. Disability is the social process that turns an impairment into a negative by creating barriers to access. (12)

The social model asserts that disabling environments create disability out of impairment. This assertion posits that the disability identity is a product of social oppression. However, as Siebers points out, the social model neglects to account for embodiment. In his theory of complex embodiment, Siebers asserts that while a disabling environment



can serve to exacerbate impairment, there are instances of disability which can derive from the body (i.e. heart conditions, blindness). Siebers writes that

These last disabilities are neither less significant than disabilities caused by the environment nor to be considered defects or deviations merely because they are resistant to change. Rather, they belong to a spectrum of human variation, conceived both as a variability between individuals and as a variability within an individual's life cycle, and they need to be considered in tandem with social forces affecting disability. (25)

Siebers' theory of complex embodiment highlights the relationship between impairment and disability. Can an individual with an impairment, embodied or otherwise, still be subject to the social injustice and oppression which creates disability? There is a significant distinction to be made between impairment and disability. Impairment is the physical or cognitive limitations "that leads to a reduced capacity to fully actualize all aspects of one's life." Disability, on the other hand, is the social construction which aggravates the effect of the impairment (Quayson 3). This distinction informs the way in which the terms "disability," "disorder," and "impairment" are used in this project.

Through the lens of disability studies, it is understood that disability is a socially constructed category and identity which encompasses a variety of different factors within the human experience. Disability, then, is the product of ideology and social injustice (Siebers). It is important to note that my use of the word "disability" is used to describe a character that falls outside of the frame of normality. This project focuses on characters

who struggle to hide disabilities that are not outwardly apparent. The main subjects of this study are Albert Albinus from Nabokov's novel *Laughter in the Dark* and Humbert Humbert from *Lolita*. Humbert suffers from a heart ailment, and several psychological disorders. Because the self-professed mad man controls the narrative, only the reader is aware of his impairments and he is thus unaffected by the social constructs regarding disability. Albert Albinus, on the other hand, is actively repressing homicidal and suicidal tendencies. Prior to his eventual blinding, his psychological distress was only revealed to the reader by the narrator. After his blinding, however, Albinus experiences an embodied impairment which forces him to navigate a disabling world.

In Lennard J. Davis's "Bodies of Difference: Politics, Disability, and Representation," he asserts that political and ideological social structures influence cultural somatic conceptions. He writes that the concept of normality did not exist in Western society until the early-to-mid-nineteenth century. In fact, the rise of "normalcy" is closely associated with the development of Western democracy. Prior to this, the notion of the *ideal* was prevalent (100). Davis writes that "the key point is that in a culture of the ideal, physical imperfections are seen not as absolute but part of a descending continuum from top to bottom. No one, for example, can have an ideal body, and therefore no one has to have an ideal body" (101). In a social structure which revolves around the concept of the ideal, what people have in common with each other is *not* being ideal. With such a paradigm in place, there can only be two states of being: ideal and not ideal. In the feudal system, the ideal was a status reserved for the monarchy, the papacy. It was a status which was thought to be close to the divine. For the peasantry,

the ideal was unattainable. The feudal model creates a hierarchical system which promotes vast inequality.

Through the field of statistics, the concept of normality emerges and is subsequently used as a means for human classification which, as a result, created a new sense of anxiety regarding personal identity. Toward the beginning of the nineteenth century in Europe, the field of statistics begins to see significant development. Specifically, the bell curve is developed and becomes an important tool for statisticians. On a bell curve, the majority of commonalities are represented in the main umbrella of the bell curve and everything else is relegated to the extreme. And with this development, comes the concept of the norm. If we are to understand the bell curve as a tool for human classification, as Lennard J. Davis does, then we can understand how this paradigm was imposed upon the cultural subconscious. Rather than believe that the ideal body was unreachable and divine, it became imperative to fall within the norm and to avoid the extremes. Francis Galton, a nineteenth century statistician, used a quincunx (see figure 1) to demonstrate that because “the balls always accumulated in the form of a bell curve, the normal curve was in effect a law of nature” (104). And indeed, according to Belgian statistician Adolphe Quetelet, the *average man* is the “statistical phantom who stands in for us all.” In reality, the hypothetical average man does not exist and is instead created from a set of hypothetical figures and abstracted from data to yield descriptive models (Garland-Thomson 30). The concept of normality has become a powerful ideological tool used by various media outlets and advertisers. According to Garland-Thomson, “we are obliged to act, feel, look, and be normal—at almost any cost. The exacting requirement to

achieve the norm—from clothes and cars to faces and bodies—creates enormous commercial markets that fuel consumer capitalism. Abnormal costs as well. One goal of medical science is to cordon off the pathological from the normal.” Anything which is considered to be outside of the center is seen as abnormal. And the label of *abnormal* is a dangerous one which can result in the declension of both economic and social status and leave one relegated to the margins of society. It is this urge to be seen as normal which creates the necessity to *pass*.

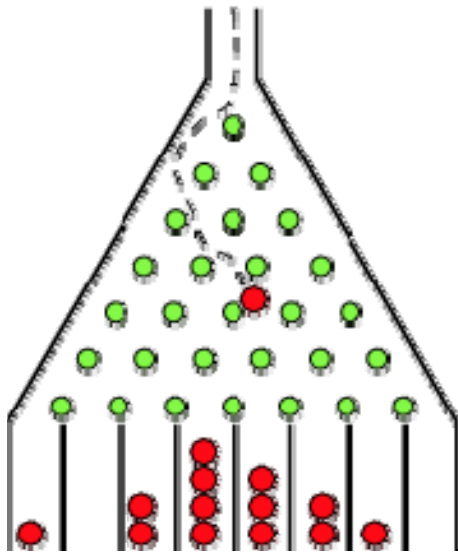


Fig 1. Francis Galton's Quincunx

In a capitalist society, disability can often represent the reduced ability to contribute to or participate in a workforce, and therefore, the inability to sustain oneself. This suggests that corporeal and psychological normativity is *required* in the workplace; however, this is not always the case in many places around the world. The Americans with Disabilities act of 1990, for example, protects the disabled from discrimination in the work place. The limitation of this act is that it attempts to classify every unique type of impairment under one category. In such cases as addiction, severe mental illness, mental retardation, etc.,

the ability to maintain an occupation is very difficult. When an individual suffers from a particularly debilitating impairment, they often require care when they are unable to care for themselves. This burden of care often falls on family members of the disabled, or the government (by way of government assistance, which is funded with tax payer funds). This will put the disabled in a position of dependency. Many times, the type of care that is suggested is medical care which aims to “fix” the disability through various procedures which often involve surgery and/or medication. Not only does this suggest that the disabled are nothing more than people who are in need of repair, but this also puts the disabled in tremendous debt.

Culturally, disability is a heavily politicized and socially constructed identity. The disabled figure is one which, by contrast, has the ability to define a social hierarchy which determines status and class. In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes that “disability is a representation, a cultural interpretation of a physical... configuration and a comparison... that structures social relations and institutions” (6). These interpretations are almost completely dependent on cultural notions of how a body *should* be able to function or how a body *should* look. These notions often tend to “perpetuate standards [such] as ‘beauty,’ ‘independence,’ ‘fitness,’ ‘competence,’ and ‘normalcy’ [that] exclude and disable many human bodies while validating and affirming other” (7). The concept of disability is deeply ingrained in our cultural consciousness as a social stigma that it seems to perpetuate a system which not only excludes it, but also derives its power from being able to justify physical differences as inferior. Interestingly, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 defines disability as

an “impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities” (Garland-Thompson 6). The implication in this definition is that individuals are compared to a standard and idealized image of a “norm” in order to determine whether or not they are “impaired” or “limited.”

Next, I would like to consider the relationship between normality and disability as social identities. Lennard Davis asserts that normality and disability are socially created constructs. And indeed, the concept of identity is a fluid one. Disability identity is not exclusive as anyone can suddenly become disabled, be born with a disability, and “of course, everyone is subject to the gradually disabling process of aging” (Garland-Thompson 13). This creates an anxiety as one's normative state is constantly unstable and unpredictable. Disability then becomes a portentous status. Davis, however, writes that these notions of identity are merely a “part of an oppressive system that creates categories of oppressed others” (Davis 13). And for centuries the disabled were an oppressed group whose primary purpose was to define and reassure the concept of normality by contrast. With regard to disability in literature, David Mitchell writes that “disability has been used throughout history as a crutch on which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and social critique [and] disability plays host to a panoply of other social maladies that writers seek to address” (17). The ideology of normalcy, a concept which is still prevalent, assumes that perfection of the mind and body is the only standard for normality. Because the ideal is unreachable, it forces people constantly find other more artificial means to achieve normalcy (e.g. plastic surgery, and pacemakers).

As people are struggling for a means to achieve normalcy, the fact that the human sense of vision contributes greatly to the determination of normality is something that should not be overlooked. In the third chapter of this study, I focus on the ocularcentric nature of our species. Above all other senses, humans value seeing the most. In fact, Sigmund Freud believed that the eyes hold a very significant subconscious value. In *The Uncanny*, he writes:

A study of dreams, phantasies and myths has taught us about one's eyes, the fear of going blind is often enough to substitute for the dread of being castrated. [...] We may try on rationalistic grounds to deny that fears about the eye are derived from the fear of castration, and may argue that it is very natural that so precious an organ as the eye should be guarded with proportionate dread. (938)

According to Freud, the dread of being castrated is equivalent to the fear of being blinded. Because the two fears are so similar, in the unconscious mind they are interchangeable. In other words, in a dream being blinded can be symbolized as the fear of being castrated. This visceral fear enforces a notion that there exists a kind of hierarchy of senses. The modern world is socially, culturally, and even architecturally designed to accommodate the demands of vision. The mobility of the blind is greatly impeded by the way that cities and suburbs are designed. And with the rise of the printing press, sight became the primary way in which people obtained information. Garland-Thomson writes that “those without a sense of smell—we do not even have a common

word for this deprivation—seem only mildly compromised in contrast to the blind”  
(*Staring* 26).

Moreover, various cultural traditions have placed an emphasis on the importance of vision. In ancient Greece, Plato wrote that the visions and images have the ability to distract the populace from more important things and that images can even obscure valuable truths. The importance on vision is even reflected in mythology and the Christian teachings. For example, consider the myth of Narcissus who fell in love with his reflection in water and then drowned. In the myth of Orpheus, his wife Eurydice was lost to him when she turned back to look. And then consider the myth of Medusa, whose gaze had the ability to turn men into stone. Likewise, the medieval Church used images to tell the story of Christ to the illiterate. The Christian religion also relies heavily on venerable images and stained-glass windows to further the tradition (*Staring* 26-7).

The particularly human tradition of ocularcentricity can be seen in various works of art. Garland-Thomson writes that “our preference for sight dates back to at least the classical Greco-Roman burgeoning of architectural and artistic iconography that celebrates looking as a source of knowledge. The ideal appeared in a perfectly proportioned statue or temple” (26). Consider the scene presented in Jacob Lawrence’s painting *Blind Beggars*:





Fig 2. Jacob Lawrence's *Blind Beggars*

This scene depicts an elderly couple with dark glasses and walking sticks walking toward the viewer. Surrounding them are children who are dancing, waving sticks, and beating drums, apparently as a means to torment the couple. To the children, regular social conventions regarding interactions with the elderly and/or the disabled do not apply because they cannot be seen and, therefore, cannot be held accountable for their actions. In this particular instance, the anxiety created by the disabled-abled encounter is gone and the children are unburdened by social protocol. The burden then is placed upon the blind

couple. This interaction is very similar to the ones seen in *Lolita* and *Laughter in the Dark*. Since none of the other characters are aware of Humbert's disability/psychological disorders, he is free to exploit their blindness and manipulate them as he likes. And in *Laughter*, prior to Albinus' blinding it is the narrator who will taunt Albinus while he remains completely oblivious. After he becomes blind, Margot Peters and Axel Rex exploit and torment Albinus without any fear of consequence.

## CHAPTER TWO: VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S SUBVERSION OF TRADITIONAL NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK IN *LOLITA*

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the disabled-abled encounter between Humbert Humbert and various other characters in the book. I intend to demonstrate how Nabokov's narrative functions as a normative force which embodies the cultural attitudes regarding disability. Indeed, the narrator of *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert, tends to enforce a normative reading on the reader. I also intend to focus on Nabokov's use of narrator to distort the cultural line between disability and ability. Ultimately, the goal of this project is to demonstrate that current societal notions of normality and disability are outdated and arbitrary.

One of the questions this chapter seeks to answer is whether disability can exist without impairment. As I discussed in the previous chapter, these two terms carry different connotations. Impairment is the physical or cognitive limitation that a person can experience. Disability, on the other hand, is a social construction, an identity or a label, which can increase the difficulty of living with an impairment. Disability, then, can be seen as a signifier of a cultural phenomenon which attempts to understand the experience of the impairment. This attempt to negotiate with physical or cognitive dissonance results in creating barriers for the impaired, and in turn aggravates the experience of the impaired. This can create a culture of victimhood. Tom Shakespeare

addresses the humanities model of disability studies in his book *Disability Rights and Wrongs*. He writes:

A more serious problem ... is that building an identity around oppression leads the minority group into taking up a victim position. In this sense, a social model of disability can be as negative as a medical model of disability. Whereas the latter sees disabled people as victims of their flawed bodies or brains, the former sees disabled people as prisoners of an oppressive and excluding society. In both versions, the agency of disabled people is denied and the scope for positive engagement with either impairment or society is diminished. (79)

According to Shakespeare's definition of the social model, the cultural identity of disability is attached to the body when said body is impaired. However, Nabokov shows that one can experience impairment and escape the social experience of disability. The difference is visibility. In the case of Humbert Humbert, he suffers from a heart condition and several psychological disorders. He suffers from paranoia and other unnamed psychological disorders which have him committed to a sanitarium several times. Because his impairments are not apparent he is able to pass as "normal." If he is revealed, then he becomes subject to a disabling social process. Humbert's experiences at the sanitarium provide the reader with an example of the disabling social process. His experience is very different from that of Albert Albinus because there is no visible impairment. Furthermore, the ease at which Humbert can commit his crimes is amplified by not only his passing appearance, but also that his identity is one that is both appealing

and trustworthy. He is a Professor from a prestigious university, and he is described as a handsome man. The reader can speculate that were it not for his carefully crafted identity and his ability to pass as normal, he might have had a more difficult time—if, for example, Humbert were blind like Albert Albinus, he might not have gained the trust of various educators and police officers so easily.

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, various cultures show a tendency to attach meaning to the disabled body. Twentieth century American culture is no exception and this is perceptible in various representations of art and literature. With regard to disability in literature, David Mitchell and Susan Snyder write that “disability has been used throughout history as a crutch on which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and social critique [and] disability plays host to a panoply of other social maladies that writers seek to address” (17).

Narration is a normative force which carries cultural attitudes regarding disability. This is accomplished through the enforcement of a normative reading by the narrative. In the novel *Lolita*, the story is narrated by Humbert Humbert, a man who has a motivation to manipulate the narrative in order to determine and define a specific frame of normality. Throughout the text, the reader is presented with a narrative that is both distinct and questionable. In the text’s forward, it is revealed that Humbert is on trial for murder, and the manuscript that follows is his attempt to defend himself against the charges. This should immediately call the credibility of the narrative into question as Humbert’s life depends on his ability to “sell” his particular brand of normality. Using the prism of disability theory, I will focus on various portions of the text in which Humbert is

manipulating the narrative for his benefit. Much like characters in *fig. 2*, the reader must blindly march forward not knowing whether what they are reading actually took place within the narrative world. Although it seems absurd to think that a reader of fiction would wonder at the truthfulness of a story, it is very common for a reader to assume that their narrator is reliable. It is an unspoken contract that is agreed upon between the reader and author that the events depicted are told without any deception or motive to deceive. It is clear then that Nabakov is attempting to subvert literary conventions by using an untraditional narrator to demonstrate the relativity of normality. In doing this, he is distorting the cultural line between disability and ability—normality and abnormality. Therefore, the reader must proceed with the knowledge that the narrator has a motive for deception.

Several times throughout the text, Humbert demonstrates a propensity for lying as a means to defend himself. In a scene in which Charlotte discovers and reacts to Humbert's journals, he says:

“You are ruining my life and yours,” I said quietly. “Let us be civilized people. It is all your hallucination. You are crazy, Charlotte. The notes you found were fragments of a novel. Your name and hers were put in by mere chance. Just because they came in handy. Think it over. I shall bring you a drink.” (96)

This scene serves as a microcosm for the entire text. Similar to this scene, Humbert Humbert has written this manuscript as a means to defend his relationship with Lolita.

And just like in this scene, Humbert is aware that a narrative can be manipulated and interpreted in a way that is beneficial to him. This scene reminds the reader that this story is a retelling, and that the narrative is thus one step removed from the alleged events of the story. In doing this, he is able to create a world which not only tolerates his inappropriate relationship with a prepubescent girl, but is seemingly amused by it.

*Lolita* features a unique disabled-abled interaction between the narrator and the reader. If Humbert's goal is to manipulate the narrative in his favor, then his first task is to lessen the severity of his crimes. The crime for which he stands accused is murder, though the majority of the text defends his illicit relationship. He does this in a number of ways. One such way is through language. His vividly floral prose-style functions to mask the ugliness of his deeds. Using language of fairy tale-like enchantment, Humbert creates a narrative frame that attempts to manipulate the reader.

Humbert often attempts to posture his attraction to nymphets as a refined taste that is only *culturally* frowned upon. He does this in several ways. The first is his references to art and poetry. Early in the text Humbert describes his early adolescent experience with a young girl, Annabel Leigh, whom he refers to as Lolita's predecessor. This scene is clearly meant to be an allusion to Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabel Lee," a poem which describes love and death of a young woman. This allusion is also meant to recall Poe's famous marriage to his thirteen year old cousin. Humbert uses language which creates an association with the sea in order to develop a connection between his story and the poem. For example, Annabel "kept lifting handfuls of fine sand and letting it pour through her fingers" (12). He also describes a frustrated and abruptly terminated sexual

encounter with her at a beach right before he reveals that she died of typhus months later. Using language of enchantment, Humbert romanticizes young love while simultaneously characterizing himself as a sympathetic figure. This scene also creates the subtle suggestion that the trauma of this event has resulted in his developmentally delayed sexuality as an adult.

Humbert also describes the ways in which the developmental stages are defined by various cultures and laws. He describes England's Children and Young Person Act of 1933 to describe the term "girl-child" which refers to "a girl who is over eight but under fourteen years." He then compares that to Massachusetts law which classifies a "wayward child" as "between seven and seventeen." He then moves on to the topic of James the First and Rahab, his ten year old harlot. He writes of Virgil's affinity for young boys, and Dante's love for a nine year old Beatrice (19). As he points to the arbitrary nature of law and classification, Humbert also suggests that his passion is not only common in history, but also one that is shared by artists and royalty. It is in this way that Humbert uses his narrative to subvert the cultural revulsion of pedophilia. Through his narrative, Humbert can create a setting in which his relationship with Lolita is acceptable.

Throughout the text, there are several instances in which Humbert and Lolita are almost caught in compromising situations. Consider the scene in which Humbert and Lolita are discovered by the police.

Hardly had the car come to a standstill than Lolita positively flowed into my arms... I touched her hot, opening lips with the utmost piety, but she



pressed her mouth to mine so hard that I felt her big front teeth... we broke our embrace as a highway patrol car drew up alongside. Its driver stared at me: "Happen to see a blue sedan, same make as yours, pass you before the junction?" [...] "Why, no." "We didn't," said Lolita, eagerly leaning across me, her innocent hand on my legs"... The cop gave the little colleen his best smile and went into a U-Turn.

By creating a world without consequences or repercussions, he is essentially creating an America that is complacent with his relationship. Despite his several encounters with police officials, Humbert rarely draws anything more than "malevolent curiosity" (171). Most of the time, Humbert manages to easily satisfy curiosity and convince passersby that he is Lolita's father. Several times during their travels, however, Humbert is caught engaging in sexual relations with Lolita. There are no consequences.

The narrative also presents two foils to Humbert Humbert. During his time at Beardsley, Humbert encounters a French Professor, Gaston Godin, whom he describes as "devoid of any talent whatsoever, a mediocre teacher, a worthless scholar, a glum repulsive fat old invert, highly contemptuous of the American way of life, triumphantly ignorant of the English language" (183). While Humbert does not particularly enjoy Godin's company, he remarks that he finds complete security in his company. This is because Godin, too, is a pedophile with an affinity for young boys. He writes: "there he was in priggish New England, crooned over by the old and caressed by the young—oh, having a grand time and fooling everybody; and here was I" (183). Humbert perhaps

feels comfortable knowing that someone whom he considers to be a lesser mind is having such an easy time fooling the entire community.

Clare Quilty, the novel's main antagonist, is presented not only as Humbert's second foil of the novel but also, unlike Godin, an intellectual match for him. Quilty, much like Humbert, uses his cunning to manipulate Lolita into running off with him thus usurping Humbert's role as father and lover. It is this portion of the manuscript which demonstrates normalizing effect of the narrative. By reverting to a familiar and standard plot structure, the characters can be replaced by archetypal stand-ins. There is now a hero, villain, and a kidnapped damsel in distress. Humbert is the established protagonist and Lolita, despite any reservations, is the established love-interest. Suddenly, the narrative, at its bare bones, can be seen as interchangeable with countless other stories. Quilty is Humbert's doppelgänger whose actions completely mirror those committed by Humbert. In presenting the narrative in this manner, Humbert can focus the ire his reader may have towards his actions onto another character.

Another way in which the manuscript that Humbert presents is questionable is the *passing* narrative. In David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis*, they write that "In order to dissociate one's disability from stigmatizing associations, disabled people are encouraged to "pass" by disguising their disabilities. Prosthetic devices, and overcompensation techniques, all provide means for people with disabilities to "fit in" or to "de-emphasize" their differences" (3). With his flowery prose and the poetic descriptions of lush landscapes, Humbert attempts to disguise the grotesque content of his tale and *pass* it off as a love story. Mitchell and Snyder also discuss the concept of a

narrative prosthesis. “While an actual prosthesis is always discomfoting, a textual prosthesis alleviates discomfort by removing the unsightly from view... the erasure of disability via a “quick-fix”... removes an audiences' need for concern or continuing vigilance” (7). In the case of this text, where the reader experiences this world through the eyes of a disabled character, it is the “normal” characters which are considered unsightly and thus are promptly removed.

As the text progresses, the normative narrator, Humbert, encounters several normate characters and his immediate impulse is to marginalize them and make them appear to be disabled in some way through the manipulation of his narrative. His goal in doing this is to present the reader with a distorted and non-normative world in which he and his actions appear “normal.” In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland-Thompson writes:

The term normate usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings. Normate, then is the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them. (8)

According to this passage, a normate is the subject position of a person who sees themselves as normal and then judges others based on his own notion of normalcy. Because a normate character would only serve to present the reader with an opportunity to identify with a normative perspective, it is crucial that Humbert undermines each

normate. Although this is a narrative which focuses primarily on Humbert Humbert, there are several normates that appear to the reader. Charlotte Haze fits this description, though she is portrayed by Humbert as a comedic caricature of the 1950's woman. A widow and single mother, Charlotte is characterized as a clueless buffoon and serves as an example of failed and uninteresting traditional relationships. Likewise, John Ray, Jr. PhD, the fictional editor who wrote the forward of the text should also be considered a normate as he immediately creates a frame on how the book *should* be read and invites the reader to judge the book based on that frame. The forward functions as a normalizing force in the text, but this is quickly undermined by Nabokov. The forward is written with such a comedic and pompously arrogant tone, that his credibility is immediately undermined. Nabokov clearly meant John Ray, Jr. PhD to be laughed at. This reinforces the notion that Nabokov is experimenting with narrative framework.

Psychology and Psychiatry functions as a normate force in the text because it has the ability to determine what is "normal." Throughout his narrative, Humbert constantly mocks the field of psychology. For example, he depicts a bizarre and absurd psychological experiment conducted on his ex-wife. He writes:

The experiment dealt with human and racial reactions to a diet of bananas and dates in a constant position on all fours. My informant, a doctor, swore he had seen with his own eyes obese Valechka and her colonel, by then gray-haired and also quite corpulent, diligently crawling about the well-swept floors of a brightly lit set of rooms... in the company of

several other hired quadrupeds, selected from indigent and helpless groups. (27)

Nabokov's disdain for psychoanalysts, particularly Sigmund Freud, is well documented. Nabokov famously referred to Freud as "The quack from Vienna" and exclaimed that "Freudism and all it has tainted with its grotesque implications and methods appears to me to be one of the vilest deceits practiced by people on themselves and on others." It seems fitting, then, that Nabokov would describe a cruel and unusual experiment being done in the name of psychology. Humbert also confesses to being institutionalized and lying to his psychiatrist. He writes:

I owe my complete restoration to a discovery I made while being treated at that particular very expensive sanatorium. I discovered there was an endless source of robust enjoyment in trifling with psychiatrists: cunningly leading them on; never letting them see that you know all the tricks of the trade; inventing for them elaborate dreams, pure classics in style (which makes *them* the dream extortionists, dream and wake up shrieking; teasing them with fake "primal scenes"; and never allowing them the slightest glimpse of one's real sexual predicament. (31)

What Humbert is telling his reader is that the entire field of psychology only functions so long as the implied contract between psychiatrist and patient is upheld and that the patient is honest. This is similar to the already broken contract between reader and narrator. Thus, Humbert effectively neutralizes the field of psychology as a normative force by

mocking and undermining it. And by marginalizing all of the normate characters and forces, Humbert brings all of the abnormal or disabled characters to the forefront and creates a distorted world which might tolerate his inappropriate relationship with Lolita.

The most important disabled-abled encounter is the way that Humbert dominates Lolita. Humbert immediately strips her of her natural name, Dolores Haze, and assigns her a new name and identity. Although the reader catches only a few glimpses of Dolores (depicted as a teenager obsessed with comic books or a vulnerable young girl who mourns her mother), the dominating image is femme fatale that Humbert creates. He uses Language of enchantment to define Lolita as a temptress. He objectifies her, emphasizing her nymphetic qualities and rarely addresses her feelings. He shatters the notion of a “Normal relationship,” though he obscures this notion with his portrayals of dysfunctional “relationships.” I.e his first marriage, his relationships with prostitutes, the Farlows.

In Eric Goldman’s “‘Knowing’ Lolita” *Sexual Deviance and Normality in Nabokov's Lolita*” he writes that

Although Lolita is presented through the eyes of a pedophile who sees her as an American Eve, the novel appropriates the language and scientific perspective of the Kinsey reports to undercut this mythological view of her. While Humbert presents Lolita's sexuality as deviant or precocious, Nabokov invokes (albeit parodically) statistical, scientific studies of

female sexuality similar to the Kinsey reports; the effect of this perspective is to suggest that Lolita's sexuality is in fact "normal."

Goldman suggests that Humbert presents a distorted portrayal of Lolita designed to sway the reader away from the idea that Lolita is a just juvenile girl whose "normal" sexual development is warped by a maniacal, myth-making pedophile. In a survey of the trend of reviews and criticism of *Lolita* shortly after its 1955 publication, Todd Bayma and Gary Fine found that the majority of critics shared Humbert Humbert's misogynistic interpretation of Lolita. They note, "By arguments similar to those used by convicted rapists in order to view themselves as non-rapists, reviewers depicted Dolores Haze as both morally unworthy and at least partly responsible for her own victimization" (167).

What this survey reveals is the impact that a narrative framework can have in shaping and manipulating perception. Because it is Humbert Humbert controlling the narrative, the tale of a murderer kidnapping a young girl can appear more like a tragic love story. And with his use of narrative in *Lolita*, Nabokov demonstrates that ideology is perpetuated by cultural narrative, and that narrative can be manipulated.

CHAPTER THREE: THE PROBLEM WITH OCULARCENTRICITY:  
CONNGENITAL DISABILITY AND ADVENTITIOUS DISABILITY IN *LAUGHTER  
IN THE DARK*

Social interactions among strangers are generally highly scripted, delicately choreographed situations in which persons read one another and assemble on the spot a behavioral repertoire to draw from in relating to one another.

--Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring* (34)

In this chapter I will be focusing on the disabled-abled interactions between Albinus (both before and after his blinding) and the normative secondary characters. I will also focus on the way Albinus is perceived by the two non-normative characters, Margot Peters and Axel Rex. Albinus is respected by his family and his peers yet when disability/disorder is discovered by Margot and Axel, he is the subject of their torment and deception. Most importantly, I will be focusing on how the normative narrator creates a frame for the reader to understand not only Albinus, but also Margot and Axel. Although Albinus is not blinded until the latter portion of the novel, Nabokov makes it clear to the reader that Albinus is psychologically unstable with homicidal and suicidal thoughts. As Albinus is enjoying the elite status that his wealth and success have afforded him, it is imperative that he conceal his “dark thoughts” (17). Because of this, there is a disparity between the way the reader understands Albinus and how his peers perceive him.



*Laughter in the Dark* demonstrates a binary opposition within disability; that is, congenital disability versus adventitious disability (Quayson 4). The narrative could be split into two sections: Before Albinus' blinding, and after his blinding. However, the narrator suggests that prior to his blinding, Albinus is psychologically unstable. This is only apparent to the reader as the narrator presents the story in a strictly normative frame. In this way, the narrator creates a dissonance of expectations that creates a unique relationship between the protagonist and the reader. This instability, coupled with his pedophilic tendencies, suggests that Albinus is congenitally disabled in a way that is not immediately apparent to the other characters in the novel. The first part of this chapter, then, will focus on Albinus' social relationships and the narrator's portrayal of him prior to his blinding. And for the first half of the novel, the reader anticipates catastrophe. As Lennard Davis describes in "Dismodernism...", there is a constant anxiety regarding one's vulnerable status as able-bodied. As the novel progresses, Albinus is blinded in an accident. The second half of the chapter will focus on the significant changes in depicted in the behavior of the text's major characters after the blinding of Albinus. The action then takes place around an oblivious Albinus. It is then that the normative narrator serves as a set of prosthetic eyes for the reader. Prior to his blinding, the narrator reveals to the reader aspects of Albinus' personality which other characters could not see; after his blinding, the narrator reveals that which Albinus can not see.

It is important to note the frivolous tone of the text's opening as this draws the attention of the reader to the narrator. The opening of *Laughter in the Dark* leads the reader to recall the 'openings of fairy tales. This opening and the quick and dismissive

tone of the rest of the line suggests that this will be a retelling of a common narrative.

“Once upon a time there lived in Berlin, Germany a man called Albinus. He was rich, respectable, happy; one day he abandoned his wife for the sake of a youthful mistress; he loved; was not loved; and his life ended in disaster” (7). It is in this opening that the narrator is introduced as an intrusive force operating within the text informing the reader’s understanding of the narrative. In this opening, the narrator creates a frame, or a microcosm, of the entire novel.

*Laughter in the Dark* features an oppositional relationship between the narrator and the protagonist, Albert Albinus. Prior to Albinus’ blinding, the narrator plays a large part of the story and seems to demand the reader’s attention. The narrator does this by portraying Albinus in an overwhelmingly negative and sometimes comical manner. Although Albinus does not become blind until the latter portion of the text, the narrator serves to remind the reader that Albinus has always had psychological impairments. Throughout the first part of the text, prior to Albinus’ blinding, the narrator consistently undercuts Albinus and highlights all of his deficiencies. There is a sharp contrast between the way Albinus is described and treated by other characters in the text, and the way the narrator portrays him. As Albinus is wealthy and successful, his peers treat him with much respect and with reverence to his artistic capabilities. There is a contrast between the respect that Albinus receives from his peers and the abuse that he receives from the narrator. Consider the narrator’s description of Albinus:

Then, one night, as he was giving his learned mind a holiday and writing a little essay (nothing very brilliant, he was not a particularly gifted man)

upon the art of the cinema...for there was decidedly something very appealing about his pleasant smile and the mild blue eyes which bulged a little when he was thinking hard (and as he had a slowish mind this occurred more often than it should. He was a good talker, with just that very slight hesitation in his speech, the best part of a stammer, which lends fresh charm to the stalest sentence. (8, 14)

Throughout the text, the narrator constantly depicts Albinus to be silly or foolish. The narrator consistently uses asides and back-handed compliments to create a certain image for Albinus. What is puzzling is the contradictory nature of these excerpts. Albinus gave his learned mind a holiday, yet he is not particularly gifted. He was a good talker with a slight stammer. This highlights the dichotomy between image and reality. Albinus attempts to display an image of success while the narrator undercuts him with reality. This establishes the narrator and the protagonist as oppositional forces attempting to narrate the story. In this way, this opinionated narrator is attempting to sway the reader against Albinus.

The narrator seems to suggest that Albinus is suffering from a congenital psychological disorder and is impaired in a way that is not immediately apparent to the other characters in the text. More specifically, the narrator suggests that Albinus is psychologically and emotionally unstable with potential homicidal tendencies. It is also suggested that Albinus has pedophilic urges and is attracted to Margot because of her youth. The narrator will also occasionally give the reader access to Albinus' thoughts in a way that makes it seem as though we are listening in on a private conversation. Often

times, we catch Albinus' thought mid-sentence and what we find is a disturbing tendency toward homicidal/suicidal thoughts. For example,

“...Like to crush her beautiful throat. Well, she is dead anyway, since I shan't go there anymore” (23).

“I shall die or go off my head if I can't have her,” thought Albinus. (57)

“...And then I'll kill myself,” thought Albinus, suddenly losing his head. (62)

“Good. Then I'll kill her,” he thought swiftly. (99)

“She must die,” thought Albinus. (99)

This seems to suggest that the narrator is an active force in the text whose purpose is to reveal Albinus' psychological instability. Of course these impulses remain hidden as Albinus actively tries to either repress the thoughts or talks himself out of acting on the impulse. For example, Albinus says to himself, “No, you can't take a pistol and plug a girl you don't even know, simply because she attracts you” (13). In his repression, Albinus is actively attempting to *pass* as normal and has been relatively successful.

The narrator also reveals a dark impulse that Albinus is hiding. The narrator provides the reader insight into the dreams of Albinus:

But at night he dreamed of coming across a young girl lying asprawl on a hot lonely beach... [he] was tortured by two dark thoughts, each of a different kind of darkness: one was that his wife might die, and the other that... he might find a friendly girl and bring her back to his empty bedroom. (17)

This dream suggests that Albinus fantasizes about killing his wife and replacing her with a younger woman. Shortly after, he finds Margot working at a cinema and begins stalking her for days and wondering whether or not to approach her. Albinus seems to be slightly self-aware as he says to himself “any normal man would know what to do” (22).

Interestingly, Nabokov presents the same scene from the perspective of Margot as if to give the reader a notion of what how the other characters perceive Albinus. She says:

A man coming out lingered by the exit and glanced at her with a shy helpless expression. After two or three nights he returned. He was perfectly dressed and his blue eyes stared at her hungrily. “Quite a decent-looking fellow, though rather on the dull side,” mused Margot. Then, when he turned up for the fourth or fifth time—and certainly not for the sake of the picture, because it was the same—she felt a faint thrill of pleasant excitement. (42)

Margot’s reaction to Albinus is quite alarming. Albinus is clearly following and watching her, actions which she should feel threatened by. Instead, she seems to be “disarmed” by the fact that he is a decent-looking fellow, and that he was well dressed. This could, of course, also speak to the nature of Margot’s character. However, it is safe to assume that Albinus is successfully *passing* and hiding under the guise of his own created persona.

It is also clear that Margot is rationalizing. In Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s *Staring*, she discusses the concept of rationalization and how it shapes the way people see themselves and others. She writes that “Rationalization developed as a way for modern

societies to control the rapidly growing amount of information, products, processes...Rationalization abstracts and simplifies us through bureaucratic structures. Things and people must fit into preexisting patterns and templates [to be processed]” (30). Using only the information gleaned from what she sees, Margot is able to assess Albinus and concludes that he is nonthreatening based on his carefully crafted persona. Garland-Thomson goes on to say that,

To behave toward unknown others effectively and ethically, we need to gather information about them. We use their appearance as clues to who they are and how to relate to them. What you look like, rather than who you are, often determines how people respond to you... We need to determine whether the strangers we encounter are going to help us, mug us, bother us, see us again, or just leave us alone. Intricate visual codes such as costuming, insignia, behavior, expression....—not to mention race, gender, age size, and visible disabilities—converge to create conclusions about strangers. (34)

It is in this way that this scene represents the ocularcentric tradition surrounding human interaction. Despite his actual motives, Margot can only use her vision to deduce from several cues that she reads from his appearance in order to make a judgment on the situation.

Margot’s excitement at the thought of being stalked may be an indication of her youth and immaturity. Margot’s youth is something which is constantly alluded to

throughout the text, both by the narrator and Albinus. Although Albinus guesses “her age to be about eighteen,” the narrative strongly implies that not only is she much younger than that, but also that Albinus is attracted to Margot’s youth, regardless of her actual age (21). In the epilogue to *Lolita*, Nabokov explains that he had toyed with several prototypes of the nymphet prior to *Lolita*’s publication as early as 1939 (311-12). Margot is one such prototype; a predecessor to Lolita.

As I have previously mentioned, the narrator provides insight into Albinus’ mind in order to demonstrate that he is congenitally impaired in a way that is not apparent to the other characters in the text. It is this insight that reveals his pedophilic desires which he desperately attempts to hide. Shortly after their first meeting, Albinus begins to plot ways in which they may be alone. He thinks to himself, “A textbook of love for beginners. Oh, the things I shall teach her. So young, so pure, so maddening...” (49). This thought is very telling as it reveals that Albinus fantasizes about being in an authority position over Margot. The teacher-student relationship is one that often features children and adults who have authority over them. The narrative makes it clear that Albinus thinks of Margot as a child. Consider a scene when she is in his home: “In a passing mirror he saw a pale grave gentleman walking beside a schoolgirl in her Sunday dress” (60). The descriptions of Margot confirm that Albinus is projecting his fantasy onto her. Furthermore, it is important to note the various descriptions of Margot from the perspective of Albinus:

“But she shook him off like a naughty child.” (61)

“She pulled up her stocking like a child...” (62)

“A schoolgirl in red for whom he had held open the door...” (71)

“The childish lines of her body...” (92)

“And as he stood by the bed and feasted his eyes on that childish face, with the soft pink lips and flushed cheeks...” (178)

The insights given to the reader by the narrator confirm that Albinus is suffering from an unrevealed psychological disorder and that he is attempting to *pass* off as normal.

According to the narrative, Albinus does a fine job of *passing* due to the ocularcentricity of human nature. Garland-Thomson states that “the modern world ... depends on sight as the primary sensory conduit to the world... vision shapes the modern citizenry” (*Staring* 25). Albinus is a character who depends on sight and vision to put forth his façade. Even his occupation as an art critic is one that is completely dependent on his sense of sight. In addition to his occupation, Albinus depends on sight and vision to hide congenital impairments and to create a persona that reflects intellectualism, professionalism, and success. Likewise, Margot relies on her sense of sight to determine whether or not Albinus is a threat to her safety. Though she fails to make the correct determination, her opinion and actions toward Albinus change once he is blinded and his carefully crafted persona is done away with.

Consider the narrator’s description of Albinus once he has been blinded: “His face was covered with bristly hair; a pink scar glistened on his temple; he looked like a bearded convict” (259). The purpose is to associate buffoonery and villainy with disability. As his façade has been dropped, he is revealed for what he actually is. His newfound adventitious disability, one that is both embodied and perceptible to the other



characters, then, makes him a vulnerable target. Because his status as able-bodied has changed, he is now subject to the disabling social process which he will struggle to come to terms with. Albinus is aware of his vulnerability and this is present as he ponders his new plight: “the terrible sense of this solid black wall remained unchanged... then presently there would loom up once more that unbearable mountain of oppression, which was only comparable with the panic of one who wakes to find himself in his grave” (245). He does, however, naively entrust his well-being to Margot.

Once Albinus’ disability is discovered by Margot and Axel, one of the novel’s antagonists, he becomes the target of their torment and deception which ultimately leads to his ruin. Axel Rex moves into Margot and Albinus’ house to continue an ongoing affair with Margot to which Albinus, of course, was blind, metaphorically speaking. Axel spends his days tormenting Albinus while he thinks he is alone. He moves furniture directly into Albinus’ path he makes sounds across the room to startle him, among other things. Ironically, Albinus does not learn of this affair Axel until he is actually blinded.

As the English translation to this text was written in 1938, Nabakov understood the desperate need for concealment as he and his part-Jewish wife fled Nazi Germany (vii). One of the questions this study attempts to answer is whether or not an individual can be impaired and not be disabled. Humbert Humbert and Albert Albinus each suffer from congenital impairments and psychological disorders which do not disable them unless they are revealed. Both characters go through great lengths to pass as normal in order to retain their positions within a power structure from which they benefit. In each case the narrator reveals the “hidden disability,” (impairment without the social barriers

associated with disability) within the main protagonist. Is the narrator revealing something which is only perceptible in representation; that is, can we see it only because the narrator shows it to us? Yes, indeed. Through the normative narrative present in both texts, the reader is not subject to the handicap of an ocularcentric experience.

## CONCLUSION: CULTURAL NARRATIVES AND IDEOLOGY

As mentioned in my first chapter, the ultimate goal of this project is to demonstrate that current societal notions of normality and disability are outdated and arbitrary. The difficulty with achieving such a lofty goal is that societal notions of normality and disability are a part of an ideological paradigm that is deeply ingrained in our cultural subconscious. Disability theorists call this the ideology of ability, which determines the value of an individual based on their physical appearance and innate ability. This creates a hierarchy of traits, values, skills, achievements, and establishes a notion of an ideal image. Those who cannot fit within the frame of the ideology of ability or achieve the ideal image are subject to the disabling social process of being relegated to the margins of society as the world seems to be created both socially and even architecturally to conform to the needs of the fit and able.

The works of Vladimir Nabokov are ideal in approaching this issue as his novels often challenge existing notions of normality. Representations of disability frequently appear in the work of Nabokov as a means to comment on existing social constructs. Both *Lolita* and *Laughter in the Dark* feature a disabled protagonist and a nontraditional narrator. By utilizing a nontraditional narrator in each of these texts, Nabokov demonstrates that normality is relative. The narrative in each text functions as a

normative force which creates a framework for how the characters, situations, and interactions, should be read and understood. As I demonstrated in chapters two and three of this project, Nabokov's use of the normative narrator in each text distorts the cultural line which separates normality and abnormality. In the case of each text, the cultural line is representative of certain long held ideologies. Goldman's survey on the reactions of *Lolita* proves that a narrative can alter and shape perception. As Humbert characterizes himself as a tragic hero, and Albinus' abusive narrator continues to undermine him, Nabokov demonstrates that a narrative, cultural or literary, has the power to either perpetuate or alter ideology. And if ideology is capricious in nature, then certainly there exists other social constructs such as normality and disability that are indeed arbitrary.

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