

Ephhebophilia Suffered by the Main Character in the Novel *Lolita* by Nabokov

Dina Amelia¹, Febri Diantika Dintasi²

amelia.dina@teknokrat.ac.id¹, febri_dd@yahoo.com¹

Universitas Teknokrat Indonesia^{1,2}

Abstract

Lolita was written by a Russian writer Vladirmir Nabokov in the twentieth century. Humbert, the male character in the story, was considered to be an ephhebophile since he was attracted to girls in their adolescences. The author wrote about the character's sexual orientation which led to his downfall. Psychological approach and ephhebophilia theory applied in this research in order to reveal the description of Humbert's sexual orientation. Meanwhile, the data for this research were taken from the dialogues and narrations in *Lolita* novel. As it is a library research, the writers took the secondary data needed from books, journals, articles, and internet sites to analyze the issue. Hence, in conducting the research, descriptive qualitative method was applied to elaborate the data concerning to the research queation. After applying those techniques and analyzing data, the writers drew several conclusions. Ephhebophilia was not only focus on the sexual encounters, but also on the sexual attraction. In this case, the construction of ephhebophilia in the main character was influenced by his unforgettable sexual encounter with his teenage lover. Therefore, Humbert became fixated to much younger women and he could not escape from his burning desire. His sexual encountered with his teenage lover had also influenced the way he saw the young girls. He often fantasized and sexually attracted to them. Overall, throughout the story, Humbert had suffered due to his sexual orientation. Nabokov was able to present the male character's dilemma and grief who desperately needed help.

Key Words: ephhebophilia, *Lolita*, main character, sexual orientation

Introduction

In 1955 the first edition of *Lolita* by Vladimir Nobokov was quietly published in Paris due to its shocking sexual content. Moreover, in the first six months, the publication and reception of *Lolita* must overcome pornography allegation. However, in 1956, the novel was recommended as one of the best novels and eventually it captured a lot of critical attentions. Columnists of *Sunday Express* expressed their wrath towards the recommendation. *The New York Times Book Review* of February 26, 1956 even stated that they have received "a flurry of mail" since they reviewed the work (Appel JR, 1991: 35-36).

The novel tells a story of a middle age man, Humbert, who is attracted to a 12 and half years old girl named Dolores (*Lolita*). Humbert is not just sexually attracted to this girl, but he is also in love with her. His obsession towards *Lolita* is a result of his love experience with a young girl named Annabel when he was 14. Humbert and Annabel are in love with each other and involve in a sexual relationship. But, after four months of seperation, Annabel died of typhus. After his heart breaking experience with his first love, Humbert's sexual orientation begins to develop. In this case, he prefers much younger girls instead of women. Sexual orientation is defined as follows:

Sexual orientation refers to the sex of those to whom one is sexually and romantically attracted. Categories of sexual orientation typically have included sexual attraction to members of one's own sex (gay men or lesbians), attraction to members of both sexes (bisexuals) (Guide, 2011: 1).

In other words, sexual orientation is a tendency of a person defined by the gender to which he or she is sexually attracted. Furthermore, a person who is primarily or exclusively attracted to the same gender is characterized as gay or homosexual. Meanwhile, a person who has strong, viable attraction for people of both genders is characterized as bisexual. Sexual orientation explicitly engages sexual attraction, in this case, Humbert is sexually attracted to *Lolita* who happens to be much younger than him. Throughout his novel, Nabokov describes that *Lolita*, as a 12 years old girl, has also developed her sexual attractions toward Humbert. For those reasons, the publishers at that time have had a second thought before publishing the novel. Sexual thoughts and attractions emerge in the adolescence Belge (2011). *Lolita* appears to have a strong sexual attractiveness. This sexual

attractiveness is the ability to arouse someone sexual desire. Each individual has different kind of attractiveness and each individual has different sexual attractions toward the opposite sex or same sex. Humbert lays his eyes on Lolita for the first time at Charlotte Haze's house. Charlotte is Lolita's mother, later in the story she married Humbert, but then she died due to car accident. Humbert continues his pursuit on Lolita and takes her to the Enchanted Hotel. He describes the moment as "the parody of a hotel corridor. Parody of silence and death". The specific attraction showed by Humbert towards Lolita is known as *Ephebohiles or Ephebophilia*. There are various perspectives regarding the term, however, according to Wedding and Niemiec that most cases of ephebophilia's attractions must have involved older men who are attracted to much younger girls. The origin of the term comes from Greek word *ephebos* which means "one arrived at puberty". For that reason, the attractions are mostly specific to the age group 14- 16 year-olds (Bering, 2009:1). Furthermore, Ephebophilia is also called as 'love of a youth' (Bullock, 2000:2). The statement means that the case happens to an adult man who is attracted to a young girl or boy in the puberty stage. Although the novel was once considered as dirty lit, but one cannot ignore the fact that Humbert has gone through some emotional sufferings as a result of the attractions.

This paper will attempt to show the description of the ephebophilia as portrayed by the male character, Humbert. The paper will also provide further insights about the character's sexual orientation, attractions and fantasies through his behaviors and thoughts on the female characters, Annabel and Lolita. Psychological approach is suitable for the topic of this paper psychological condition is one of the factors that influences sexual orientation of human beings. According to Stangor (2011:10), psychology is the scientific study of mind and behaviour. In other words, this approach assists to reveal the character's mind and behaviour related ephebophilia.

Method

This research employs qualitative method. The data source for this study was *Lolita* novel by Vladimir Nabokov. This research started with data collections from the fictions including narrations and dialogues related to ephebophilia. The data were collected, analyzed and the conclusion was drawn without making any generalization.

This paper applies library research in the data collecting technique since all of the data were taken from the novel. The first method in collecting the data is reading the data source comprehensively. The second is identifying the data related to ephebophilia. The third is classifying and arranging the data in order to be analysed.

Discussion

3.1 The Construction and Sexual Attraction in Ephebophilia

Belge (2011) defines that sexual orientation starts during the adolescence. In other words, teen years are crucial time for human beings to develop their sexual orientation that involves sexual attraction towards the opposite sex or same sex. Sexual attraction mostly depends on the physical stimulation and appearance as seen in Humbert. Humbert is different from those who can be considered as normal men, in the novel he explains:

"A normal men given a group photograph of school girls or Gril Scouts and asked to point out the comeliest one will not necessarily choose the nymphet among them. You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine (oh, how you have to cringe and hide!), in order to discern at once, by ineffable signs—the slightly feline outline of a cheekbone, the slenderness of a downly limb, and other indices which despair and shame and tears of tenderness forbid me to tabulate—the little deadly demon among the wholesome children; *she* stands unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power." (Nabokov, 1995: 11)

At the age of 14, he is attracted to Annabel, half English and half Dutch girl, who is a few months younger than him. He describes her as a lovely child with "honey-colored skin", "thin arms", "brown bobbed hair", "long lashes", and "big bright mouth" (Nabokov, 1955: 6). The way he says "honey-colored skin" specifically shows that Humbert remembers her appearance vividly and all he could recall is pure physical. Nabokov creates Humbert in his own image: middle age, broke, broken hearted, desperate, pathetic and lonely. Earlier in the story Humbert boasts about his family, childhood and how his teachers and friends like him. However, this is before his sexual encounter with Annabel. Annabel's death has caused a great shock for him. His life changes; his frustration and

nightmares lead to his permanent inability to cope with romance during his youth. Eventually his experience with Annabel leads him questioning his sexual desire towards children. He mentions that he has spent his time analysing his cravings, motives, actions, and so forth. He is convinced that in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel (Nabokov, 1955: 6). Humbert commences his understanding on his sexual attraction towards the opposite sex and he realizes his sexual orientation after his loss. Annabel's prepubescent beauty becomes his references of an "ideal" woman. For that reason, the first time Humbert meets Lolita, he is immediately attracted to her. "Love of a youth" or also famous with the term Ephebophilia can be seen in the male character's absolute fondness to the young girl.

Lolita has similar physical appearance like Annabel. Humbert narrates that she has similar frail, honey-hued shoulders, silky supple bare back, and chestnut of hair. Additionally, he even recalls her juvenile breasts as the one he has fondled one immortal day (Nabokov, 1955: 25). For that reason, Humbert is attracted to Lolita as soon as he looks at her. His attraction arises and he also develops feelings for her. The girl suits his "ideal" characteristics and in fact there is a sense of relief in Humbert when he says that he has been living for 25 years since he loses Annabel to feel the excitement and the joy once again (Nabokov, 1955: 26). Andrew (2011) earlier states that sexual attractions deal with someone's ability to sexually arouse someone else. Although Lolita is still 12 and half years old at the time Humbert finds her, but she has all the attributes to attract him. Furthermore, sexual experience constructs one's sexual orientation. Humbert's sexual relationship with Annabel provide him enough experiences. It takes a long process for him to finally accepts his sexual orientation. He has been trying to control his desires toward much younger girls ever since Annabel dies. He even describes in the novel that he married his first wife, Valeria, simply because she imitates a little girl. Humbert's preference to Valeria presents a strong indication that he suffered from Ephebophilia. However, he states that his marriage with Valeria helps him to manage his sexual desire. At one time he explains that a little girl who lives in the opposite of his house, the grocer's daughter, has attracted his attention. He imagines her and he states that, "her shadow drove me mad" (Nabokov, 1955: 17). Nevertheless, Valeria existence helps him to find legal outlets in order to accomodate his fantasies. Men who suffered from Ephebophilia cannot escape from their burning desire. Those who are considered as normal men would not be attracted to girls under 16 years old.

In Humbert's case, interpersonal relationship also contributes to his sexual orientation. Plante (2004) states that an interpersonal relationship is one of the elements that influences one's sexual psychology. Humbert and Annabel develop their relationship from acquaintances to lovers. As the writer, Nabokov begins his story slowly and with detached calm. Humbert's alteration from a shy boy to become a passionate man takes over the rest of the story. All of his miserable experiences lead to his sexual preference which is Ephebophilia. It is when men are strongly attracted to postpubescent adolescents. Nabokov narrates how Humbert loves to stare at young girls and that his action sometimes irritates Lolita. He would park his car in a public places like natatoriums, museums, and local schools. He loves watching school girls, moreover, he says that they are always a pretty sight (Nabokov, 1995: 105 – 106). Whenever he is at a swimming pools, he would love watching Lolita play with other girl-children. Humbert enjoys her looking at her rubber capped, bepearled, smoothly tanned, as glad as an ad, in her trim-fitted satin pants and shirred bra. He is proud to have her, he calls Lolita as his Pubescent Sweetheart and she is "His" Lolita. In the Ephebophile case as mentioned earlier, the men would develop a sexual attraction toward young girls in their adolescent. Additionally, the term used to describe men who are aroused by pubescent or early adolescent children (Rowan, 2006:4). Humbert's attraction can be seen through his idea that there are girls within the age limit of nine and fourteen who, according to him, look more mature or older than they are (Nabokov, 1995: 16-17). Their nature is not human, but nymphic or demoniac. The girls are nymphets since they possess sexual appeal that could arouse men. In the story, Lolita is a young maiden who possesses angelic beauty. She is the maiden who turns into a "nymphic".

3.2 Humbert's Sexual Encounters, and Fantasies as an Ephebophile

This particular part of the research seeks further understanding about the term ephebophilia and the sexual fantasies engage in it. The particular term involves sexual attraction of adult men with postpubescent adolescents girls. After his sexual encounter with Annabel, Humbert becomes obsess with girls much younger than his age. Earlier in the story he propose an idea reagrding young grils:

Now I wish to introduce the following idea. Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as "nymphets." It will be

marked that I substitute time terms for spatial ones. In fact, I would have the reader see “nine” and “fourteen” as the boundaries — the mirrory beaches and rosy rocks — of an enchanted island haunted by those nymphets of mine and surrounded by a vast, misty sea. (Nabokov, 1955: 10)

Humbert implies in his idea that there are girls who are more mature than their age. These girls possess the ability to sexually attract men. Therefore, they are considered as “demonic”. Furthermore, earlier in the story Humbert states that if he is given a photograph of school girls or Girl Scouts, he would prefer the little one with the most powerful ability, the sex appeal, rather than the ones with older ages. Throughout the story, Nabokov appears to emphasize the idea that Humbert’s suffering is a result of his unfulfilled desires toward Annabel. Clearly, the beginning of the story describes how the two, Humbert and Annabel, are always seeking for a chance to spend some intimate moments together.

One night she managed to deceive the vicious vigilance of her family. In a nervous and slender-leaved mimosa grove at the back of their villa we found a perch on the ruins of a low stone wall. Through the darkness and the tender trees we could see the arabesques of lighted windows which, touched up by the colored inks of sensitive memory, appear to me now like playing cards—presumably because a bridge game was keeping the enemy busy (Nabokov, 1955: 8).

Humbert recalls his first sexual encounter with Annabel. The excitement of having to spend time with the girl he loves is the one that haunts him. Humbert explains that ever since his parting with Annabel he cannot forget her seaside limbs as well as her tongue. Her memory stays with him for over 24 years until he meets the incarnation of her, Lolita. Annabel’s death takes its biggest and deepest toll on Humbert. His memory of his first love’s physical appearance and personalities lingers in his mind. For those reasons, he describes his youths as miserable days. His sexual encounter with Annabel forms the characteristics of his “ideal” woman. However, Annabel is only 6 months younger than him the first time they meet. Thus, her age plays a major role in Humbert’s sexual orientation. He constantly seeks women who meet his sexual orientation or his “ideal” type.

After his relationship ends with Annabel and before he meets Lolita, Humbert has gone through other sexual encounters with prostitutes and he is also married a woman, Valeria. The women are not in their adolescence, however, they possess the typical features or personalities of a little girl. In the case of Monique, a young prostitute from French, Humbert says that the girl is in her eighteen probably even two years younger than her age. He can tell that the girl is still immature from her body, her hips that are no bigger than squatting lad, and her Parisian childish lips. She is the mixture of professional *fréttement* and childlessness. Humbert clearly compares her to other prostitutes. According to Humbert, Monique is the only one who provides him genuine sexual pleasure (Nabokov, 1955: 13-14). It can be inferred from his actions and statements that he gains more sexual excitement when he spends intimate moment with women much younger him.

Ironically, Humbert’s sexual encounters and fantasies toward younger girls (especially Lolita) in the story merely shows that Annabel is the main focus of his sexual desires. Although the story mostly describes his relationship and his attractions with Lolita, the way he pursues all of the other girls is appeared as a result of his sexual experience with Annabel. At this point, it is understandable that Humbert’s erotic thoughts and attraction to younger girls begin in the first time he caresses Annabel’s body. He expresses his first experience with the girl vividly including the way her legs part, the ways she kisses him, the lips, and the feeling in which he says half pleasures and half pain (Nabokov, 1955: 8). It seems that Nabokov as the author creates an implication in the story and strengthens the idea that Annabel is in every girl and woman Humbert drawn to. Humbert’s sexual imagery deeply polluted his mind. Therefore, when he meets Lolita, he cannot resist her enchanted physical appearances that resemble Annabel.

The dimmest of my pollutive dreams was a thousand times more dazzling than all the adultery the most virile writer of genius or the most talented impotent might imagine. My world was split. I was aware of not one but two sexes, neither of which was mine; both would be termed female by the anatomist. But to me, through the prism of my senses, “they were as different as mist and mast” (Nabokov, 1995: 18).

In this passage, Humbert suddenly turns into a romantic, yet pathetic man. Humbert feels as if he is in lost direction in defining his sexual orientation. The above quotation explicitly tells his sexual arousal toward her body has already taken over his life. His life is only bounded with a girl that has certain physical beauty like Annabel or Lolita. Nabokov emphasizes the fact that Humbert's attractions toward Lolita blinds and blocks his conscience. Unfortunately in the story, she seems to be described merely as an object of an erotic fantasies. Humbert without no doubt has gained pleasures from his erotic fantasies by looking at the girl's body. In the ephebophilia case, one does not necessarily involve in sexual encounters. It is the sexual pleasure and attractions that matter. Nabokov presents the idea of child adoration from the actions and statements in the story. Primoratz (199: 183) states that the ephebophilias are attracted to adolescents. Therefore, Humbert's idea about younger girls indicates the symptom of ephebophilia.

It will be marked that I substitute time terms for spatial ones. In fact, I would have the readers see "nine" and "fourteen" as the boundaries - the mirrory beaches and rosy rocks - of an enchanted island haunted by those nymphets of mine and surrounded by a vast, misty sea. Between those age limits, are all girl-children nymphets? Of course not. Otherwise, we who are in the know, we lone voyagers, we nympholepts, would have long gone insane (Nabokov, 1995: 16-17).

What makes Lolita different from other girls in her age? She is a true nymphet. She might appear to be inferior, plain or nice, cute or sweet, attractive or ordinary, formless with cold-skinned. Basically, Lolita, for men who are considered to be normal, is just a little girl with pigtails and tummies. However, for Humbert, she has the angelic beauty that drives his sexual attraction. Her "nymphet" appearance has triggered Humbert's sexual fantasy. This condition is in line with a statement that ephebophilia engages with fantasy (Lanning, 2001). Humbert believes that there should not be any kind of boundary in sex. For him, Lolita appears to be innocent, however, she has everything that Humbert wants. She is the resemblance of Annabel whom he is fixated to. To Humbert, Annabel is his "ideal" woman". Humbert emphasizes that everybody must have their own sexual fantasy on description of their ideal women. For that reason, throughout the story, Nabokov rarely describes Humbert and Lolita's sexual encounter in detail since Humbert's desires towards Lolita is not merely to make love to her, to touch her or to have her body, but it is also to fulfill his fantasies which is related to his sexual orientation to young girls.

Conclusion

In this research has provided the descriptions of ephebophilia in the main character, Humbert. The characteristics of ephebophilia can be seen clearly through the ephebophilia construction, the sexual attraction, and the sexual fantasies. The ephebophilia construction of Humbert was a result of his sexual encounter with Annabel. They met while they were in their adolescences. However, Annabel died not long after they got their first chance to have an intercourse. Humbert became fixated to Annabel ever since he lost her. He could not let go of her memory and his sexual encounters with her. She became the "ideal" type of woman for him and eventually leads to his sexual orientation. He was only attracted to girls in their adolescent and when he met Dolores (Lolita) he became infatuated with her.

Ephebophilia was not only focus on the sexual encounters, but also on the sexual attraction. An ephebophile gains satisfaction by having a sexual fantasy towards young girls. Humbert, in this case, is attracted to Lolita's physical appearance, which according to Humbert is the resemblance of Annabel. Humbert receives sexual pleasures by looking at her body. Nabokov portrayed his major character as a middle age man in despair who was holding on to his desires and enjoyed sexual pleasures from much younger girls. Although the novel was once considered as a pornographic novel, Lolita has proven to serve beyond the sexual depictions. The novel has provided the story and description of a man who has gone through some sufferings due to his desires toward younger girls. Nabokov was able to present the readers the grief and dilemma that suffered by the main character who desperately needed help.

References

- Belge, Meid. 2011. *Sexual Attraction and Orientation*. California: Sage Publication.
- Bering, Jasses. 2009. "Pedophiles, Hebephiles and Ephebophile, oh my: Erotic Age Orientation". Retrieved from <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.erotic-age-orientation>. Accessed on Desember 23 2012

- Bullock, Chris. 2002. *Suffer the little children Part 4*. New York: Reed Elsevier Inc.
- Charles, Stangor. 2011. *Principles of Social Psychology*. Vancouver: Flat World Knowledge.
- Guide, L. 2011. *Definition of Terms: Sex, Gender, Gender identity and Sexual Orientation*. Washington: Defense University College.
- Lanning, Kenneth V. 2001. *Cyber "Pedophiles:" A Behavioral Perspective*. New Jersey: Hoboken.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. 1991. Backgrounds of Lolita. Alfred Appel, JR. (Ed.). *The Annotated Lolita*. 1st ed. New York: A Division of Random House.
- Plante, Thomas G. 2004. *Contemporary Clinical Psychology*. New Jersey: Hoboken.
- Primoratz, Igor. 1999. *Ethics and Sex*. London: Routledge.
- Rowan, Edward L. 2006. *Understanding Child Sexual Abuse*. Mississippi: University of Mississippi.