

Analysis of Humbert's Ethical Choices

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Abstract

Humbert's mumbling in prison shows the readers his true inner world and his tragic fate. Throughout *Lolita*, it is evidently clear that Humbert's ethical choice is inextricably linked with his depressed heart and tragic fate. Based on ethical literary criticism proposed by Professor Nie Zhenzhao, this paper analyzes Humbert's life, which is a life full of ethical choices. This article, based on Humbert's ethical choice of Charlotte Haze, Lolita and Quilty, and his ultimate ethical redemption, reveals his ethical dilemma in ethical choice, his Sphinx Factors, the interweaving of his free will and rational will, and his ultimate ethical choice. Humbert's ethical choices eventually led to his tragic fate.

Keywords: Humbert, ethical choices, ethical redemption

1. Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov was an important figure in both literary and critical circles. "Nabokov is also an alternative presence in the American literary tradition" (Wang, 2017, p. 102). In his most controversial masterpiece, *Lolita*, his profound thoughts on the ethical value of literature are reflected everywhere. "There is a wealth of content and directions behind what at first glance looks like a popular novel" (Wang, 2008, p. 156). Humbert's life is full of tangled ethical choices, and every ethical choice further leads to the tragic fate of the protagonist. Based on ethical literary criticism proposed by Professor Nie Zhenzhao, this paper tries to analyze Humbert's tragic life under his different ethical choices, from the ethical dilemmas full of natural will in his marriage with Charlotte Haze, to the different representations of the sphinx factor in Lolita's emotion, to the outburst of Quilty's free will and rational will and the confession of his own ethical value.

2. Humbert's Ethical Choice of Marriage with Charlotte Haze

From an unhappy childhood, Humbert had a passionate love affair with "nymphets" (Nabokov, 1995, p. 16) between the ages of nine and fourteen. But as a European scholar, Humbert had to suppress his feelings. "Inly, I was consumed by a hell furnace of localized lust for every passing nymphet whom as a law-abiding poltroon I never dare approach" (Nabokov, 1995, p. 18). Humbert was tormented by the contradiction between his inner absurdity of thinking and his actual action which had to be rational. As an adult, easy academic work provided Humbert with a steady income and a job. When Humbert learned that his relative's house in New England had been burned down, he had to turn to a friend of the relative for help. Thus Mrs. Haze met this polite European scholar.

Mrs. Haze was in her mid-thirties, "the lady herself—sandals, maroon slacks, yellow silk blouse, squarish face, in that order—came down the steps, her index finger still tapping upon her cigarette" (Nabokov, 1995, p. 37). In Humbert's consciousness, communication with Mrs. Haze is very reluctant, what's more, Mrs. Haze's house seems old and shabby to Humbert. He wanted to finish the visit as soon as possible, but she introduced him with warmth and wishful thinking. The polite Humbert of old fashion could not refuse, and continued to talk to Mrs. Haze. Humbert fumbled for the timetable in his pocket to check the quickest available train back into town when he followed Mrs. Haze out onto the lawn. It was on this lawn that Humbert met Lolita, "half naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses" (Nabokov, 1995, p. 39).

Although he was not satisfied with the house and did not have much affection for Mrs. Haze, Humbert quickly and happily rent the house because of the presence of his sexy maiden. In the following days living together, Humbert recorded his inner world with his diary, while enjoying Lolita brought him desirable and spiritual satisfaction. Then a confessing letter from Mrs. Haze tipped the balance. In the face of "as a lifelong mate; and

that you are ready to link up your life with mine forever and ever and be a father to my little girl” and “Destroy it and go” (Nabokov, 1995, p. 68), Humbert found himself in an ethical dilemma.

Humbert cannot choose to live with a woman he does not love; but once out of Mrs. Haze’s house, there was no Lolita, “light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul” (Nabokov, 1995, p. 9). “Ethical choice is a way for one to choose good and discard evil and become a moral person” (Nie, 2014, p. 6). What kind of choice should Humbert make? It was an ethical question that Humbert, as a European scholar, had to decide at once. “After a while I destroy the letter and went to my room, and ruminated, and rumbled my hair, and modeled my purple robe, and moaned through clenched teeth...” (Nabokov, 1995, p. 70). Humbert’s inner struggle and pain of making the ethical choice of marrying Mrs. Haze can be clearly expressed. But “I imagine (under conditions of new and perfect visibility) all the casual caresses her mother’s husband would be able to lavish on his Lolita. I would hold her against me three times a day, every day” (Nabokov, 1995, p. 70). But once thinking about this, Humbert imagined Mrs. Haze as a tolerable mate. Marriage should be the result of love and trust for each other, while Humbert’s heart was secretly planning his own desires. “For Humbert, marriage was just a means to an end” (Wang, 2021, p. 41). Humbert eventually chose to marry Mrs. Haze and became Lolita’s stepfather. In this marriage, Humbert is not out of the loyalty to Mrs. Haze’s love, or even in essence, Mrs. Haze is no love for him, but out of the idea of long-term possession of Mrs. Haze’s daughter Lolita. “Ethical choice liberates human beings from animals. Only then do human beings really acquire concepts and realize the difference between themselves and animals. Only then do ethical consciousness begin to appear and the concept of good and evil really come into being” (Nie, 2014, p. 6). As a scholar, Humbert could not be ignorant of ethical consciousness and the concept of good and evil. But his choice violated the ethical standards.

Humbert not only failed to fulfill his duty as a husband after marriage, but even had the idea of murdering Mrs. Haze. Although Humbert had a picture in his mind of drowning Mrs. Haze in a lake, the kindness and gentleness that remained in Humbert eventually made him give up the idea. “But I could not kill Charlotte—especially when things were on the whole not quite as hopeless, perhaps, as they seemed at first wince on that miserable morning” (Nabokov, 1995, p. 87). Humbert wanted to get rid of Mrs. Haze without risking her life. This shows that Humbert’s ethical choices still have the aspect of “human nature factor” (Nie, 2014, p. 38). It was not until Mrs. Haze opened Humbert’s locked diary that she understood his true thoughts and the absurdity of her marriage to Humbert. Heartbroken, Mrs. Haze rushed out the door, only to be killed in a car accident.

In his marriage to Mrs. Haze, Humbert chose both to be a husband and to shirk his responsibilities as a husband. This is Humbert’s ethical dilemma. Due to his inner desire and the “animal factor” (Nie, 2014, p. 39), the only reason Humbert could accept this marriage was that he could be infinitely close to Lolita. He himself refused to marry Mrs. Haze. Humbert wrote the pain of this ethical choice in his diary, which eventually led to the discovery of Mrs. Haze, causing the tragedy. But Humbert made the choice of giving in to his inner desire in this dilemma, and began to walk slowly towards the road of destruction of his destiny. Humbert’s ethical choice of Mrs. Haze stems from Humbert’s natural will. “Natural will is the will that is closest to the animal part, such as instinct” (Nie, 2014, p. 42). Humbert’s marriage with Charlotte Haze was based on Humbert’s better proximity to Lolita, rather than on his emotional foundation. This choice of marriage itself is contrary to common sense and ethics, and eventually lead to the tragic marriage.

3. Humbert’s Ethical Choice of Lolita

Humbert’s ethical choice of Lolita is determined by his own “Sphinx Factor”. “The Sphinx Factor is made up of two parts: the Human Factor and the Animal Factor. These two factors combine organically to form a complete human being. In human beings, both are necessary, but among them the human factor is the higher factor, the animal factor is the lower factor, so the former can control the latter, so that people become ethical people” (Nie, 2014, p. 38). Humbert’s human and animal factors are intertwined, leading to his final ethical choice of Lolita.

In the beginning, Humbert’s human factor is dominant. “The human factor is the ethical consciousness, mainly embodied by the human head, which is manifested in the form of rational will” (Nie, 2014, p. 38). Although Humbert’s emotional experience made him have a paranoid love for young girls, he was still able to treat the world rationally in his school life and professional life after adulthood. “In my sanitary relations with women I was practical, ironical and brisk. While a college student, in London and Paris, paid ladies sufficed me” (Nabokov, 1995, p. 15). Before he met Lolita, Humbert’s human factors occupied a dominant position, restricting his mind and behavior.

The death of Mrs. Haze left Humbert with greater freedom and space. Humbert, however, was not thrilled by the prospect of joy. “Instead of basking in the beams of smiling Chance, I was obsessed by all sorts of purely ethical doubts and fears” (Nabokov, 1995, p. 105). At this time, Humbert’s human nature was in the dominant position,

so his choice of Lolita still remained as the father-daughter relationship. When Humbert goes to the camp to pick up Lolita, in order not to let Lolita know the news of her mother's death and grief, Humbert lies to Lolita that he has an abdominal disease, and will have to stay in the rural hospital for a while. Even when Lolita enthusiastically expresses her feelings for Humbert, Humbert reverently expresses his response and sees it as a trick of Lolita's innocence. "Not daring, not daring let myself go... I touched her hot, opening lips with the utmost piety, tiny sips, nothing salacious..." (Nabokov, 1995, p. 113).

Leaving Humbert without saying goodbye puts Humbert into a frantic search for Lolita. The search for Lolita became Humbert's life for the next few years. In the disappointment of his failed search, Humbert received a letter from Lolita. Lolita told Humbert that she was married and expecting a child, but she did not have enough money to pay her debts. She had to ask Humbert for financial help. This rekindled Humbert's hope for life. After finding Lolita's house and seeing her again after a long absence, Humbert gives up his desire for Lolita and leaves behind enough cash and checks for Lolita to start living. "As long as the human element exists, it can open the flowers of humanity" (Nie, 2014, p. 38). From this point, Humbert's emotional choice after seeing Lolita again is relatively rational, and the human factor in Humbert overcomes his animal factor.

As Humbert and Lolita get along in the motel, the animalistic elements in Humbert gradually come to the fore and take over. "The animal factor and the human factor are opposite, is a part of the human animal instinct. The animalistic factor is the remnant of the animal instinct in the process of human evolution. It is the animalistic part that exists in human body" (Nie, 2014, p. 39). Humbert's emotional change and possessive desire for Lolita is a process in which his animal factors inhibit human factors and eventually tend to dominate.

The relationship between Humbert and Lolita began as a father-daughter relationship, with Humbert also taking care of Lolita's custody. As he travels more and more and has more opportunities to be alone with Lolita, Humbert's human nature is gradually replaced by his animal nature. One night at the Hotel of the Possessed Hunter, Humbert completely abandoned his self-restraint and took possession of Lolita. "Anyone can imagine those elements of animality. A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets" (Nabokov, 1995, p. 134). Humbert embarked on an extensive tour of the United States with Lolita. This journey is also the beginning of Humbert's gradual loss of the bondage of human factors and his slow descent into the slave of animal factors.

To avoid suspicion at first, Humbert paid for two sets of bedrooms in a motel. But as the desire for Lolita continues to deepen, Humbert's animalistic factors eventually take over, and it is Humbert who is trapped in the boundless sea of desire. "The animalistic factor is driven by the original desire of man, and its external expression is natural will and free will" (Nie, 2014, p. 39).

Humbert's natural will to Lolita stems from his emotional experiences in his youth. Humbert's youth was enriched by Annabel's enlightenment of love and sex. However, the unexpected death of Annabel left a permanent psychological scar on Humbert. As a result, in the heart of the adult Humbert, the infatuation for the girl is always lingering. Mrs. Haze's daughter Lolita satisfies all of Humbert's emotional fantasies, coupled with the legal fact of becoming Lolita's stepfather, Humbert has a unique condition to get close to Lolita. In Humbert's car on the way to pick up Lolita from the camp, Lolita's intimacy with Humbert has broken Humbert's inner reason and made his natural will gradually rise. "Hardly had the car come to a standstill than Lolita positively flowed into my arms. ... was the beginning of the ineffable life..." (Nabokov, 1995, p. 113). Humbert's desire for Lolita was awakened.

Humbert's ethical choice of Lolita is at first ambivalent. Lolita is the love that he cannot give up, but at first Humbert regards himself as the senior generation and keeps a certain distance. "Free will is that which is close to reason, such as the conscious pursuit of a purpose or demand" (Nie, 2014, p. 42). It can be said that Humbert kept a distance from Lolita by his free will in the first moments, although he had some thoughts against ethics in his heart. But Humbert's original desire for Lolita gradually evolves into a desire, a desire for possession. In the motel, Humbert finally gave in to his animalistic factors by satisfying and fading his desire again and again, thus completing the final ethical choice for Lolita. "The daughter becomes the lover, the father-daughter relationship is replaced by the lover relationship" (Wu, 2016, p. 64). Humbert becomes the slave of desire after his free will has been replaced by natural will.

4. Humbert's Ethical Choice of Quilty

"Good and evil are the foundation of human ethics" (Nie, 2014, p. 36). Humbert could distinguish good from evil in his heart. The last reunion with pregnant Lolita with excited and uneasy emotion, Humbert's inner feelings are very complex. He tried to find out what happened to Lolita in the days she was missing; why did she end up in this situation? Above all, he wanted to know who it was that he had tried so hard to find, and who had

made her life so miserable. Humbert was guided by Lolita to see her husband, “a dark-haired young stranger in overalls, instantaneously reprieved, was perched with his back to me on a ladder fixing something near or upon the shack of his neighbor...” (Nabokov, 1995, p. 270). Humbert realized that the man who had persecuted Lolita could not be the simple young man standing before him.

Pressed again and again by Humbert, Lolita told her about her life since she left him. Quilty kidnapped Lolita. Lolita doesn't think Quilty is a “hog” (Nabokov, 1995, p. 276). She thought that in many ways Quilty was a great man. But finally, could not tolerate Quilty's sexual perversion and asked themselves to shoot low pornographic films and left Quilty. But during this time, Quilty had done more mental and physical damage to Lolita than Lolita herself wanted to talk about. “No, she gave it up, she refused to go into particulars with that baby inside her” (Nabokov, 1995, p. 277).

Humbert leaves Lolita's apartment feebly and bids farewell to his lovely American lover. Humbert attributed Lolita's misery to Quilty's manipulation of Lolita. In Humbert's heart, Lolita is the innocent victim, and Quilty is the maker of evil. The last thing Humbert did for Lolita was to make Quilty pay for his evil deeds. Humbert, in his own way, made an ethical choice of Quilty: kill him.

Humbert's ethical choice of Quilty is determined by both Humbert's free will and his rational will. “Free will is the external expression of man's desire, and rational will is the external expression of man's reason” (Nie, 2014, p. 42). The first encounter between Humbert and Quilty was on the steps outside the lobby of a hotel. “Suddenly I was aware that in the darkness next to me there was somebody sitting in a chair on the pillared porch. I could not really see him...” (Nabokov, 1995, p. 126). Humbert did not see what Quilty looked like because he was in the dark. Humbert's actions, however, are clearly discernible by Quilty. Humbert and Lolita's strange relationship also seems to be detected by the dark Quilty. The first encounter between Humbert and Quilty hints some kind of animosity towards Humbert. It also suggests that Quilty, as a kind of dark symbol, will bring unknown mysteries to Humbert's life, such as the later disappearance of Lolita and Humbert's nowhere to go. So, at least in terms of emotion and desire, Humbert's first experience of Quilty is “sepulchral” (Nabokov, 1995, p. 127). Quilty has always appeared in Humbert's life as an identity in the dark. Abduction of Lolita without Humbert's knowledge. This directly leads to Humbert's hysterical search and the pain of the failed search, as well as Lolita's unbearable experience. So, when Humbert finally finds Quilty's place, he will make Quilty pay for the sins that have caused pains to him and Lolita. “Free will is the part close to rational will, such as the conscious pursuit of a certain purpose or requirement” (Nie, 2014, p. 42). Quilty was forced to read the sentence Humbert had written to him, which revealed Humbert's the free will of abhorrence to Quilty.

“The rational will is the part that is close to the moral will, such as the standards of good and evil and the codes of morality for judging and choosing” (Nie, 2014, p. 42). When Humbert is struggling to find the whereabouts of Lolita, Lolita is suffering from Quilty's “weird, filthy, fancy things. I mean, he had two girls and two boys, and three or four men, and the idea was for all of us to tangle in the nude while an old woman took movie pictures” (Nabokov, 1995, p. 276). In Humbert's mind, what Quilty did to Lolita was an inferior act without any morality. Humbert wrote a verdict against Quilty, accusing him of every crime. “The term ‘poetical justice’ is one that may be most happily used in this respect” (Nabokov, 1995, p. 299). Humbert's judgment to Quilty, at least, seems to be justified and well-reasoned, consistent with the moral standards of good and evil. Therefore, Humbert's death sentence for Quilty fully reflects his rational will.

After learning about Lolita's disappearance and the harm Quilty had caused to her, Humbert sought out Quilty and used his actions to punish him for the harm he had done to Lolita. “Human nature is the essential feature that distinguishes human beings from animals. Ethical awareness is the external expression of human nature and the ability of human beings to distinguish good from evil” (Nie, 2014, p. 39). Humbert's attack on Quilty's evil is not only an attack on his harm to Lolita, but also an expression of Humbert's self-ethical consciousness. In Humbert's ethical consciousness, Quilty is the incarnation of evil. It is an ethical choice made by Humbert in the call of human nature factors to punish evil. This free will with a purpose and the moral requirement to punish the harm it does to Lolita leaves Humbert make the ethical choice of killing Quilty. “Humbert's shooting is actually his evil side, the dark side and his hate side, this is his rational verdict and the final judgment on his own” (Wu, 2018, p. 95). Therefore, Humbert's ethical choice over Quilty is the combination of his free will and rational will. Although this choice also made it difficult for Humbert to escape the legal investigation, but in face of his inner emotion and moral call, Humbert still used a regretless attitude to complete his choice of punishment to the wicked.

5. Humbert's Ethical Self-Redemption

Lolita is based on Humbert's confession in prison as a narrative. Humbert's eloquence in describing his life and

his relationship with the main characters is of self-examination and self-ethical evaluation. "Humbert's quest was really a desire for love and spiritual support" (Shao, 2018, p. 106). After all his complex ethical choices, Humbert examined his conduct in prison with a more rational attitude, and often uttered such terms as "Gentlemen of the jury!" (Nabokov, 1995, p. 69) and "Frigid gentlewomen of the jury!" (Nabokov, 1995, p. 132) in his narratives. After self-examination, Humbert realized that people's ethical choice "is the result of restraining their free will with moral reason" (Chen, 2017, p. 25). Therefore, he adopted a relatively objective attitude to describe his life. Humbert who confesses to the jury in prison is one who has a rational will and a sense of moral judgment, who then is the most rational individual.

The true feelings and emotion of *Lolita* also returned to the most simple and sincere state. As he himself said, "Be true to your Dick. Do not let other fellows touch you. Do not talk to strangers. I hope you will love your baby" (Nabokov, 1995, p. 309). Such an injunction is more like a father's sincere blessing to his daughter than any twisted emotion. In this respect, at least, Humbert was a father in the real sense. "The soul is the noblest thing in a man" (Ni, 2014, p. 44). This returns to the expression of human nature and care, or let the soul in the prison glitter a certain moral brilliance.

At the end of the novel, Humbert confesses the ultimate fates of himself and *Lolita*. He died of illness in prison, and *Lolita* also died because of childbirth. "The power of love transcended his fear of death, which for him was not the end of life" (Zhang, 2010, p. 16). All the ethical choices made previously are opened and closed quietly in a silent picture scroll. Finally, they return to the starting point. As if a storm of emotion was annihilated on the surface of calmness. Humbert's self-analysis in prison reveals a certain moral significance. "The method of ethical choice is ethical instruction" (Nie, 2017, p. 34). Humbert is controlled by rational will when he is in prison where he was the most ethical self during his short life. "...and then in this well-heated, albeit tombal, seclusion, I thought I would use these notes in toto at my trial, so save not my head, of course, but my soul" (Nabokov, 1995, p. 309). Through the repentance of his ethical choice, Humbert finally completed his ethical redemption at the cost of his life.

6. Conclusion

Nabokov's Humbert image "contains profound moral and ethical connotations" (Liu, 2012, p. 45). Humbert's life is full of tragedy. At some critical moments in his life, Humbert faces the painful ethical choices. The ethical choice of Haze's marriage is the embodiment of Humbert's natural will. Under the guise of marriage is the essence of getting close to *Lolita*. Due to the domination of instinct consciousness, Humbert and Charlotte Haze's marriage is against the ethical basis. Humbert's ethical choice of *Lolita* is more complicated. From the free will at the beginning, he gradually turns into the natural will and gives in to the animal nature, which not only causes great ethical harm to *Lolita*, but also makes himself fall into the situation of self-destruction step by step. Humbert's complex ethical choice of Quilty is the result of the comprehensive action of his free will and rational will. Humbert finally realized the harm Quilty had done to *Lolita*, and he made a conscious effort to search for him, in order to complete the vicious punishment for Quilty. In a sense, this punishment for evil is in line with the rational will. "From an ethical point of view, killing Quilty would also mean killing Humbert's alter ego, who was plotting incest with his adopted daughter" (Wang, 2015, p. 76). Humbert eventually completed Quilty's punishment, which resulted in his own imprisonment. Humbert appeared to be most sober in prison, which was the most balanced period of natural will, free will and rational will in Humbert's life. Humbert recalled his life calmly and rationally, and finally died of illness in prison and completed his ethical redemption.

The sphinx factor in Humbert is always in company with his whole life, and the rational will and the irrational will be intertwined with each other, which constitute Humbert's ultimate ethical choice of his life and emotion. "Rationality makes human beings think about how to know themselves and how to make ethical choices in life" (Nie, 2014, p. 14). At the critical moment of Humbert's life, his rationality failed to overcome his own animal nature and rational will failed to restrain his own natural will. In the final choice between human nature and animal factors, Humbert lost to his own animal factors. As a result, he chose the wrong direction in the ethical choice, which eventually led to his tragic life. However, Humbert examined his life with an ethical attitude of rational will in prison, made an objective ethical analysis of the ethical choice in life, and revealed the instructive significance of ethical choice at the cost of life. Therefore, he finally completed his own ethical redemption.

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