

Struggles for Power and Independence in *Lolita*

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Lolita is a film directed by Stanley Kubrick, based on Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel of the same name. The film looks into the tragic love affair if you could call it that, between a middle-aged man, Humbert Humbert, and his teenage stepdaughter, Lolita. The film documents the disturbing obsession and infatuation that Humbert Humbert has with Lolita, as well as, more subtle, Lolita using said obsession for her own personal gain. This creates a power struggle between the two characters that persists throughout the whole of the film. There is a specific sequence just under two hours into the film, where Lolita tells Humbert Humbert about being selected for the school play, that highlights this well.

The start of this scene features Humbert Humbert and Lolita in a very stationary positioning. Lolita is laying on the bed drinking a soda with two straws while Humbert Humbert is delicately painting her toenails. The actions of what they are doing within the scene characterize both their personalities as well as their intents for each other. Humbert Humbert is in a more powerless position here in regards to his physical position. He is doing a serving tasking for Lolita - painting her toenails - and is positioned lower than her, as he is sitting on some sort of chair or stool that is lower than the level that the bed is on. While this is contrasting the dynamic that he is trying to exude within his speech, regardless he is lower than her.

Lolita is in a very relaxed and nonchalant position. Because the bed is raised above his position of seating, she is beginning the scene in a higher place than she is. Additionally, the position that she is laying in harkens back to the odalisque that we the audience see her in at the beginning of the film, however with a bit of a twist this time. When the camera is on Humbert Humbert, we only see Lolita's feet in a way that stretches out, giving a sense of delicateness and elegance. When the camera is on Lolita, however, a different feeling is given because of how the camera is angled onto her. While we know for the most part that she is in the same odalisque that we have seen her in before, we instead see her appearing to be in a sort of crunched-up position. The angling of the camera gives a sort of illusion of Lolita hugging herself, or at the least curling up within herself. There is also importance within her actions in the scene and the fact that she begins the sequence with the sole act of drinking a soda. She doesn't need to waste her energy doing something that's any sort of a major task, unlike the higher degree of effort that Humbert Humbert is putting in.

The combination of the positioning and actions of Humbert Humbert and Lolita shows the audience a few different things. First, it shows that she holds a higher place of importance and power than he does in their relationship. This allows her to be literally held up high and have to do very little action within the sequence. Second, this demonstrates to the audience a bit of a difference in their age. Lolita is doing a task that fits something her age, relaxing and having a soda, which is something that you would typically see a high schooler do. Humbert Humbert's task sits a bit differently, as he is doing something that you would expect of someone older for sure, in adult regard, given it is a more meticulous task. However, this action would be done for a spouse or

romantic partner as well as possibly a young child who would need help with such a task - neither of which titles should fit Lolita.

This body language does have a slight shift partway through the sequence. During their conversation, Humbert Humbert stops his task to circle around to the other side of Lolita. However, he does keep a lower pose than her, crouching near her face to look at her closer while they are talking. Even though he has stopped doing a more subservient task, he is still demonstrating that he is lower than her. Lolita does not physically change her positioning initially, aside from some slight shifting to look at him better. The camera does the adjusting for her. Instead of the sort of curled up Lolita that we had been seeing in prior shots, we are instead shown her in what fully looks like a stretched-out odalisque pose. This instantly gives her more of a feeling of power and authority within their conversation, demonstrating that she has taken the lead in their conversation. This idea is furthered at the end of the sequence, where Lolita moves to sit up and eventually get up and leave Humbert Humbert behind. This shows more of her autonomy, as she is the one to both ends the conversation and separate herself from him.

Humbert Humbert begins their conversation within this sequence questioning her whereabouts in the day prior, given that she didn't come back home until three hours after she got out of school. After further prying he reveals that he saw her at the Frigid Queen with boys, which is overpassed by Lolita, however is a small glaring detail to the audience to show just how closely he is keeping an eye on her. He already knew the answer he was looking for full well, he was just trying to pry it out of her. She sort of dismisses him and they get an argument over whether or not she was on a date, as he says that she is not allowed to date. Humbert Humbert begins to shift the conversation

over to Lolita's friend Michelle and Lolita makes the statement that "You can't have her, she already belongs to a marine." As she smirks both while saying this and taking a sip of her drink later, this is quite obviously a purposeful jab at him and demonstrates just how easily she can shift the power within her conversations.

This scene is one of the many instances of Lolita and Humbert Humbert displaying their power dynamic. Lolita can shift the tone of their conversations with an easy statement and Humbert Humbert is left, quite literally, her feet.