

THE LOST OEDIPAL STAGE OF HUMBERT HUMBERT IN NOBOKOV'S *LOLITA*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the lost oedipal stage of Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. It aims to discover the main character's motivation behind his sexual disorder and the inner conflicts of his psyche, in response to Humbert not experiencing the oedipal stage in his early years. The oedipal stage is a crucial development stage of a human being, and Humbert's inexperience causes him to be unable to express his desires as an infant boy towards his mother resulting in his psyche developing abnormally. Humbert is considered a hebephiliac for his sexual attraction towards young girls due to the loss of maternal figure at the age of three. Thus, psychoanalysis theory by Sigmund Freud is used in order to analyse the impact of Humbert's lost oedipal stage to his adult psyche by applying the tripartite theory. The data are collected using qualitative descriptive method, represented in direct quotes from the book. The paper reveals that Humbert's lost oedipal stage holds a vital role in developing his sexuality in adult life. He only received a strong affection and love when he was thirteen, from Annabel that aged no older than fourteen. He has been holding on to the moment, in which he was able to express his desires as his id, and is unable to let it go even after Annabel's decease, as his id was not fully fulfilled. This causes him a traumatic experience, leading to his sexual disorder which is developed further once he met Dolores Haze as Lolita.

Keywords: hebephilia, oedipal stage, psychoanalysis, tripartite

INTRODUCTION

Lolita has been analysed by many scholars, mostly regarding the controversial relationship between the main character Humbert Humbert and Dolores Haze, a young girl for whom he harbors feelings. The novel pictures Humbert Humbert as a mature man with striking sexual disorder towards Dolores Haze, which he refers to as his Lolita; a strong sexual interest towards prepubescent, typically aged 11 to 14, called hebephilia. It differs from pedophilia which is the sexual attraction to prepubescent children. In 1996, researchers at Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) conducted research on neurological explanations of pedophilia which hypothesized that hebephilia could also be distinguished on the basis of neurological and physiological measures. It is not known what causes someone to experience sexual attraction towards pubescent. CAMH's series of studies on physical and psychological correlates of hebephilia grew out of efforts to seek neurodevelopmental etiologies for hebephilia.

The novel raises issues such as: what triggers Humbert to be a hebephilia? And as the authority of society forbids him to fulfill his desires, how does he negotiate with his condition? This research focuses on discovering the cause and effect of Humbert's sexual

disorder using concepts on psychoanalysis to crack the mysteries that that lie beneath the surface of the controversial yet enchanting novel of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*.

METHODS

The data are collected and analysed using qualitative descriptive method, in which it is gathered through observation and described thoroughly (Trochim, 2006; Polit and Hungler, 1999). In order to discover the answers to the questions, the research will take Humbert's past memories and events into account then relate it to his present self.

According to Freud (1897), an unconscious mental representation object of the target or focus of sexual desire is first developed in early stages of one's childhood. It helps child development to expressing their desires towards the object, and as the child develops, the mental energy is focused on more mature objects. However, the child development can be disturbed by trauma, and their sexual energy remains in the last stage they were previously in. The disturbance in these stages will decide whether a person has normal or pathological personalities. Out of the five stages of psychosexual development, the early stages of development are vital as the children sexual energy repeatedly reattaches itself to other objects, in this case, the mother.

A young infant (male or female) has a natural erotic attachment to the mother. As the infant grows older, they slowly realize that the mother is not available sexually due to the role of the father. Based on Freud's point of view, the father then becomes the infant's sexual rival to the point that the infant fantasizes of killing the father so that he can possess the mother. This stage is also known as Oedipal stage. Some children may proceed through the stage progressively, but some may not, hence the term Oedipus complex. It is used by Sigmund Freud (1856-1936) based on the Greek myth of Oedipus, especially as portrayed in the play *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, to illustrate how psychoanalysis is the most crucial experience in the development of human psyche. In the play, the main character, Oedipus, kills his father and marries his mother, a situation in which Freud states as "Oedipal drama."

Oedipal drama is the central event in the development of adult psyche, thus it is a crucial development stage. Freud's different and best known description of three different parts that help develop human psyche, as he stated that it is not a single integrated entity, are known as the "tripartite" model (id, superego, ego) which have different goals and desires according to different principles. The id, according to Freud, is the site of natural drives that know only desires and passion, has no sense of moderation or limitation. In other words, id is the wild state of human psyche that is almost if uncontrollable. The superego, based on the Oedipal drama, is the authority of the father and of society; authority that demands a strict limitation of the id. The ego moderates between the demand of the desires and the limitation of the authority.

The relation between Freud's tripartite and the Oedipal drama is clear. The desire of an infant baby who wants to possess his mother is the representation of the id. Society and the authority of the father limit his desires; therefore, it is the superego. However, as he grows older, he accepts his limitation and tries to restrain his desires for the mother, leading to repression as the process of accepting the limitation. Freud's tripartite model has been applied to literature, especially to psychoanalytic literary criticism that is solely based on Freudian analysis.

RESULTS

The results of the study show that the cause of Humbert to be a hebephilia and his negotiation to his condition as seen in table 1.

Table 1. Results of the study

The cause Humbert to be a hebephilia	Humbert negotiation to his condition
The Loss of Oedipal Stage due to: - Humbert lost his mother at age of three - The loss of Anabel	- Humbert might refuse to admit that he mourns his mother’s death, an unpleasant thing that he experienced as a child.
	- He attached to Annabel
	- He learned to have “so-called normal relationships” with many women only as to abide the law
	- He is marrying Lolita mother to get closer to her.

DISCUSSION

In the beginning of the story, Humbert Humbert overviews his past as to why he is so obsessed with Lolita. According to Freud, analysing the development of the human psyche is begun from the childhood. A young infant, male or female, has a natural erotic attachment to the mother. In *Lolita*, Humbert states that he lost his mother at the age of three—the stage that strongly requires the existence of the mother. The libidinal drives that exist in child development are not fully fulfilled by the loss of the mother. He did not find the maternal figure that he unconsciously and psychologically needed the most; he did not experience the Oedipal stage and thus skipped to the puberty step thoroughly.

This is where he first develops a sexual deviation. In the novel, his “very photogenic mother” died in a freak accident, stroke by lightning while having a picnic. Even though he admits that “nothing of [his mother] subsists within the hollows and dells of memory”, the accident actually scars Humbert. He barely experienced the Oedipal stage due to his mother’s decease, and it is worsened by the loss of mother figure both physically and mentally. It might be due to his weak memory as a child that he cannot even remember his own mother, but it might also be denial. Humbert might refuse to admit that he mourns his mother’s death, an unpleasant thing that he experienced as a child.

His lost Oedipal stage is prolonged as he met Annabel, the closest he could get to the needed maternal figure regarding her love and affection towards him. The sexual desires he had repressed since he was a child were overflowing, combined with the preadolescent sexual urges as he was currently thirteen years of age when first met Annabel. The erotic urges that were supposed to be released when he was an infant, to his mother, were flown rapidly to the newly discovered sexual experience. However, when he was being attached slowly yet strongly to Annabel (the object of Humbert’s mental energy), the hands of Fate decided to take the only replacement he used to express his desires, which explains why Humbert is psychologically devastated for the loss of Annabel:

“I was a strong lad and survived; but the poison was in the wound, and the wound remained ever open, and soon I found myself maturing amid a civilization which allows a man of twenty-five to court a girl of sixteen but not a girl of twelve.” (Nabokov, 1955:15)

As seen from the quotation above, it is interpreted that he has been holding on to the memories and figure of Annabel Leigh for so many years. The loss of Annabel, the loss of maternal figure, causes a great traumatic experience that affects more to his sexuality, as his unreleased libidinal desires have not released all yet. He was trying to express his desires that should have been expressed in his Oedipal stage, but the experience on the other hand worsened his situation. It is obvious that Humbert is holding on to the past, where he and Annabel were still little kids who shared memories and romance together. The line “...but the poison was in the wound, and the wound remained ever open...” can be interpreted to ‘the painful memories of the loss of Annabel were in the past, and the pain lingers to the present days’. This attachment is caused by Annabel being the first and closest female figure that Humbert psychologically trusts in order to help him express his desires and needs of maternal figure, to help him rediscover his lost Oedipal stage, which explains even after growing up, he is still craving for the lost maternal figure of his life.

His unsatisfied desires remain the same, as he finally grows old and finds himself in a society which does not approve of an adult man courting young girls. Humbert is stuck in the past, holding on to the memories of Annabel, a thirteen years old girl, and is blinded by the loss that he cannot move forward and settle for girls his age. Therefore, the loss of two significant figures, that are supposed to help him complete his Oedipal stage, are the main trigger of Humbert’s sexual disorder.

Humbert’s strong passion in sexual tendency also supports Freud’s theory of libidinal imagery. In his childhood, his secret rendezvous with Annabel contained erotic actions of preteens; the urge they have to touch one another and to feel the pleasure is an urge of sexual desires. As he becomes a grown man, the libidinal imagery is not erased by time, instead it grows much bigger though Humbert himself admits that he “never dared approach” the nymphets that he craves for. It is proven by this quotation: “Another time a red-haired school girl hung over me in the metro, and a revelation of axillary russet I obtained remained in my blood for weeks.” (1955:12) Humbert emphasizes how he tries to be good and respect other children, but he still laments over the fact that his desires towards young girls are still excruciatingly almost unbearable. As he described in the quotation, the sight of the young girl’s “axillary russet” is hard to forget even weeks of the aftermath. This approves that Humbert gains a fantastic sexual experience only by being in contact, not even physically, with a school girl for a little while. His libido is much wilder though still can be contained inside.

However, Humbert consciously realizes that he cannot come in contact with the nymphets as he desires, that is due to the social norms and laws. “While my body knew what it craved for, my mind rejected my body’s every plea.” (1955:10) As seen by Freud’s tripartite model, Humbert’s sexual desires are his id that is strongly declined by the superego, which is society. He knows that he craves for little girls to fulfill his unexpressed desires, but he still has his logical thinking of how the society around him revolves. As mentioned earlier, he knows that the society does not approve of his desires to be with young girls. Thus, he learns to accept this fact by repressing his desires, which is the ego that has been negotiated by both his id and superego. He learned to have “so-

called normal relationships” with many women only as to abide the law, which results in a deceptive ego: him ‘accepting’ the social norms and laws while in other side escaping his desires towards Lolita, one of it is marrying her mother to get closer to her.

Charlotte Haze, Lolita’s mother, is used as a cover for Humbert to acquire the excuse to “court” Lolita, as he holds a legal role as her stepfather. His desires, faced with many possibilities and opportunities, are getting wild, especially after the passing of Charlotte Haze. He even takes the initiation to sedate Lolita in order to fulfill his sexual desires by having sexual intercourse without her consent. Moreover, due to being the pretend-biological father of Lolita, Humbert has the authority to control her. As he has finally found and expressed his repressed id caused by his lost Oedipal stage, Humbert is more obsessive and possessive towards Lolita. It is due to the fear and anxiety that he might once again lose his replacement of a maternal figure and lose his chance to express the desires within him, which explains his fury and rage towards Quilty for abducting Lolita while still being in Humbert’s possession.

However, upon meeting Lolita at last and listening to her story of the runaway incident’s aftermath, Humbert regrets what he has done to her. He admits that his sexual desires have deprived her of her childhood; he laments that his “foul lust” has ruined his Lolita; he admits that he is a maniac for taking benefits of the sexual exploitation of a child. In the end, he is captured by the police while driving hastily, and he lets himself be due to his newly found regret of depriving Lolita from a normal life.

CONCLUSION

In other words, based on Freudian analysis, the factor that triggers Humbert to be a hebephilia is the traumatic experience of his past: the loss of maternal figure, the unexperienced Oedipal stage. Due to the lost Oedipal stage resulting unfulfilled desires, he found another source closest to the figure he had lost, which is Annabel Leigh. However, it must be taken away from him for the second time, which creates a deep wound that is being carried away up until now. The figure he created in order to overcome his wounds developed from the previously lost Oedipal stage are broken again, thus prolonged his traumatic experience that becomes a part of him. The experience affects his sexuality due to his inability to cover the trauma and his previous need of a maternal figure that were used to be expressed to Annabel, a thirteen years old girl of his childhood. This event then introduces him to having sexual interest towards prepubescent girls, in response to his inability to let go of Annabel and the sexual experience they had in their own prepubescent age.

However, it is rather difficult for him to release his desires, his id. This is caused by the social norms, law and morality, the superego, that force him to repress his desires and memories. As a result of the negotiation of the id and the superego, comes the ego which does not only abide the superego, but also wins the id. The won id, however, is hidden from the surface and covered by layers of deceit, of Humbert hiding behind the role of so-called biological father of Lolita herself.

In his possession, Lolita is controlled abusively due to his obsessive and possessive behaviour, resulting in her runaway. Humbert finds himself miserable without Lolita’s presence, though in the end, after finally encountering with her and listening to her story, he regrets everything he has done to her—he regrets expressing his id to her—and eventually allows himself to be bound by the superego as punishment.

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