

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## LOLITA (1962)

Stanley Kubrick

**OVERVIEW** *Lolita*, Kubrick's sixth feature film, was adapted from a novel of the same name, written a few years earlier by Vladimir Nabokov (who also became the scriptwriter on the film). The novel was extremely controversial for its uncompromising depiction of paedophilia and seduction of a young girl. Working together, Kubrick and Nabokov captured the essence of the novel while also shifting its focus away from raw sexuality (as required by censors at the time) and toward the psychology of guilt. Despite this shift, the film is faithful to the novel in its use of satire, innuendo and comedy to lighten the otherwise grim story. That farcical tone is played to perfection by Peter Sellers, without whom the film might have fallen flat on its face. The film was a commercial success but had mixed reviews from critics.

**SYNOPSIS** Humbert, a middle-aged professor in small-town America, is sexually attracted to young Lolita, the daughter of Charlotte, in whose house he rents a room. Widowed Charlotte falls in love with Humbert and demands that he leave the house (and thus Lolita) unless he marries her. Humbert marries her, but only in order to stay close to Lolita, and soon has his prayers answered when Charlotte is killed in an auto accident. Humbert and Lolita embark on a sexual relationship, which has its ups and downs. When rumours of their abnormal relations grow, Humbert takes her away on a road trip, during which they are followed by a mysterious car. Everything comes to a sudden end when Lolita is spirited out of a hospital bed by a man (Quilty) who claims to be her uncle. Humbert is devastated at his loss. Years later, he receives a letter from Lolita. She is married with a child and wants money to go to Alaska, where her husband has job prospects. In their final meeting, she reveals to Humbert the truth of their relationship. Quilty was her true lover, who deceived Humbert, playing various roles. Angered, Humbert tracks Quilty down and kills him.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Humbert	Humbert is a professor.
Charlotte	Charlotte is a widow who marries Humbert.
Lolita	Lolita is Charlotte's young daughter.
Quilty	Quilty is a TV writer and lover of Lolita.

### STORY

**Murder** In the opening scene, an angry Humbert confronts a drunk Quilty in the latter's house, which is as chaotic as he is. Humbert says he has come to kill him, but Quilty pays no attention, rambles on incoherently and plays ping pong and the piano. Humbert gives him a letter to read, which appears to accuse him of sexual abuse. Then he shoots and kills him.

**Four years earlier** In another scene as farcical as the first, the story moves back four years, to Ramsdale, New Hampshire, where Professor Humbert had decided to spend his summer holiday before taking up a new position at a college in Ohio. Looking for a room to rent, he goes to a house owned by Charlotte, a sexually frustrated widow, and agrees to stay when he sees Lolita, her young daughter, lying in the garden in a bikini.

**Quilty** In a series of scenes, loaded with sexual innuendo, Humbert, Charlotte and Lolita play chess, eat dinner and go to a summer dance. There, at the dance, Quilty, a famous TV writer with a suave appearance, makes his entrance. He seems to be looking at everyone all at once and during a conversation with Charlotte, mentions her daughter, Lolita. He is obviously interested in her, too.

**Secrets** Charlotte flirts outrageously with Humbert, but he has eyes only for Lolita. Slowly, the mother begins to resent the daughter, who stands in the way of her own sexual satisfaction. Lolita lives her teenage life, chewing gum, playing music, arguing with her mother and moping about. One morning, she brings Humbert his breakfast tray, while he is writing in his journal about her ('a nymphet'). He hides it and reads her a stilted poem by Edgar Allan Poe, which she finds boring.

**Marriage** Humbert is distressed when told that Lolita is being sent to an all-girls camp for the rest of the summer, 'to isolate her from boys.' And when she is taken to the camp by Charlotte, he is

devastated. Then he reads a letter for him left behind by Charlotte, in which she declares her love and orders him to leave the house unless he feels the same. If he stays, she also demands that he marry her. Realising that it is the only way to remain in touch with Lolita, Humbert stays and marries Charlotte.

*Fatal accident* The marriage, of course, is a failure. Humbert misses Lolita and is upset to hear that Charlotte is planning to send her away to a boarding school. Humbert contemplates murdering Charlotte with a pistol that belonged to her first husband. Then Charlotte finds Humbert's diaries revealing his passion for Lolita and his mockery of her. He pretends that the diary is a novel he's writing, pure imagination and not about her. But Charlotte knows better and is driven mad with despair. She runs out into the street and is killed by a passing car. Humbert then brings Lolita back from the summer camp, explaining that her mother is ill in hospital.

*Hotel* They spend the night in a hotel but are forced to take a room with a double bed. Humbert plays the thoughtful step-father and arranges for a cot. Lolita smiles knowingly and ambiguously through these arrangements. Quilty, in the false role of a police officer, is staying at the same hotel and manages to trap Humbert into a conversation. Quilty the cop says he noticed the 'lovely girl' he was with and thought that he was cheating on his wife. Disturbed by this suggestion, Humbert excuses himself and halts the conversation.

*Sex* Humbert sleeps on the cot, but in the morning, she coaxes him into playing a sexually suggestion game. The next scene shows them driving to the hospital. 'Let's tell mother,' Lolita says with a laugh. 'No, that's not very funny,' he says sternly. Obviously, they had sex. Liberated from any pretence, she acts like his teenage daughter, eating crisps and drinking pop, and he behaves like a concerned father.

*Truth* Eventually, he tells her about her mother's death, which she takes badly. He soothes her depression by explaining that they can set up a new life in Ohio, where he is going for his job. This seems to calm her. 'Promise me something,' she says, with dried tears. 'Promise me that you'll never leave me.' She is afraid that she might end up in a juvenile delinquent centre. He promises and cuddles her, like a child.

*Six months later* Humbert and Lolita are living in Ohio, where he teaches and she goes to high school, maintaining the pretence of father and daughter, while still carrying on a sexual relationship. Humbert becomes jealous of her seeing boys and lays down the law. Lolita is then cast as the lead in the school play, which makes him even more suspicious, but she sees it as a way to make him proud of her. When he voices reservations, she gets angry at his control of her.

*Dr Zempf* One afternoon, Humbert is visited at home by the school psychologist, Dr Zempf. He tells Humbert that Lolita is acting strange and is 'suffering from the suppression of the libido.' Humbert grows more and more uneasy as he listens to the man suggest, imply and hint at some sexual impropriety. When Zempf says that Lolita's friends have 'unmentionable' suspicions about the 'home situation,' Humbert becomes afraid and agrees to his suggestion to allow her to act in the play.

*Deception* After watching the play, Humbert inadvertently learns that Lolita has been lying about having piano lessons on certain afternoons. Presuming that she is spending time with boys, he gets angry and drags her away from her friends and cast members, who are about to have a cast party. Lolita, who was the star, is humiliated. This embarrassing scene is observed by Quilty.

*Argument* At home, in a chaotic, angry scene, Humbert confronts her with her lie about piano lessons. Equally angry, she denies being with boys. 'You're sick. You'll never believe me,' she cries and then pouts as he relents and tries to win back her affection. He suggests that they go away together, as an escape from their problems, but she refuses. 'I hate you!' she screams and begins to hit him. Their fight is interrupted by a neighbour who tells him that she and her guests can hear the noise. She also says that others are wondering about his relationship with his daughter.

*Escape* Lolita has left the house and made a secret telephone call, after which she changes her mind. Meeting Humbert, who has come to search for her at night, she tells him that she wants to leave school and go with him on a long journey. They head south to Mexico. As they ride along

country roads, he notices that they are being followed by a black car. He is unnerved, thinking the car, which follows but does not question him, might be from the vice squad. Suddenly, without apparent reason, the car turns around and disappears.

*Kidnapped* En route, Lolita becomes ill and he takes her to a hospital, where she is admitted as patient. He gets a mysterious call in his hotel room in the middle of the night. The anonymous caller describes the scandal surrounding his relationship with Lolita. The next day, he goes to visit Lolita in hospital and discovers that 'her uncle' turned up and took her away. He goes berserk, says there is no uncle, and is wrestled to the ground as a dangerous psychotic man. Pinned on the ground, he lies (in order to be released) and says that Lolita does have an uncle. Released by the medics, Humbert becomes desperate, not knowing where she is or how to find her.

*Mrs Richard Schiller* Three years pass. Humbert gets a letter from Lolita, telling him that she is now Mrs Richard T. Schiller, that she is going to have a child and that she needs money. Humbert finds her living in an ordinary house. She is an ordinary housewife, who invites him in like a long-lost friend and offers him coffee. Her husband, who she met a year ago while working as a waitress, is out back. Humbert asks if he is the man who took her from the hospital. She doesn't want to revert to the past, but he says he will only give her money if she tells him who it was. Then Lolita tells him the full story.

*Revelations* She was taken from the hospital by Quilty, she says, who was also Dr Zempf, her mother's old flame, who was also the man who had followed them in the car and the man who called him in the middle of the night. After Quilty took her from the hospital, they went to live in New Mexico. She only separated from him when he wanted her to appear in his porn films. Then she drops the bombshell that she had a sexual affair with Quilty in high school, meeting when she was supposedly having those piano lessons. Humbert is devastated by these revelations.

*The past is the past* Her husband, she says, is very sweet and they are happy, but 'it's not the same thing' as a sexual affair. 'And me?' Humbert asks. 'I suppose I never counted.' 'The past is the past' is all she says. When her husband enters the room, she snuggles up to him as he explains their plans to move to Alaska. After the husband leaves, Humbert pleads with her to leave with him. She refuses, saying she is going to have her husband's baby and that she will not hurt him. Humbert breaks down in tears and gives her thousands of dollars, from the sale of her mother's house. She apologises for her infidelity, but he simply runs off.

*Murder* The film returns to the first scene, when Humbert tracks down Quilty and shoots him dead. A voiceover explains that Humbert later died of coronary thrombosis while awaiting trial for homicide.

## THEMES

*Desire* The dominant theme of the film, borrowed from the source novel, is sexual desire. But Kubrick has transformed a story about sexual predation into an examination of the psychological effects of paedophilia on the paedophiles. The result is a film in which the emphasis is not on the immorality of seduction but on the vacuity of an older man's sexual desire for a young girl. In this way, the film highlights not the depravity but the futility of the sexual fantasy entertained by Humbert. Some have called the film a 'sexual comedy' (and Peter Sellers is hilarious), but it is more properly a sexual tragedy. The flaw in Humbert's adventure is that his very desire to possess Lolita is what prevents him from achieving that desire.

*Jealousy* Another factor that leads to Humbert's self-destruction is his insane jealousy. All lovers are probably jealous to some extent—otherwise their love wouldn't be genuine—but Humbert's desire to possess Lolita becomes monstrous. He watches her every move, who she spends time with, especially 'filthy boys', and where she goes. She shouldn't go to parties, act in a play or have dance lessons. His micro-managing of her life is precisely what drives her away from him. His jealousy as a lover is compounded by his desire as a step-father to protect her. In fact, part of the genius of the film is its eliding the one role (paedophile) with the other (parent), mixing the illicit with the normal. Even a father might feel jealous that his daughter was drawing away from him and forging an independent life, which would naturally include sexual maturity. This is one reason that Humbert's jealousy

explodes so often and so fiercely. Again, the paradox is that jealousy is poisonous because it slowly kills the very thing that the jealous person wants to possess.

Humbert's jealousy is also exacerbated by the rivalry he has with Quilty. From the very beginning, the story pits Humbert against Quilty. We only grasp the full scale of their rivalry at the very end, when Lolita explains that Quilty played several roles in the film and was, in fact, her lover in high school. The relationship between the two rivals is so intense that we can see Quilty as Humbert's alter ego, or as the projection of his own inner chaos. Quilty is the one who understands Humbert's mental state, his desire for Lolita and his guilt for that desire; he is disguised as the psychologist who interviews Humbert at home about his relationship with his daughter; he is the one who haunts him throughout the film, following him in the car and calling him at midnight. Humbert, in this reading of the story, kills his own demon when he shoots Quilty at the end. Both men are psychotic, and although Quilty appears to be less damaged by guilt, he, too, goes crazy by the end.

**Guilt** A third factor in Humbert's mental instability is his guilt. This theme is cleverly expressed through an emphasis on normality. Is it normal for an older man to have sex with a young girl? The need for normality first emerges when Quilty (rhymes with 'guilty') engages Humbert in conversation and says that Humbert has a 'normal-looking face' and that he 'is a normal guy.' Two 'normal guys like us', he says, 'should get together and talk, in a normal sort of way.' Quilty (masquerading as a policeman) is, of course, far from normal. But his obsessions enable him to recognise a kindred spirit. Then, of course, there is Lolita, who only wants to live a normal teenager's life, going out with boys and growing up. Lolita herself is worried that she is not normal and fears being sent to a juvenile detention centre. After her mother dies, she cries because before everything was 'normal.' All the characters want to be normal, and the film suggests that the sexual act itself may not be abnormal. Rather it is the shame and guilt attached to it by society that makes it un-normal.

**Psychosis** The tragedy is not that he has sex with a young girl, but that, having begun that affair, he is undone by it. His struggle to keep their relationship secret drives him over the edge, making him fantasise, misjudge people, ignore signs of danger and, in the end, allow her to slip away from him, forever. Afraid that the neighbours and others in town are beginning to grasp the truth of his shameful secret, he leaves town, which makes him more vulnerable, away from his job and his books. Beyond his familiar world, he is haunted by his own guilt and is increasingly incapable of functioning in the real world. The end of his journey comes not at the end of the film, when he shoots Quilty or even when he is rejected by Lolita (Mrs Richard Schiller), but when he breaks down at the hospital and is wrestled to the ground as a possibly dangerous psychotic maniac. That is the culmination of his tragedy, when the consequences of his foolish fantasy assume nightmarish proportions. Put in a sentence, his tragedy is that sexual desire leads to mental breakdown.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Humbert Humbert** Like his slightly absurd name, Humbert Humbert is a fussy professor, who is awkward in public and keeps his own counsel. He doesn't dance, but he likes to watch and keeps a journal, where he records his emotions. He is also very jealous of Lolita, as well as tender towards her. Far from the monster who appears in the novel, he is likable, even sympathetic at times in the film. There is no doubt that he crosses the line in his pursuit of Lolita, but it is less certain who is the more damaged by their affair.

**Passive** Although Humbert is often described as a predator, he is also passive. Of course, he manipulates situations to his advantage, in his pursuit of Lolita, but he is more a voyeur than a stalker. This quality is clear when he first catches sight of Lolita, while being shown around the house by Charlotte. Charlotte casually introduces him to her daughter and moves on to other topics, but Humbert's eye strays back to the pretty young girl. It is a furtive eye, a half glance, his desire restrained by etiquette. His observer stance is established even more strongly in the scene at the summer dance. After superficial chit-chat with Charlotte's friends, Humbert excuses himself and sits behind a flower display, slightly pushing the vases apart so that he has a better view of Lolita on the dance floor. He bobs his head from side to side to keep her in sight, like an ornithologist tracking a bird from inside a hide. This secretive, disguised behaviour is key to the urbane professor's character. He knows what he wants but he has to hide his intentions.

**Jealous** The single-most important aspect of his character, though, is his jealousy. He is jealous

even before he begins a sexual relationship with Lolita, and it only gets worse afterward because he fears that she has other romantic interests. His possessiveness explodes into violent anger three or four times, but the most volcanic is the scene after he discovers that she has lied to him: she hasn't been going to piano lessons on Saturday afternoons. Incensed, he sits her down and screams at her, demanding to know the truth about what she has been up to. She says she's been going to extra rehearsals (a lie, as we later realise), but he doesn't believe it. 'I know what you've been doing,' he says. 'You're seeing this boy.' When she gets angry and says he's 'sick,' he stops screaming. Although still seething with jealousy, he does calm down and tries to apologise. He realises that he's imagined things, stepped over the line, and damaged their relationship with his insane jealousy. This is the entire plot in a nutshell: he destroys what he desires.

**Tender** Despite his flashes of anger and his 'creepy' desire for young Lolita, Humbert is (unlike the character in the novel) not completely loathsome. He is often very sweet and tender to Lolita. Perhaps the most poignant example is the scene when he tells her that her mother has died. They are on the road, in a motel room, in separate beds. Lolita is crying uncontrollably and goes to him for comfort. She lies face down on the bed, he sits on the edge. 'Everything's going to be all right,' he says and strokes her hair gently. As she continues to cry, he speaks softly, reassuring her that they can start a new life together. She begins to feel better and crawls into his arms. As we hear violins in the musical score, he holds her like a child (which she is), hugs her and rocks her back and forth. He may have taken advantage of her youth, but he is tender, nonetheless.

**Lolita** Lolita is a young girl, perhaps fourteen years old, with a blooming sexuality. The complexities and ambiguities in her character are what make this film so intriguing. She can be petulant and sulky, like a normal teenager. She can be savvy and cunning, like an adult. She is a rebellious, confident and independent-minded person who wants control of her life. If that means manipulating a few men along the way, so be it. She is level-headed, despite her girlish histrionics.

**Independent** Lolita is anything but passive. Her independent nature, chafing against the restraints placed on her by her mother and then Humbert, is illustrated throughout the film. But the most incendiary illustration occurs in the scene when Humbert finds out that she has lied to him about her piano lessons. After his enraged accusation, when his anger dies down and he suggests that they leave town to start a new life, she gets angry. And when he asks if she will go away with him, she screams, 'No! I hate you. Why don't you leave me alone!' He says she can't see 'those filthy boys again', and she bursts out in a tirade. 'Oh, I've got news for you. I'm going to do whatever I like. Anytime I want. With anybody I want. And you can't stop me!' The pretty girl has a fiery sense of independence. Just like Humbert, she is determined to get what she wants.

**Teenager** Despite her sexual allure, Lolita is a young girl (supposedly only 14, but looks more like 16), with all the usual characteristics of a teenager. If at times, she is wise beyond her years, she also often acts very much her age. A telling scene is that which takes place after she learns that her mother has died. She grieves, not so much for her mother as for the loss of stability in her life. Humbert tries to reassure her and says that they will move to another town. But she is concerned that she won't have her 'things'. He asks what she wants most. 'My records and my record player' is the answer. Nothing could be more stereotypical than a teenager wanting her stereo.

**Savvy** The complexity of her character revolves around her sexual experiences. Was she an innocent victim of two older men's paedophilia? Or did she know what she was doing? At the end, we learn that she has been manipulating Humbert all along, that she had been carrying on a sexual affair with Quilty when she said she was at piano lessons. But there is another scene, much earlier, when (in retrospect) we can see that she is very savvy for a young girl. She comes home after the summer dance and sees her mother seducing Humbert, with Cuban dance music on the phonograph. She advances toward them with a knowing smile, shakes her hips and says, 'Cha cha cha.' When Humbert leaves the room, she asks her mother if she enjoyed dancing with Quilty at the summer dance. 'All the girls are crazy about him,' Lolita says, raising her eyes to meet her mother's. Her mother dismisses that comment, but Lolita knows that her mother is having an affair with him and stares at her. This is another side of Lolita. She figures out what's going on very quickly.

**Quilty** Quilty is described as TV writer and personality. Like Humbert, he is a middle-aged man, but he is altogether more smarmy and detestable. He is devious and manipulative, a pure con-man, who pretends to be a police officer, a psychologist and an uncle. Both men seduce, or are seduced by, Lolita, but whereas Humbert is tender, Quilty is heartless. More than just paired with Humbert as a rival in a love triangle, he seems to be the professor's guilty conscience (perhaps the name 'quilty' is a hint), his alter-ego, his shadow. Only at the end, when he is deranged, does he get his comeuppance.

**Devious** Quilty is a man of many names and disguises, although we learn this only at the very end, when Lolita tells Humbert what 'really happened.' Only then, in retrospect, can we appreciate the true nature of Quilty's character. His con-man quality is well illustrated in the scene when he importunes Humbert in the hotel where Humbert has taken Lolita. He introduces himself as a police officer and then babbles on about being suspicious and hints, very cleverly, at Humbert's relationship with his 'daughter'. He goes so far as to say that he could arrange with the hotel to give him a 'bridal suite'. Quilty is doubly devious. Not only does he impersonate a policeman, he also manages to penetrate Humbert's defences and make him feel guilty.

**Manipulative** As the story unfolds, we learn the depth of Quilty's obsession with Lolita and Humbert. He follows them in the mysterious black car, he calls Humbert on the telephone and (pretending to be Dr Kempf, the school psychologist) he interviews Humbert about Lolita. That interview scene reveals the full scale of Quilty's manipulations. First, he lies about being the psychologist, then he preys on Humbert's guilt by mentioning the rumours circulating about him and Lolita, and, finally, he says that a panel of experts might be called in to 'examine the home situation.' Quilty/Kempf knows that these insinuations will frighten Humbert and force him to concede that he has been too strict with Lolita, allowing her to continue with her 'piano lessons'. That way, Quilty can continue his sexual affair with her.

**Deranged** Despite his frequent repetition of the word 'normal', Quilty is far from ordinary or stable. In various scenes, he appears stealthy, secretive and underhanded. But the consummate display of his mental state is the opening scene, when Humbert comes to murder him. Quilty emerges from under a sheet, which he wears like a Roman toga, and launches into a torrent of incoherence that is both provocative and mad as it reels back and forth between accusations and delusions. Later, at the end of the story, we realise that this is the culmination of Quilty's unhinged nature. He is a liar, a schemer and a seducer. And it all catches up with him at the end, when his fantasies and deceptions gain the upper hand.



(Humbert and Lolita in the garden)



(Lolita and Humbert in a motel room)



(Quilty and friend at the summer dance)