

## Littérature anglophone | *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov

### Introduction, chapters 1 and 3

#### Thématiques croisées :

- **Art et contestation** : l'art qui fait débat, défendre un point de vue.
- **L'art qui fait débat** : l'artiste qui fait débat, les tabous, la notion de bienséance.
- **Mise en scène de soi et autorévélation**
- **Initiation et apprentissage** : la construction de l'individu face aux injonctions et normes sociales. Surmonter les préjugés.

#### Introduction:

*Lolita* is a 1955 novel written by the Russian-American writer Vladimir Nabokov. The novel is notable for its controversial subject. It was banned in France from 1956 until 1959 and in England from 1955 until 1959. The book was first published in France for the first time in 1955 but the novel was banned by the French government a year after. The first US edition was published in 1958 and was ranked amongst the best-selling novels of all time. The novel has become more controversial than ever in recent years due to its unethical topic.

#### Chapter 1 – analysis:

The beautiful language the narrator uses makes the reader forget about Humbert's "diabolical cunning". Humbert's charming and ingenious prose gets the reader on his side while diverting us from the horror of his "crime". The opening lines of the book get the reader directly in the mood. It is obvious that a great love is afoot: "(...) but in my arms she was always Lolita". There is also passion: "*light of my life, fire of my loins*". At the same time, it appears evident that there is something dark and socially inappropriate about it: "*You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style*". The narrator introduces himself as a murderer and acknowledges the atrocity of his crime. This opening passage renowned for its poetic and poignant style of narration.

#### Chapter 3 – analysis:

In chapter three, the reader is told about Annabel – Lolita's precursor. For Humbert Humbert, Annabel is the first one "who got away", to whom all other girls will be compared – until he eventually meets Lolita. This chapter is crucial since its purpose is to lull the reader into a tender and sweet nostalgic mood. Once again, the style the narrator employs is quite convoluted and can be rather difficult to follow for any reader, albeit elegantly written. Humbert Humbert gives the reader explicit detail and information. The general tone is never vulgar, never crude, and the narrator constantly remains at a poetic level. Although the story he tells may be immoral, the beautiful and romantic aspects of the scene he describes transcends their sexual and ethical dimension.

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*"After one wild attempt we made to meet at night in her garden (of which more later...)"*. This sentence builds anticipation and makes the readers feel guilty in some way because they want to know more, but Humbert will never get into too much detail. This may trigger [generate] a feeling of frustration and guilt for the narrator.

*"(...) an four months later she died of typhus."* This sentence closes the chapter with sudden tragedy that strikes the reader just as it must have stricken young Humbert when he was a teenager. It is just like a slap in the reader's face. Most importantly, it tenderises and disarms the reader for what lies ahead. Not only is this an attempt to help us sympathise with Humbert, but it sets the reader up for the sexual frustration of the next chapter. This frustration can be compared to a dam that withholds the waters that had been torturing Humbert all his life until he finally met Lolita. As Edgar Allan Poe said: "The memory of past happiness is the anguish of today". Humbert's remembrance of the past is a mixture of sweet and sour (bitter sweet).

## Conclusion

The opening lines of the book can be regarded as a strange combination of self-incrimination and self-defense. Vladimir Nabokov's honed writing skills outstep the realm of accepted mentionability. *Lolita* was a taboo-breaking book, which caused great controversy when it was first published in France (since no American or British publisher dared publish the novel for fear of prosecution).