THE TRUTH BETWEEN THE LINES

A Comparative Analysis of Unreliable Narration in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange* and Stanley Kubrick’s Film Adaptations

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I would first like to thank my master’s dissertation advisor Assistant Professor of English and Literary Theory, Marco Caracciolo of the Department of Literary Studies at the University of Ghent. Whenever I needed guidance or had a question about my research or writing, Prof. Caracciolo was always quick to respond, steering me in the right direction whenever he thought I needed it.

Then, I must also express my very profound gratitude to my parents and to my brother for providing me with continuous encouragement and unfailing support throughout my years of study and through the process of writing and researching this dissertation. This accomplishment would not have been possible without them. Thank you.
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INTRODUCTION

In 2011, Mark Jacobs launched a campaign ad for a new fragrance of his, called ‘Oh, Lola!’\(^1\). It was a variation on a previous scent, this time aimed at younger consumers. In the ad, the then seventeen-year-old Dakota Fanning took on the role of a contemporary version of Lolita, dressed wearing a sheer pink dress while holding the fragrance bottle suggestively between her legs. Even though the British Advertising Standards Authority banned the ad for the reason that it was considered to be “sexualizing a child”\(^2\), it’s still remarkable to me how this character has become something completely different from what Vladimir Nabokov intended her to be.

When reading Lolita for the first time, I was both horrified and impressed. Even though a quote by *Vanity Fair*\(^3\) on the front cover of the 1997 version claims that the novel is “the only convincing love story of our century,” I knew that this book was about a pedophile and his obsession with a young girl. Yet, I was horrified by how charming Humbert Humbert’s narrating voice was and how easily I got swept up in it. Remembering the fairy tales read to me in my childhood days, I was taught that you’re supposed to recognize the villain in the story, either by how they look or how they act. Yet, here this despicable man found ways to make me smile, swept me up in his narrative and he even made me root for him. So, next to being horrified by the way in which this narrative voice was successful in turning my ethical compass upside down, I also felt extremely impressed. How could I not? I went into the reading experience expecting to hate this character, expecting to not feel any

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1 See Appendix A, figure 1.
2 Srivats, P. S. “From Dolores Haze to Dakota Fanning”, 45.
kinship with the man, yet when Humbert Humbert lost Lolita I felt sad and vengeful. I wanted him to win.

This probably wasn’t the first time that I realized just how powerful words can be, but it is the first time that I truly paid attention to it. When taking into account recent events, with people in higher power claiming true stories to be ‘fake news’, and others who blindly go along with it, I’m starting to realize that words not only carry a lot of power within them, but that they can be dangerous as well.

When trying to come up with a topic for this master’s dissertation, I chose Lolita as a starting point, because I wanted to find out exactly how Humbert manipulated its readers into believing that it was not him, but Lolita who was at fault in their relationship. I wanted to find out how the truth of a story can be erased from people’s minds so that only the lies get remembered. What role did Humbert play in changing the definition of a ‘Lolita’ as being a child manipulated and deceived by someone who is supposed to protect her, into “a young girl who has a very sexual appearance or behaves in a very sexual way”?

Trying to answer these questions, I believed that unreliable narration was a good place to start. Wayne C. Booth talked about this concept first, writing that he:

"called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not."^5

Peter J. Rabinowitz modified Booth’s definition and claimed that:

“An unreliable narrator however, is not simply a narrator who ‘does not tell the truth’ – what fictional narrator ever tells the literal truth? Rather an unreliable narrator is one who tells lies, conceal information, misjudges with respect to the

narrative audience – that is, one whose statements are untrue not by the standards of the real world or of the authorial audience but by the standards of his own narrative audience. [...] In other words, all fictional narrators are false in that they are imitations. But some are imitations who tell the truth, some of people who lie.6

Considering this last interpretation of the concept of unreliable narration, I believe Humbert Humbert’s narrative power lays exactly in this: how he so successfully lies to his audience and guides their judgements elsewhere.

For this dissertation, I have chosen to analyze not only Vladimir Nabokov’s novel Lolita, but also Anthony Burgess’s A Clockwork Orange, as a way to compare how different authors establish an unreliable narrative and what effect it has on its audience. I also chose to include the Stanley Kubrick’s film adaptations of both novels, to find out what different techniques are used to create an unreliable narration in film and if this carries the same power as it does in the novels. The two films create for an interesting comparative analysis, since they were adapted by the same director.

First I will take a closer look at the theoretical framework, looking into what unreliable narration really is and how these two different mediums approach the concept differently. Since narration is trickier to describe when it comes to movies, I’ll try to specify how I would define the narrative voice in film. Next, the analysis of Lolita – first the novel, then the film adaptation – gets discussed. Here, I will first give a brief summary of the story, to then take a closer look at all the ways in which the narration manipulates the reader into a more sympathetic opinion of the novel’s protagonist, Humbert Humbert. I will also discuss those moments in which Humbert’s defense seems to falter, to see how the truth doesn’t remain completely unhidden. When analyzing the film, I will use the same pattern, focusing

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on the different techniques used to guide the audience into a different interpretation of the story.

After the analysis of Lolita, Burgess’ novel A Clockwork Orange will be discussed. Here it is the delinquent Alex who takes the word, showing the readers a world in which violence becomes the ‘new normal’. After a brief overview of the content of the novel, I will focus on how Alex is considered to be unreliable in the way in which he tells his story and how he wants to desensitize his readers to his ultra-violent behavior. In the film, I will focus on how techniques such as the voice-over narration of Alex, as well as music and setting are important factors in making the violence seem less horrifying.

My aim is to demonstrate that a closer examination of the technique of unreliable narration leads to a greater understanding of the work’s meaning and its value, and therefore to a greater appreciation. It is my belief that studying this technique in the novel and how it differs in their adaptations, leads to a better understanding of the medium of film as well.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

THEORY OF UNRELIABLE NARRATION

In the *Handbook of Narrative Analysis*\(^7\), Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck write that different types of narrators can be established on the basis of three properties. The first one is the temporal property, which shows the difference between the moment in which the narrated events take place and the moment of its narration. A second property is a narrator’s visibility, making a distinction between an overt and a covert narrator, and the last property is reliability. According to Herman and Vervaeck there is no objective way to establish reliability, but there are certain signs that can be picked up by the reader. These textual indications suggest a discrepancy between the factual reality of the narrative and the way the narrator presents it, which causes the reader to believe the narrator to be untrustworthy and thus unreliable.

In *Lolita* and *A Clockwork Orange*, both authors have chosen a first-person narrator. When a story is told from a first-person point of view, it draws the reader in from the first lines and allows the audience to see themselves more easily through the eyes of who is telling the story. Due to its subjective style, it will be more difficult for readers to see what they are being shown through objective eyes, therefore they will become more easily swept up in what is told and more susceptible to the manipulations of the one telling it. As Evers states:

> “Great first-person narratives suck you into a character’s world to such a degree that it seems effortless.” \(^8\)

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\(^7\) Herman & Vervaeck, *Handbook of Narrative Analysis*, 86-91.

\(^8\) Evers, S. “The Dangers of First-Person Narration”, *The Guardian*. 
Both in *Lolita* and in *A Clockwork Orange* the narrators try to get the readers on their side, therefore the choice of the author to write the story from a first-person point of view is the most useful one. Because of the way that one person experiences events, unreliability is potentially “an inherent characteristic of any first-person narrator”\(^9\), since narrators only have their own perception to rely on and so their relationship to the facts are biased by their experience of them.

The first scholar to introduce the concept of unreliable narration was the American literary critic Wayne C. Booth and other scholars have continues defining this concept. According to William Riggan\(^10\), unreliable narration has “become part and parcel of modern literature” and he believes that those readers and critics who do favor a more “straightforward, traditional narrative” should not overlook the rewards and delights that unreliable narration brings with them.

Wayne C. Booth was the first to present a definition of the term ‘unreliable narration’, which he did by introducing the concept of the implied author. According to Booth, the implied author is “always distinct from the ‘real man’—whatever we may take him to be—who creates a superior version of himself as he creates his work; any successful novel makes us believe in an ‘author’ who amounts to a second self”\(^11\). The unreliable narrator is a hypothetical entity created by the reader to make the interpretation of the text easier. When we start reading a story, we come to the natural conclusion that someone is guiding the story, giving it a specific direction, but it would be short-sighted to think that this is the same person as the one who wrote the book. The ideas and points of view that are posed in a work of fiction are not necessarily the ones the author would have; therefore, an implied author needs to be introduced as the carrier of these notions. He determines what is true in a story, which

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\(^9\) Prather, *Craft Study*, 3.


stands in contrast to a narrator, who tells us what the truth is, but who also may be misrepresenting the truth for a multitude of reasons. One of these motives may be that the narrator is a child, unable to grasp the severity of certain situations, or he could be a madman, guided by his illusions and therefore unable to distinguish reality from fantasy. As Booth believes, unreliability is established when the intentions of the implied author concerning the truth of the story don’t align with the intentions of the narrator concerning what he wants the reader to believe is true.

Since Booth introduced the theory of unreliable narration, the concept has been heavily discussed and debated by researchers who wanted to get to a more concise definition. Phelan & Martin\textsuperscript{12} starts from the unreliable homodiegetic first-person narrator to look at the “ethical positioning” of the reader. Phelan points out that narrators “perform three main roles – reporting, interpreting, and evaluating; sometimes they perform the roles simultaneously and sometimes sequentially”. ‘Reporting’ is about the characters, facts and events, while ‘interpreting’ has to do with observing and knowledge. ‘Evaluating’ is more about ethics. Going into these three roles a bit more, Phelan believes that unreliability can be categorized by focusing on three axes: the axis of truth, the axis of knowledge and perception and the axis of values or ethics. He concludes that unreliability can have six types, divided into two categories: (1) misreporting, misinterpreting or misevaluating and (2) underreporting, under-interpreting or under-evaluating. In the ‘mis’-category the unreliability is established by the narrator purposefully giving the wrong information – either by reporting incorrectly about the events, reading the situation differently or by misinterpreting the ethics – in which case the audience needs to reject the narrator’s words and construct an alternative. The ‘under’-category is established when the narrator is insufficient in his telling, either purposely or not. In this case the audience must supplement the narrator’s view. The distinction that Phelan

\textsuperscript{12} Phelan & Martin, \textit{The Lessons of “Weymouth”}. 
makes here helps us speak more clearly about the ways in which the narrator distances himself from the implied author.

In light of Phelan’s categorization, William Riggan makes a distinction between four different types of unreliable narrators in his book *Picaros, Madmen, Naifs, and Clowns: The Unreliable First-Person Narrator*. Especially the type of the madman is interesting in the context of this dissertation. Riggan believes that an unreliable narrator is more than just ignorant. He is also unbalanced and “for both the critical and casual reader, the literacy, cunning and seductiveness of these narrators often poses considerable problems for comprehension and interpretation of the works in which they appear”\(^{13}\).

Ansgar Nünning believes that Booth put too little emphasis on the power of the reader when it comes to establishing unreliable narration. According to Nünning it is not the author – or the implied author, as Booth said – who creates an unreliable narration, but the reader’s response to the text. He believes that the “the implied author is a construct established by the reader on the basis of the whole structure of a text”.\(^{14}\) He continues:

> “If the implied author is conceived of a structural phenomenon that is voiceless, one should look at it not as a speaker involved in the structure of narrative transmission, but as a component of the reception process, as the reader’s idea of the author”.

Diengott\(^ {15}\) concurs with Nünning when he says that “the implied author should be understood … as a depersonified interpretive construct, apart of the meaning of a text” and it is “definitely not an agent in narrative transmission.” Diengott believes that the concept of the implied author should be used for the interpretation of texts, since it prevents us from thinking

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\(^{13}\) Riggan, W. *Picaros, Madmen, Naifs and Clowns*, 13.

\(^{14}\) Nünning, A. *Reconceptualizing the Theory, History and Generic Scope of Unreliable Narration*, 34.

\(^{15}\) Diengott, N. *The Implied Author Again*, 73.
that the ideology of the text is in alignment with the author’s beliefs and it also allows us to better understand complex forms of communication, such as unreliable narration.

What all of these interpretations of unreliable narration have in common is that unreliable narration is established when an incongruity exists between the fictional reality and the fictional truth of the narrator’s view on that fictional reality. Something goes wrong between the narrator’s conception of what is real and what is not and he becomes untrustworthy in the eyes of the reader. In both *Lolita* and *A Clockwork Orange* we encounter narrators who are aware of this discrepancy and they use it to their advantage to try and confuse and persuade the reader of *their* truth instead of *the* truth.

**UNRELIABLE NARRATION IN FILM**

When talking about narration in film, the question has been raised whether it is possible to have a narrative without a visible or audible narrator. In film, therefore, the absence of an obvious narrative subject needs to be compensated by a “visual narrative instance” (showing) and a “verbal narrative instance” (telling), who, when combined together, create the “filmic narrative agent”16. According to Markus Kühn, the visual narrative instance contains both “the moving picture within one shot (i.e. the process of selection, perspective, and accentuation by the camera, or cinematography)”, as “the combination of shots into sequences (i.e. the process of editing, or montage in terms of classical film theory)”. Verbal narrative instances would be employed in the form of voice-overs, intertitles and text captions.

Unreliable narration does not only occur in the medium of literature; a cinematic narrator can be unreliable as well. Unlike novels, film does not use “language”, but another

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16 Kühn, M. *Handbook of Narratology*, 393.
kind of semiotic system with “articulations” to narrate the events\textsuperscript{17}. When it comes to a film adaptation of a novel, the selected images have to be arranged in such a way that it makes sense on the big screen. As Linda Hutcheon\textsuperscript{18} states: “a novel, in order to be dramatized, has to be distilled, reduced in size, and thus, inevitably, complexity”. She believes that the plot of a novel needs to be reduced and condensed for it to have a powerful effect in the film adaptation.

Ejxenbaum states that the notion of a “film narrator” is purely metaphoric and that instead it is the viewer who moves “to the construction of internal speech”. Heath concurs with this idea that the audience plays a big role in establishing narration in film. Branigan and Bordwell decided to abandon the “cinematic narrator” altogether, replacing the author by the “idea that narration is a process or activity presupposing an active perceiver, but no sender”.

In this master’s dissertation, I will look at narration in film in a similar manner. Since there is no visible narrator, the film medium needs to make use of different techniques to establish a narrative and it is up to the viewer to be perceptive to this.

Because film cannot establish a narrative voice the same way a novel would, instead of using the voice of a narrator to establish unreliability, filmic narration has to use different techniques to establish an untrustworthy storytelling. According to Per Krogh Hansen\textsuperscript{19} there are four ways in which the film medium creates an unreliable narrator. The first one is the technique of voice-over narration, the second one the point of view-shot, the third technique would be the use of extradiegetic sound effect and music, with ‘diegetic’ meaning sound used in correlation with other forms of media such as is done in film, and lastly he addresses the way in which scenes are staged in agreement with the focalizer’s point of view, as well as

\textsuperscript{17} Metz, C. Some Points in the Semiotics of the Cinema.

\textsuperscript{18} Hutcheon, L. A Theory of Adaptation, 36.

\textsuperscript{19} Hansen, PK. “Unreliable Narration in Cinema”.

with his/her reception and understanding of what is going on, but because we’re talking about unreliability here, that would be misreception and misunderstanding of the events.

Looking at unreliable narration in film, Chatman argues for the relevance of the implied author in cinema as well, but he prefers to use the term ‘inferred author’. He defines it as the “agency within the narrative fiction itself which guides any reading of it”. Just like Nüning, Chatman also sees the importance of the reader when it comes to a definition of the inferred author, which he sees as “the patterns in the text which the reader negotiates”\textsuperscript{20}. When looking at how unreliability is established by the cinematic narrator, the audience needs to be aware of these patterns and the effect they have on him as a viewer.

Chatman’s ideas about the cinematic narrator are still very much connected to how the narrator is seen in literary theory. Branigan and Bordwell step away from this and the latter believes that “to give every film a narrator or implied author is to indulge in an anthropomorphic fiction”\textsuperscript{21}. Bordwell is of the opinion that in film we get narration without a “sender”, and that is why a narrator must be imbedded in a film. Chatman disagreed and believed that if stories are not told by a narrator, it “contradicts both logic and common sense”. For Chatman the narrator is “someone or something in the text who or which is conceived of as presenting the set of signs that constitute it”. In both literature and in film it is therefore up to the audience to recognize the signs and interpret them as untrustworthy.

\textsuperscript{20} Chatman, S. \textit{Coming to Terms}, 86-7.
\textsuperscript{21} Bordwell, D. \textit{Narration in the Fiction Film}. 62.
Nabokov’s novel is well-known by its prosaic style, its intricate subtext and the main character’s inner monologues about his pedophilic obsession with a twelve-year-old girl. Since the film poster of Stanley Kubrick’s Lolita carries the tagline: “How did they ever make a movie of Lolita?”22, the question can thus be posed how Kubrick used the different aspects of the film medium to adapt this story onto the big screen.

In this part, I will take a closer look at the concept of unreliable narration in the novel and how Kubrick decided to take this essential element of the story to adapt it to the medium of film. First I will focus on how unreliable narration is created in the novel and then I will look at how the medium of film is used to establish said concept. In the analysis of the novel, a brief summary of the story will be given which will then be followed by an in-depth analysis of unreliable narration in the written text. In the analysis of the film, I will take a closer look at the different techniques used to establish an (unreliable) narrator and whether or not a similar effect is established.

**LOLITA: THE NOVEL (1955)**

**IN HUMBERT HUMBERT’S DEFENSE: A SUMMARY**

As the title of Vladimir Nabokov’s novel and the opening lines of the story may predict, this is the tale of Lolita, a twelve-year-old child, who becomes the obsession of Humbert Humbert. The fictional psychologist’s John Ray Jr., Ph.D. introduces the novel as a case-study and describes the narrator of the story as a murderer and a sexual pervert.

22 See Appendix A, Figure 1.
Humbert’s narrative starts with a description of Lolita’s predecessor, Annabel Leigh, with whom Humbert fell in love at a young age. She dies of typhoid, leaving the charming narrator’s sexual desires unfulfilled.

As a young adult, Humbert lives in Paris and in London where he studies literature and publishes in several journals, while discovering his unnatural interest in young girls, or “nymphets”. He never approaches them, but tries to find ways to be as close to them as possible and he even finds a prostitute, Monique, who impresses him with her likeliness to the nymphets he desires. Nevertheless, Humbert recognizes the perversity of his thoughts and he tries to get rid of them by engaging in a marriage. In 1935, he marries the daughter of his doctor, Valeria. The marriage crumbles after only a couple of years, when Valeria leaves Humbert for a Russian taxi-driver named Maximovich. This is the catalyst for Humbert to leave for the United States.

In New York, Humbert Humbert starts working at a University, while also writing a book on French literature. He has to stay in a sanatorium for a couple of years, due to issues pertaining the state of his mental health.

In 1947 Humbert is released from his final stay in the sanatorium and he moves to New England, to the town of Ramsdale. His plans to move in with the family of the McCoos, which makes Humbert fairly exited because of the knowledge that they have a little daughter, but when he arrives he discovers the house has burned down and he needs to find another place to stay. This leads him to the house of Charlotte Haze. Humbert is rather unimpressed with the house itself, but when he sets eyes on her daughter Dolores, his mind is made up.

The longer Humbert stays at the Haze house, the more infatuated he becomes with Lolita and a plan to have her all to himself starts to form, but certain factors work against him. Charlotte is quite taken with Humbert, and she wants him all to herself and she sends Lolita
away to camp. Humbert marries Charlotte to keep close to his nymphet and when she dies in a car accident, he finally gets the opportunity to be with his beloved Lo once and for all.

This is the start of a love affair between Humbert and Lolita that lasts for two years in which they move from hotel to hotel, after which our “Humble Narrator” decides to settle in Beardsley, an Eastern college town where Humbert can work as a teacher and where Lolita can further her education. What Humbert considers to be the start of their lives together, is in actuality the beginning of the end. Lolita distances herself more and more and starts acting out against Humbert’s authority. Feeling lost and confused about Lolita’s withdrawal from him, Humbert decides to take her away from the little college town and takes her on a cross-country trip. Soon, he feels as if someone is following him and he becomes increasingly paranoid. In the town Elphinstone Lolita falls ill and Humbert is forced to take her to hospital. After leaving her there for the night, he discovers upon his return that Lolita is no longer there. That which he had feared for so long has come true: Lolita has left him.

Lolita’s running away starts Humbert’s search for her. He follows little clues that seem to be left specifically for him, but rather than finding Lolita, it seems to be tantalizing him and it forces him to acknowledge that he has lost her once and for all. He falls into despair and starts a relationship with an alcoholic woman named Rita.

It is September 1952 when Humbert Humbert receives a letter from Lolita in which she asks for money for her and her husband. When he visits her at her home, he finally realizes who helped her in her escape: Clare Quilty, a playwright working on Lolita’s school play. Lolita fell in love with Quilty and she decided to run away with him. Instead of the love affair she expected, Quilty wanted to use her in his pornographic films and so, Lolita left him as well. Even though Lolita is now a pregnant married woman, Humbert nevertheless begs her to come with him, but she refuses, leaving him for the final time. The only thing left for him is revenge.
Finally knowing who took his Lolita way from him, Humbert goes looking for the man responsible. He finds Quilty, which ends with a fight between the two men and Humbert shoots and kills the playwright and he is eventually arrested for Quilty’s murder. Imprisoned for this crime, Humbert Humbert starts writing his defense.

**UNRELIABLE NARRATION IN THE NOVEL**

In *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov has established a singular voice that he continually undercuts. In this part of the analysis, I will look closer at how unreliable narration is established by the voice of the narrator and protagonist of the novel, Humbert Humbert. I will first look at how the foreword written by John Ray, Jr. counts as a warning for the unreliability the reader will encounter in the following narrative. Next, I will look at how Humbert’s characterization adds to his unreliability and how he then uses his charming words to manipulate the reader. Next to being the protagonist of the story, Humbert is also the narrator and throughout *Lolita* we find him repeatedly commenting on the constructive nature of the novel. By doing so, Humbert finds different ways to make the truth less accessible. I’ll also focus into the narrator’s style and use of irony and lastly, I will look at how the truth of the pedophilic relationship between Humbert Humbert and Lolita doesn’t remain completely unhidden by his unreliable retelling.

**Foreword**

Humbert Humbert’s story is first introduced to us by John Ray, Jr., a supposed psychologist from Widworth Massachusetts. He portrays himself as a specialist in perversions and abnormal states of mind, which makes him the appropriate person to address the controversy that arises with Humbert Humbert and his tale of pedophilia. Because the bulk of
the novel is introduced by a psychologist, the foreword seems to warn the reader about Humbert Humbert’s potential unreliability.

Throughout the text, John Ray, Jr. wants to make it very clear that everything he is writing, as well as Humbert Humbert’s story that follows, actually happened. He does this by listing sources, specific dates and documentary information, establishing an authoritative position in judging Humbert and his narration. Yet, the psychologist’s power gets reduced to a more farcical status with the knowledge that he is not a real doctor, but a character invented by Nabokov. When a foreword is added to a novel, it is often someone outside of the fictional world. A real authority talking with knowledge about the subjects dealt with in the book. Here, however, this isn’t the case and the author has left certain clues for the readers to find, inviting them to step out of a more mimetic stance, where they believe John Ray, Jr. is a real doctor, who knows what he is talking about, and they move towards a more synthetic stance, where we know that the man is a fictitious character, who may lead us in a more unreliable direction.

The foreword thus creates ambiguity, “the use of a single word or expression to signify two or more distinct references, or to express two or more diverse attitudes or feelings”23. Everything that the fake psychologist says becomes questionable. Yet, John Ray, Jr. wants the readers to believe him, and he tries to create a context in which Humbert’s story can truly exist. He makes it clear that the names used in the novel are pseudonyms, and that every name has been changed expect for Lolita’s, because she is supposedly ‘too important’ and multiple times, we are given a brief account of what other characters have been up to since the end of Humbert Humbert’s story. This all adds a realistic element to the story.

Reading the foreword a bit more closely, though, shows us the unreliable nature of the psychologist and that he is in fact made up. One of the people John Ray, Jr. refers to is

‘Vivian Darkbloom’, a writer. This name is an anagram for Vladimir Nabokov and it’s appearance should be considered as a warning for the reader that everything in this story should be read with caution, because the author is guiding you through the story and his voice might be a deceitful one.

Focusing on the content of John Ray, Jr.’s foreword, we see that he tries to defend Humbert Humbert’s actions, stating that “at least 12% of American adult males enjoy early, in one way or another, the special experiences ‘H. H.’ describes with such despair”\(^\text{24}\). At the same time, though, he criticizes Humbert as well. “He is horrible,” he writes, “he is abject, he is a shining example of moral leprosy”\(^\text{25}\). By showing the reader from the start what makes Humbert such a terrible person, he wants to neutralize the audience’s opinion of the narrator and his pedophilic tendencies. If you go into a story, and you already know what’s going to happen, you might be less inclined to judge too harshly. For the same reason John Ray, Jr. uses prolepsis, a literary device in which future acts are introduced before they happen, taking away the weight they might have when they actually occur. The foreword mentions that both Humbert Humbert and Lolita, the two main characters of the story that is to follow, are dead in the present time. Humbert Humbert “had died in legal captivity, of coronary thrombosis, on November 15, 1952, a few days before his trial was scheduled to start”\(^\text{26}\) and even in these sentences that are filled with what is supposed to be ‘true’ information, the irony cannot be unseen. Humbert supposedly died from a coronary thrombosis, which is a fancy way to say that he died from a broken heart.

At the end of his foreword, John Ray, Jr. wants to point out why this novel is so important. One of his points is the ethical impact the novel can have and how it “should make all of us – parents, social workers, educators – apply ourselves with greater vigilance and

\(^{24}\) Nabokov, V. *Lolita*, 3.
\(^{25}\) Nabokov, V. *Lolita*, 2.
\(^{26}\) Nabokov, V. *Lolita*, 1.
vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world”²⁷. To the reader, this doesn’t feel like honest advice, especially because the author of the foreword is defending the actions of a pedophile on trial for an unknown crime, which turns out to be a murder. The irony behind everything John Ray, Jr., Ph. D. writes in his foreword only becomes clear in retrospect, but it should also be considered a way to foreshadow the fact that we will encounter an unreliable narrator throughout the rest of the novel as well. The cautious reader has thus been warned.

**Characterizing Humbert**

Humbert Humbert is the first-person narrator of the novel *Lolita*. Since he’s also the protagonist of the story, the narrator is autodiegetic. Throughout the novel, most events are focalized through his eyes. This means that he is not only the person showing the events, but also the one seeing them. Therefore, we as readers should be aware of the fact that everything Humbert tells us, could be an untrue account of the actual events and thus purposeful misreported to us.

Humbert Humbert portrays himself as an outsider throughout most of the story. He has a nomadic way of living, jumping from one job to the next, never really finding stable footing. He was born in Europe and both his immigrant status as the language barrier have caused Humbert to feel as if he’s constantly looking in, but never apart of, American life. Add to this his sexual perversion and you get a man who is disconnected from ordinary social life. This outsider status could be a way to manipulate the reader into sympathizing with him. By putting himself in an underdog position, he expects the reader to pity him and be emphatic.

When it comes to considering Humbert Humbert as (un)reliable in narrating his story, it should be pointed out that he was incarcerated several times in his life, as is stated in the

foreword. Whether or not this makes him unreliable is not clear yet, but he should definitely be considered unstable. We also see from his interactions with the psychoanalysts at the mental asylums that he can manipulate them in such a way that he makes them believe whatever he is saying. If he so easily and joyfully manipulates these trained doctors, then why not a reader who is willing to trust whatever the narrator tells him?

While reading, it becomes quite clear that we should see Humbert as a charming, attractive man. Whether or not this is an actual fact is unclear, since we only get Humbert’s view on this. Since he is the one narrating this story, it should be questioned if he actually is “an exceptionally handsome man”28, or if he is embellishing on his looks and his charming personality as a part of his defense strategy. Because, if other women found him so desirable, then why not Lolita as well? This adds to his opinion that Lolita was the one who came on to him, which will be discussed later on. It could also be seen as a warning for the reader. If Humbert is telling the truth about his appearance, then why couldn’t the same be true for his charming narrative voice? Similar in the way that his handsomeness adds to his allure as a desirable man, the charming way in which he is telling this story is a way for him to get the reader to side with him instead of with the actual victim.

Another way in which Humbert tries to get the reader on his side is by repeatedly emphasizing that he is a lover of literature. Literature is often considered as an art form with a certain intellectual prestige and by connecting himself to this, he wants to try to convince the reader that someone who loves art is not capable of such horrendous actions as he is describing. Instead of being considered to be a pedophile, he wants the reader to see this as a romantic tale between two consenting lovers and the murder that took place as an act of passion, not revenge.

28 Nabokov, V. Lolita. 25.
Humbert Humbert doesn’t always take his role as a narrator as seriously as he should. Oftentimes he could be considered as a ‘lazy’ writer. At different moments in the novel, he asks the reader to use their imagination instead of giving the information himself by writing “and so forth” or “and so on”\textsuperscript{29}, thus falling in Phelan’s second category of underreporting, demanding that the audience supplements to the given information. In chapter 26, he writes “Lolita” ten times, adding the instructions to “repeat till the page is full, printer,” instead of actually repeating the word. So, if Humbert is a lazy writer, it wouldn’t be a far stretch to wonder if he is lazy with the truth as well. Do we as readers get the full story, or only the parts that he considers necessary for his defense? On one occasion Humbert writes that Lolita says “unprintable things”, but considering the subject matter of this novel - the sexual relation between an adult and a twelve-year-old girl - it should be put into question what could still be unprintable. It seems more likely that Lolita said something that could hurt Humbert’s defense, instead of things too lewd to be mentioned.

Despite having a “photographic memory”\textsuperscript{30}, Humbert seems to forget details fairly often. Only a couple of pages after mentioning his pristine recollection, he mentions a musical composition he made of Lolita, yet he “cannot recall it today”\textsuperscript{31}. He calls himself a poet, yet later he states: “But I am no poet, I am only a very conscientious recorder”. As Mathew Winston wrote:

\begin{quote}
“The book’s protagonist, narrator, and supposed author, Humbert Humbert, continually forces us to maintain a double perspective by calling on us to pass moral and legal judgment upon him as a man and aesthetic judgment upon him
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{29} Nabokov, V. \textit{Lolita}. 34, 77, 80.
\textsuperscript{30} Nabokov, V. \textit{Lolita}. 43.
\textsuperscript{31} Nabokov, V. \textit{Lolita}. 47.
as an artist. (...) [T]he murderer, madman and pedophile is balanced against the artistic creator, stylist, lover of language and master of literary allusion.”

This inconsistency in his language repeatedly throws the reader off and makes it that much more difficult to distinguish between truth and lie.

**Manipulating the Reader**

As a part of his defense, Humbert Humbert makes Lolita out to be the instigator of their physical relationship. When he asks her why she thinks he has stopped caring for her, just after he retrieved her from camp, she apparently responds with: “Well, you haven’t kissed me yet, have you?” Her saying this should be an indication that she’s actually interested in Humbert and he should not be considered an abuser if she asked for it. Yet, even if Lolita actually said this, the reader should still be aware of the fact that there is an enormous age difference between the two of them, Lolita being only twelve years old and Humbert thirty-six at the time of the events. So it doesn’t really matter whether or not she wanted to, she was still a child and most likely unaware of the implications of such sexual actions. Humbert should have taken his responsibility and declined the offer. Instead, he is easily persuaded by the seduction of a child and he clings to this part in a desperate attempt to defend himself as he approaches the jury:

> “Frigid gentlewomen of the jury! I had thought that months, perhaps years, would elapse before I dared to reveal myself to Dolores Haze; but by six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers. I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me.”

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33 Nabokov, V. *Lolita*. 127.
34 Nabokov, V. *Lolita*. 153. [own emphasis]
Humbert’s defense is that he didn’t really have a choice, that it was only natural to give in to his desire for her. To further drive this point home, he includes that he wasn’t even the first person she had sex with. So why should he, “Humbert the Innocent”, be seen as the culprit?

As I have pointed out above, Humbert Humbert tries to manipulate the reader into siding with him by putting the emphasis on him being the victim instead of him being the one standing on trial for murder. Throughout the novel, he also finds ways to manipulate the other characters by portraying himself as someone else. When Humbert marries Lolita’s mother Charlotte, they are interviewed by a society column and Humbert seizes the opportunity to create a backstory that seems plausible enough, yet untrue. He even gives himself a new name, “Mr. Edgar H. Humbert (I threw in the ‘Edgar’ just for the heck of it)”\(^{35}\), connecting himself to the poet Edgar Allan Poe, who also fell in love with a teenage girl who died too young. He does this because it makes it easier for him to manipulate Charlotte if he pretends to be the typical American husband she so desperately craves. He covers these lies by stating that “society columns should contain a shimmer of errors”. Perhaps he believes his defense should “shimmer” with errors as well.

This cover story has another purpose beside manipulating Charlotte. By stating that they had an affair over thirteen years before their wedding, Humbert Humbert opens the door to the plausibility of him having conceived Lolita. Since this is so premeditated, the events that follow, such as Charlotte’s death, seem less like an accident and more like actual murder.

\(^{35}\) Nabokov, V. *Lolita*. 84.
Humbert: The Narrator

In telling his story, Humbert Humbert points out several times that this novel has been written by himself, that it is a construction created by a character involved in the events and that we, the readers, are his audience.

Humbert the Narrator often refers to himself in the third person, which creates a certain distance between his character and the events taking place. So when he says that “Humbert Humbert tried hard to be good. Really and truly, he did,” he’s also stating that he was not successful in “being good”, but he wants to focus on his intentions, rather than his actual actions. He wants the readers to accept that Humbert is in fact a good man, which will make them feel more reluctant to condemn his behavior.

The narrator also makes us of the literary technique of the epithet, “a descriptive literary device that describes a place, a thing or a person in such a way that it helps in making the characteristics of a person, thing or place more prominent than they actually are”.

Mostly, epithets are used to make something easier to understand, but in this case, Humbert the narrator uses it to manipulate the reader. He sees himself as conflicted between being “Humbert the Terrible”, representing the animal inside himself, and “Humbert the Small”, the old-world, European gentleman. These two sides to himself are often in battle and the outcome of their fight is supposed to decide whether or not “Humbert Humbert should kill her or her lover, or both, or neither”. By making these two the deciders of his faith, it seems as if he is putting the blame in someone else’s hand, but it is actually he himself who is in control. He also calls himself “Humbert Le Bel”, Humbert the Hoarse”, “Humbert the Humble”. This

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36 Nabokov, V. Lolita. 19.
37 “epithet”: Definition on Literary Devices.
38 Nabokov, V. Lolita. 28-29.
has the same effect as the previous epithets, namely that it creates a distance from his own role in the events and it tries to confuse the reader in deciding if Humbert is to blame or not.

Another way in which Humbert puts the emphasis on his role as not only a character, but also a narrator, is by continuously addressing the reader. He repeatedly calls the reader “ladies and gentlemen of the jury”, thus implicating the reader in his faith. If we, the reader, convict him, he’s considered to be guilty, but if we don’t convict him, he’s innocent. So, by making it clear that the reader is in a position of judging him as a character, and that we are actually allowed to have an opinion about his actions, Humbert Humbert puts a lot of power in the reader’s hands, perhaps making it a bit more difficult to clearly see the truth. He asks of the reader to be patient, but to also be forgiving, and the effect it has is very persuasive:

“Gentlewomen of the jury! Bear with me! Allow me to take just a tiny bit of your precious time.”

Other times, Humbert calls us by what we actually are, namely readers. “Let me remind my reader,” he says, or “my brief acquaintance with her started a train of thought that may seem pretty obvious to the reader who knows the ropes”, and he continuous later with: “the reader can easily imagine how dusty and hot I got”. What happens here is not only Humbert including the reader to participate in the story, but he also implies that the one reading it, is not unlike him. If the reader believes that there is a certain unidentified bond between him or herself and this character, he is perhaps less likely to condemn Humbert for actions he himself could be guilty of as well. He asks the reader to participate in this story, which he does by asking them to verify facts such as “the weather data in the Ramsdale Journal for 1947” and to then “analyze it”. This is a way for him to show the reader that he

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39 Nabokov, V. Lolita. 139.
40 Nabokov, V. Lolita. 34.
41 Nabokov, V. Lolita. 43.
has nothing to hide and that the things he tells us are factional within his narration, instead of a subjective account of his memory.

A big part of Humbert’s defense strategy is by expanding on the psychological causes of his actions. The cause would be his childhood girlfriend, Annabel, whom he loved deeply. Sadly, she died before they could consummate their relationship, which is the reason why he has this intense feeling of being unfulfilled and he tries to compensate this by looking for a replacement for Annabel in the *nymphets* he meets. He makes the comparison between Annabel and Lolita several times, saying that “in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel” and that eventually he “broke her spell by incarnating her in another”42. By using Annabel, Humbert wants to prove that his relationship with Lolita was solely a natural consequence of his love for her and not pedophilic in nature, as the reader might think.

As the author of the foreword pointed out, all of the names in this story have been altered, except for Lolita’s name. It should therefore not be considered a coincidence that the name of Humbert’s childhood girlfriend is the same as Edgar Allan Poe’s Annabel Lee. Humbert teases this a couple of times in the novel as well, referring to a “princedom by the sea” and “‘Monsieur Poe-Poe,’” as that boy in one of Monsieur Humbert Humbert’s classes in Paris called the poet-poet43. By creating this intertextual connection, it establishes a certain pattern in behavior and it could be a way for Humbert to defend his actions by pointing out that what he’s doing is not so uncommon and therefore more natural than we think. The reference to this great and well-known writes also seems intended to ingratiate readers even further.

Humbert comments on his own narration by using metafiction. This is a “term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an

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43 Nabokov, V. *Lolita*. 7, 46.
artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality”⁴⁴. According to Waugh, “such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction”, but “they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text”. Humbert Humbert is writing this story retrospectively. He is writing in prison, preparing his defense for his court case in which he stands on trial for the murder of Clare Quilty and, according to our narrator, “you can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style”⁴⁵. Because of Humbert’s metafictional commentary, it becomes clear that he is aware that this story is told after the events took place and it should therefore be a warning for the reader to not trust everything (or anything) that is written. The narrator could have edited out certain parts to make himself look less guilty. Humbert also points out various times that he is following a script, which tells him what he should or shouldn’t do. At one point he writes that he “ought to have hit her across the cheekbone according to the rules of the movies”⁴⁶, and he also repeatedly refers back to the character of Aubrey McFate, who he sees as a symbol for his destiny. He believes that everything that took place was out of his hands, and already predetermined by a higher power. He was following Fate’s scenario, and if we, the readers, convict him for his actions, we condemn Fate’s will as well.

Fitting this idea of Fate guiding Humbert’s life and actions, is the repeated use of foreshadowing in the novel. In several scenes hints are given of what is going to happen next. Before Charlotte dies, Humbert mentions that “(a bad accident is to happen quite soon)” and so the reader is prepared for her death. At the same time, it also opens the window to questioning Humbert’s motives concerning her death and whether or not she really died from

an accident or if it was murder. He also hints at the crime for which he stands on trial, and he writes that “if I was really losing my mind, I might end by murdering somebody”47.

**Style**

In the foreword written by the fictional psychoanalyst John Ray, Jr., it is made clear that this Humbert’s account of the story was written in retrospect. Humbert adds different sources into his retelling, such as reports from his time at the insane asylum where he demonstrated his manipulative power over the psychoanalysts. He is also writing a journal within a journal. Since he is retelling these events based on a journal that no longer exists, he can write from a more detached point of view. It also adds to his artistry, since, as stated before, “you can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style”48. This is a way for Humbert Humbert to distract the reader, because he knows that not every detail will be added in his account, yet he wants to mask his inconsistencies from the reader by hiding them behind poetic language. As Nabokov himself states in *Strong Opinions*:

> “Reality is a very subjective affair … you never get near enough because reality is an infinitive succession of steps, levels of perception … Whatever the mind grasps; it does so with the assistance of creativity, fancy.”49

The style used by Humbert feels very prosaic, not really something that seems to be written down in a hurry, but something well-thought-out and edited. This artistic style starts from the very first lines of Humbert Humbert’s narration, when he introduced the subject of the novel:

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49 Nabokov, V. *Strong Opinions*. 


She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock.
She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita.”

The ample use of consonance and assonance introduces the readers to the poetic voice of the narrator and from the very start they are swept along by his words.

Humbert is very aware of his artistic voice, and he likes commenting on it, writing that he feels it is his “artistic duty” to not include the content of the journals of Mrs. Haze’s journals, but that in this memoir, this account of his story that we’re reading, he has decided to “tune” his style to the “tone” of Charlotte’s words. Other times, he eschews the artistry of his voice, mentioning that he is not a poet, but “only a very conscientious recorder”

Humbert is trying to find a balance between appearing as an artist playing with words and someone who records the real hard facts.

The narrator also believes himself to be very clever, and perhaps even more so than his reader, which can be concluded from him playing with the language. His wordplay leaves certain ironic hints, and it almost seems as if the narrator believes that the reader isn’t smart enough to catch them. When the name of Clare Quilty, Humbert Humbert’s double and ultimate rival, is introduced, it is connected to a play under the name of ‘The Little Nymph’. The acronym for Vladimir Nabokov, ‘Vivian Darkbloom’ is also mentioned, and as was argued above when discussing the foreword, the use of this acronym seems a way for the author to emphasize the role he has in the story. It shows the reader that these words cannot be

50 Nabokov, V. Lolita. 7.
51 Nabokov, V. Lolita. 80.
52 Nabokov, V. Lolita. 33.
trusted, because they are not real, but a construction. Lolita’s name is also mentioned here, but under ‘Dolores Quine’, connected to the play Never Talk to Strangers, which again has a very ironic and almost comical effect. Because of this Bercovich believed Lolita to be an antinovel, calling the literary work “a metafictional tissue of literary allusions […] and parodic names”\textsuperscript{53}. Instead of saying that she appeared, Humbert makes a supposed typo and writes that she “has disappeared since” in a number of plays. This mistake isn’t left unnoticed to Humbert, but instead of correcting it while writing, he asks his friend and the editor of this manuscript, “please do not correct it, Clarence” and he further continues “Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!”\textsuperscript{54}. This illustrates that Humbert is very aware of the fact that he is manipulating the language he is using and that he’s taking pleasure from it as well. The reader should be aware of this and try not to become a puppet in this master narrator’s game.

Next to using wordplay, the narrator also adds symbolic meanings to certain objects, making it very clear that this is a retrospective account. Before the scene where Humbert starts masturbating in the presence of Lolita, she is seen holding an apple over which she and Humbert play-fight. This apple could be seen as a symbol for her lost innocence, just as it did in the Bible. Several places get a specific symbolic name as well, which gives the scenes an ironic effect. At “Hourglass Lake” Humbert’s schemes seem to run out of time, while the “Enchanted Hunters Hotel” is symbolic for Humbert first raping Lolita, with him and Quilty being the “enchanted hunters” as pedophiles praying on this innocent child, who they have convinced themselves of feeling a similar attraction to them as they do for her. “Lake Climax” near “Camp Q” represent the climax that Humbert has been moving towards, his ultimate reunion with Lolita, but it also symbolizes a climactic point in the novel, because once he has her, Humbert Humbert has to try to keep her.

\textsuperscript{53} Bercovitch, “Implications of the Confessional Mode in Lolita. 206-207.
\textsuperscript{54} Nabokov, V. Lolita. 33.
Irony

In The Rhetoric of Fiction\textsuperscript{55}, Wayne C. Booth makes the following remark:

“Can we really be surprised that readers have overlooked Nabokov’s ironies in Lolita, when Humbert Humbert is given full and unlimited control over the rhetorical resources? . . .

One of the delights of this delightful, profound book is that of watching Humbert almost make a case for himself. But Nabokov has insured that many, perhaps most, of his readers will be unsuccessful, in that they will identify Humbert with the author more than Nabokov intends.”

Bran Nicol\textsuperscript{56} defines irony as “a non-literal usage of language, where what is said is contradicted by what is meant (either deliberately or unwittingly) or what is said is subverted by the particular context in which it is said”. According to Hutcheon\textsuperscript{57}, “irony can be playful as well as belittling; it can be critically constructive as well as destructive.” Booth advocated against the use of irony in novels, since he believed that it “gives trouble” understanding “the truth” behind the text. “The relationship of the ironic narrator to the author’s norms is an extremely complex one,” Booth writes, “and the norms are themselves subtle and private; and the narrator’s own mental vitality dominates the scene and wins our sympathy”\textsuperscript{58}.

Because Humbert takes the reigns when it comes to narrating his story, he has the ability to direct the audience’s sympathies. In the parts previously discussed, this irony can be found in most of the techniques Humbert makes use of. When he calls himself “Humbert the Humble”, he resorts to self-irony, not really taking himself too seriously, almost demanding

\textsuperscript{55} Booth, W. The Rhetoric of Fiction, 391.
\textsuperscript{56} Nicol, B. The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction. 13.
\textsuperscript{57} Hutcheon, L. A Theory of Parody. 32.
\textsuperscript{58} Booth, W. The Rhetoric of Fiction, 324.
that the reader does the same. Adding to this, he comments on his good intentions towards Lolita:

“My chère Dolorès! I want to protect you, dear, from all the horrors that happen to little girls in coal sheds and alley ways, and, alas, comme vous le savez trop bien, ma gentile, in the blueberry woods during the bluest of summers. Through thick and thin I will stay your guardian, and if you are good, I hope a court may legalize that guardianship before long.”

This scene reads extremely ironic, since Humbert is trying to convince his audience that he only has the best in mind when it comes to Lolita and that he wants to take care of her in the best way he can. Yet, what she should really be protected from is Humbert himself, the pedophilic predator planning to do horrendous things to this child. Later, when Clare Quilty says “I’m very fond of children myself”, it’s covered in irony due to the pedophilic nature of both men talking.

When describing the murder of Quilty, Humbert writes:

“He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us.”

His description is very ambiguous, forcing the reader to doubt the narrator’s telling. The jumbled use of syntax adds to the distorted view the audience has of the scene.

Rampton claims that if one believes that Humbert's confession is sincere, one has not only lost the game to the author, but also his "game of worlds." Understanding Humbert’s irony, therefore, allows for a more concrete understanding of the story depicted, and makes

59 Nabokov, V. *Lolita*, 147.
60 Nabokov, V. *Lolita*, 297.
the realization that we, the readers, are being swept up by the enticing words of the narrator that much more daunting. It teaches us how dangerous words can be and how they can put our own ethics into question.

**The Truth Between the Lines**

Even though Humbert Humbert is a very clever narrator who finds different ways to play on his reader’s emotions in order to manipulate them, there are moments where his defense weakens. These are the moments where the truth seems to break through, despite Humbert’s strong defenses. At one point Humbert calls Lolita “his prey”, proving that it occurs to him that he is not as innocent as he wants us to believe. His choice of words fits the image the reader has of a pedophile, with him being the predator and the child his unsuspecting victim. Lolita is not the one seducing him, rather she is the one being attacked by Humbert.

The truth is shown in certain aspects of the dialogue as well. Several times Humbert quotes Lolita in which he shows her true feelings towards him, namely that he is a “brute” and not the lover he wants to be.

“'She was on the whole an obedient little girl and I kissed her in the neck when we got back into the car. 'Don't do that,' she said looking at me with unfeigned surprise. 'Don’t drool on me. You dirty man.'”\(^{63}\)

At one point, Lolita calls their relation “incest” and she goes even further than that:

“'You chump,' she said, sweetly smiling at me. "You revolting creature. I was a daisy-fresh girl, and look what you've done to me. I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me. Oh, you dirty, dirty old man.'”\(^{64}\)

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\(^{62}\) Nabokov, V. *Lolita*. 125.

\(^{63}\) Nabokov, V. *Lolita*. 130. [own emphasis]
The reason why Humbert shows the reader this side of the story might be that he believes the reader is already persuaded by him in such a way that these incriminating thoughts by Lolita couldn’t hurt him anymore; or it could also be because he doesn’t believe the words are true. Instead, he possibly thinks it is Lolita’s way of showing her affection towards him instead of her displeasure.

At certain points in his narrative he does imply that he was aware of the fact that Lolita wasn’t as willing as he first wanted us to believe:

“to turn away from it with something akin to plain repulsion. Never did she vibrate under my touch, and a strident ‘what d’you think you are doing?’ was all I got for my pains”65

Yet, Humbert doesn’t try to address the struggles of the girl whose life he ruined. He’d rather talk about himself and this egocentric point of view translates in his relationship with the reader as well. He doesn’t belief that the reader would feel emphatic with Lolita, because as he had proved earlier on, she’s a nymphet and a successful seductress of vulnerable men. Instead, he believes the reader is sympathetic to the narrator, which is proven when he says: “Oh, do not scowl at me, reader, I do not intend to convey the impression that I did not manage to be happy”66.

Humbert also shows more honesty when he uses brackets or dashes to mark off certain parts of his thoughts. When Lolita is about to leave for camp, she comes running towards him in a scene filled with romantic symbolism and as Humbert describes:

“I hitched up the pants of my pajamas, flung the door open: and simultaneously Lolita arrived, in her Sunday frock, stamping, panting, and then she was in my

64 Nabokov, V. *Lolita*. 159.
66 Nabokov, V. *Lolita*, 188.
arms, her innocent mouth melting under the ferocious pressure of dark male jaws, my palpitating darling! The next instant I heard—her—alive, unraped—clatter downstairs.”

The suspensory dashes put a pause in the narration and allow the reader to start questioning what they're being told. The highlighted adjectives lead the reader to believe this is some kind of foreshadowing, and that Lolita will not remain “alive” and definitely not “unraped”. The use of punctuation creates a rhythm which aims to blur the temporal and narrative levels, assuring the reader’s sympathy.

In between his stylistic descriptions, the truth is hidden and Lolita remains “alive” and “unraped”, yet not for long. Here he suggests that if they had more time and if her mother hadn’t been waiting downstairs, things might have been different. His use of the word “rape” also suggests a certain awareness of his actions and that even though he wants to imagine this moment as a part of their epic romance, it would in fact be rape if he slept with her, despite what he wants us to believe. Later, when he tells Lolita that she will attend Beardsley college, Humbert the narrator adds her response in brackets, in which she says:

“(swell chance... I'd be a sap if I took your opinion seriously... Stinker... You can't boss me... I despise you... and so forth)”

By writing his thoughts in between brackets, it almost seems as if he wants to add them as an afterthought, not worth paying much attention to. But they actually reveal to the reader that what we get here is not a story of love, but a story of resistance. Humbert is a predator and not some misunderstood outsider seduced by a clever young girl: his narration is both unreliable and untrustworthy.

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67 Nabokov, V. *Lolita*, 73. [own emphasis]
**LOLITA: THE FILM (1962)**

**STANLEY KUBRICK AND ‘CINEMIZING’ THE NOVEL**

In 1958 Stanley Kubrick and his producing partner James B. Harris bought the rights to Vladimir Nabokov’s 1955 novel *Lolita*. For the screenplay, Kubrick decided that the best way to go would be to use the words of the novelist himself, so he offered Nabokov to write it. Yet, after a first meeting, Nabokov turned Kubrick down. In the foreword to his published version of the *Lolita* script, Nabokov wrote that “the idea of tampering with my own novel caused me only revulsion”\(^69\).

A few months after this rejection, Kubrick sent Nabokov a telegram renewing the offer. This led to another meeting between the two, which resulted in an “amiable battle of suggestion and counter-suggestion on how to cinemize the novel”. In the summer of 1960, Nabokov finished his first draft, a manuscript that counted more than 400 pages. This didn’t really work for Kubrick, so he decided to write the screenplay himself. During his time filming, the director remained fairly secretive, not only to the public, but to the author of the novel as well. “I had discovered that Kubrick was a great director, that his *Lolita* was a first-rate film with magnificent actors, and that only ragged odds and ends of my script had been used,”\(^70\) Nabokov later wrote.

When the film came out in 1962, it turned out that Stanley Kubrick had stripped out the backstory and most of the narration. He had also given Quilty a bigger role and due to censorship restrictions he had to raise Lolita’s age from twelve to fifteen. As Richard Corliss wrote, “The book is about child abuse; the movie is about the wiles a teenage girl might have learned in those two years: an awareness of her power over men”. Kubrick did decide to give Nabokov credit for the screenplay though, which earned him an Academy Award nomination.

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\(^69\) Found in *Film, Literature: “Vladimir Nabokov’s Script”* on openculture.com.

\(^70\) Webster, P. *Love and Death in Kubrick*. 11.
for best adapted screenplay in 1963. The author was generally positive about the film. He did regret the time he spent writing the manuscript, since “most of the sequences were not really better than those I had so carefully composed for Kubrick”.71

**UNRELIABLE NARRATION IN THE FILM**

Unreliable narration in film is more difficult to establish than in a novel. Per Krogh Hansen pointed out the four ways in which film can establish an unreliable narrator: the technique of voice-over narration, the point of view-shot, the use of extradiegetic sound effects and music and showing the scenes in alignment with the focalizer’s perspective.

When looking at the tagline of the film (*How did they ever make a move of Lolita?*)72 and at how the filmmaker translated the unreliability of Humbert’s narration onto the screen, the question of ‘how’ becomes highlighted. To help find and answer to this question, I will be looking at these four techniques and how they add to the unreliability in the film.

From the very first sequence, the audience is set to believe that it is not Humbert Humbert who is the bad guy in this story, but Clare Quincy, the stumbling fool on whom Humbert Humbert seeks revenge. Kubrick’s film adaptation is set as a frame story, starting and finishing with the murder of Quincy. Because the film changes up the chronological order we get in the novel, the audience is likely to believe that Humbert is the hero and Quincy the villain, even though they’re both pedophiles wanting to use Lolita for their own pleasure. Quincy is being pursued and he eventually gets killed by Humbert and since the scene is set out to seem as some sort of vengeance, the audience is led to believe that Humbert isn’t killing someone purely for the pleasure for it. The viewer rather believes that the murder is a necessary evil, and Humbert is thus justified for killing him.

71 Mazierska, E. *Nabokov's cinematic afterlife*. 23.
72 See Appendix B, image 1.
The Voice-over Technique

Even though film does not narrate a story in a similar manner than a novel, a narrative voice can be made present. The use of the voice-over technique would be the most obvious way of telling a story in the medium of cinema, fitting Kühn’s idea of a “verbal narrative instance” that does the telling. According to Kozloff, voice-over narration exists out of “oral statements, conveying any portion of a narrative, spoken by an unseen speaker situated in a space and time other than that simultaneously being presented by the images on the screen”⁷³. Kubrick believed that in film, using expositional dialogue scenes to tell necessary facts is often tiresome; thus, instead of giving this info through a conversation between his characters, the filmmaker chose to work with voice-over narration, believing it to be “a perfectly legitimate and economical way of conveying story information which does not need dramatic weight and which would otherwise be too bulky to dramatize”⁷⁴.

The only character in Kubrick’s Lolita who speaks to the audience through this narrative technique is Humbert Humbert, showing us that this is his story, seen through his eyes, focalized through him, and thus eventually also possibly manipulated by him. The voice-over endows him with “a sense of agency and therefore power in the story”⁷⁵. As Kubrick stated, the voice-overs are used in service of the plot and they contextualize those sequences that seem disconnected from the other ones. Yet, according to Mario Falsetto⁷⁶, only five of the thirty-five narrative units involve Humbert’s voice-over. Humbert therefore doesn’t get a lot of time in the film to speak to the audience directly to make them to side with him, but adding the other cinematic techniques used in the film, the audience does find themselves sympathizing with Humbert Humbert.

⁷³ Kozloff, S. Invisible Storytellers, 5.
⁷⁴ Ciment, M. “Kubrick on Barry Lyndon”.
⁷⁵ McQuiston, K. We’ll Meet Again, 39.
⁷⁶ Falsetto, M. Stanley Kubrick: A Narrative and Stylistic Analysis. 86.
The first time Humbert talks directly to the audience, it is when he is looking for a place to rent. The film as a whole does not have the same retrospective structure as the novel, and everything seems to be happening in the present. Yet, the first time Humbert speaks directly to the audience through voice-over narration, he is talking in the past-perfect tense, suggesting that the images we see are happening in the past, and the voice is talking to us from the present. This creates quite an unsettling effect, making the viewers question what they’re hearing in accordance with what the images try to show them. The voice-over of Humbert Humbert therefore adds to the unreliability of the narrative voice established in the film.

Multiple times, the voice-over is not just Humbert’s expression of thought – him internalizing what he is feeling – but actually his narrative voice reading textual fragments out loud. Humbert reads from his diary in which he expresses his obsession for Lolita for the very time. The audience will presumably have already been aware of Humbert’s feelings towards Lolita, due to the excessive eye-contact and eye-lingering gazes, but this is the very first time that the viewer’s assumptions are confirmed. The effect of affirming Humbert’s pedophilic desire for Lolita through voice-over is that the audience feels as if they have become his confidants. The lack of an added soundtrack contributes to the secrecy of this confession and the audience develops an alliance with the narrator, thus becoming more reluctant to condemn him and his actions. When Humbert reads Charlotte’s love letter to him aloud, it is first suggested that it is not her, but Lolita writing it and when Humbert becomes aware of this misunderstanding, Humbert’s voice gets interrupted by his continuous laughter. He makes her words laughable, and the audience is thus more likely to follow him in his opinion that a relationship with Lolita’s mother is indeed ridiculous. Not his connection to the girl, but his union with Charlotte becomes absurd and unacceptable.
In the novel, Humbert muses about killing Charlotte and benefiting from her death by becoming Lolita’s sole guardian. Yet, when she dies, he claims it all to be an accident. In a similar manner, the Humbert in Kubrick’s film adaptation fantasizes about getting rid of Charlotte to get easier access to her daughter. In a voice-over, he tries finding excuses to tell the police if they questioned him once Charlotte gets shot by her late-husband’s gun. “She said it wasn’t loaded,” he would claim. The way in which he thinks about possibly manipulating the police, should open the door for the audience to question Humbert manipulating them as well. It should also cast doubt on her actual death, because it seems to be a bit too much of a coincidence that Charlotte happens to get hit by a car when it becomes most convenient for Humbert Humbert.

The voice-overs however are few and far between, putting into question whether the narrator knows the whole plot of the story as the Humbert in the novel seems to know everything. It isn’t until the ending that the voice-over narration of the story’s protagonist acknowledges the presence of Clare Quilty, while the audience has been aware of his existence from the very start, through Stanley Kubrick’s framing and ironic camera positions. Since Humbert is not as aware of the future as he is in the novel, it seems more likely that he is less manipulative as well. It seems as if the unreliability in the film has not fallen on the shoulders of Humbert, but on those of “filmic narrative agent”77.

Music

When considering most of Stanley Kubricks films, we can conclude that the music score is an important aspect of the films. Paul Charlier, an Australian composer, said the following about Kubrick’s musical vision:

77 See section Theoretical Framework, 6.
“what was innovative was not so much his use of classical music, but that he used extant recordings of classical and modern orchestral music. The effect was profound in that over time the influence was to free directors from the mould of how music, especially orchestral music, was composed, produced and incorporated within film.”

For Lolita, he chose to combine newly written compositions with an orchestral arrangement of preexisting tunes. Nelson Riddle was hired to help work on the music in the film, already familiar with the medium because of his previous work on the 1960’s Ocean’s Eleven, directed by Lewis Milestone.

In the film, three main theme songs are used to accompany specific scenes, adding an ironic undertone. The love theme is first used in the opening scene and was written by James Harris’ brother, Bob Harris. The song begins rather low in the orchestra, slowly building through the use of an arpeggio – a chord broken into a sequence of notes – and finally it develops into the theme, which is played by “piano and strings in a warmly romantic vein”.

The song represents how Humbert Humbert himself views his relationship with Lolita: it is a romantic, passionate connection that is undeniably powerful and ultimately, inevitable. By using this type of song to introduce Humbert’s relationship with Lolita, the audience is manipulated into believing their connection is something deeper and instead of seeing their union as criminal and unethical, it becomes romanticized.

The second time the love theme is used, is when Lolita is about to leave for Camp Q. The song starts playing as Lolita runs up the stairs towards Humbert and jumps in his arms in a loving embrace. Again, the appearance of the song suggests a different kind of relationship. When Humbert finally loses Lolita, the love theme is subtly changed and emphasis the ambiguity of their fate, with the music becoming louder as Humbert leaves the hospital, the

78 Paul Charlier quoted in Byrnes, P. “Kubrick Knew the Score and He Used It”.
79 Gengaro, L. Listening to Stanley Kubrick, 50.
piano solo taking over and the cue eventually ending on an unresolved cadence. The love theme comes and goes during the following years in which Humbert is looking for his lost ‘love’, never to completely return again.

A second theme song is Quilty’s. His song sounds like one you would hear at a carousel, played with an organ and a dulcimer. When it is first introduced in the murder scene, it represents the disarray of the room as well as Humbert’s disheveled and confused state. He is desperate to finally get his revenge. Quilty’s theme returns at Beardsley, when Quilty awaits Humbert disguised as Dr. Zemph. The presence of the theme song is a sign for the audience that the doctor is not who he says he is, even though Humbert is not made aware of this. Because the viewer and the main character have different levels of awareness in this scene, it makes the audience more inclined to sympathize with Humbert and to even pity him. Since the opening sequence, Quilty has been made out as the villain, and because he can successfully manipulate Humbert, the audience sides with the latter even more. The song therefore is a way to manipulate the audience into feeling sorry for our main character and acquitting him for his eventual crime of killing Clare Quilty.

The last theme used in Kubrick’s film adaptation is known as Lolita Ya-Ya and it is first heard playing when Lolita is introduced to both the audience and Humbert. It is a pop song written by Riddle and Harris, and was recorded as a single, featuring the actress portraying Lolita, Sue Lyn. The fact that the singer and the actress are one and the same, adds a certain metafictional aspect to the scene, as well as a hint of irony similar to the opening sequence in which Quilty states that he is “Spartacus” (Peter Sellers starred in the film). About the song, Levinson said that it “perfectly captured the humor of Humbert’s lust for the teenybopper”\(^8^0\), but at the same time it also adds a “satirical commentary on the insipid simplicity of contemporary popular music”. The song is thus Lolita’s song, it is young and

\(^8^0\) Gengaro, L. Listening to Stanley Kubrick, 51-2.
fresh, countering Humbert’s age and sophistication. The song is used in those scenes in which a connection between Lolita and Humbert is suggested. Their first meeting needs to be viewed as a ‘meet cute’, “a cute, charming, or amusing first encounter between romantic partners”81, and every other scene in which the song is being played has to add to this first contact, adding to the romance between the two of them.

These three songs form the main basis for the music underscore of the film, but they are not the only songs used. Their names add a certain comical irony to the scenes in which they play, such as There’s No You when Lolita dances with Kenny at the Summer dance, or The Last Martini when Charlotte dies. Yet, the name of these songs don’t really influence the audience’s perception of the scenes, because they only hear the music and not the title of the song. But I wouldn’t discard the meaning behind the songs completely, since the titles do carry a certain similarity to the wordplay in Nabokov’s novel, of which meaning the reader is not always aware as well. The audience isn’t necessarily knowledgeable to this added irony, but they can become aware of it if they go deeper into the score and look at the track list that was added with the film’s publication.

**Camera’s Eye**

The camera in Stanley Kubrick’s film often adds an ironic undertone to the scene it shows. By presenting a discrepancy between the image and the dialogue between the characters, the eye of the camera calls attention to the disconnection between what is shown and what is said, making the narration more unreliable. The camera often adds double entendres to the scene and they create a “dramatic compression through the use of objective correlatives which take on symbolic significance, replacing words”82. Before setting eyes on

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81 Definition “meet cute” in *Merriam Webster*.
82 Burns, D. “Pistols and Cherry Pies”, 249.
Lolita, Humbert Humbert is quite reluctant to Charlotte’s offer of moving into her spare bedroom. When Charlotte then asks him what made him change his mind, Humbert replies “our cherry pies”, with the camera giving a close-up view of Lolita. This suggests that what he says is not what he actually means, but that the cherry pies are symbolic for his lust for the girl. Later, when Humbert, Charlotte and Lolita are at a drive-in cinema watching The Curse of Frankenstein, Kubrick gives the audience a “shock cut to the face of the monster”\(^83\), which stands in juxtaposition with a close-up shot of Humbert’s face, adding a symbolical connotation that the man is a lustful demon as well\(^84\).

The camera is used to add humor to the scenes, which would probably otherwise be perceived by the 1960s audience as too provocative and scandalous. By adding a comical aspect to the scenes, the severity of Humbert’s crimes is reduced and the viewer registers his actions as less harmful than they really are. Kubrick uses close-up to focus on the character’s facial expressions, showing inconsistencies between the scene enfolding in front of us and the character’s reaction to it. James Mason, the actor portraying the main character, has developed facial and gestural mannerisms that show Humbert’s emotional involvement and they add to his vulnerability when it comes to Lolita.

According to Skinner, “an oft overlooked but crucial aspect of any character based scene”\(^85\), are eye-lines. During the Summer Dance, Humbert’s eyes constantly follow Lolita around and these eye-shots add to the unreliability of his character, since he’s trying to show to the outer world that he’s interested in Charlotte, while his eyes tell the truth about his true feelings.

Even though Humbert Humbert is the protagonist of the film, the audience seems to get more information than him. The camera makes the audience aware very early on that

\(^83\) Kovačević, D. “Narrator, Intertextuality and Humor”, 27.
\(^84\) See Appendix B, image 2-3.
\(^85\) Skinner, C. “Stanley Kubrick’s Cinematic Lolita”.
Clare Quilty is going to be an important character in the unfolding of the story, adding a foreshadowing effect. In the novel, the reader gets certain hints that Clare Quilty is present, but they only become aware of his importance once Humbert knows about it as well. In the film, this is done differently and Kubrick made the choice to give Quilty, portrayed by Peter Sellers, a bigger role than in the novel. First of all, the film starts and ends with the presence of Quilty. The murder scene frames the story of Humbert and Lolita, and makes the audience pay more attention to those scenes in which Quilty is mentioned as well. Since Quilty is going to be murdered, the viewer knows that he is going to be a central character and they look for him in the scenes.

After Humbert has finished reading Charlotte’s letter in Lolita’s room, he falls on the bed in blissful joy, since he sees this as an opportunity to get closer to Lolita and become a regular fixture in her life. The camera shows another possibility, though. It moves away from the bed and zooms in on a picture on the wall of Clare Quilty, the playwright. Unlike Humbert, Quilty doesn’t have to scheme his way into Lolita’s life, because he is already a part of it. The camera thus suggests a different ending to Humbert’s fantasies, one less fortunate for him.

Later, when Humbert has retrieved Lolita from camp and is checking into a hotel room, Quilty is shown in the background. During Quilty and Humbert’s conversation, once again only the audience gets to see his face and since they’re already familiar with his looks from the opening scene of the film, they’re also aware of his role in the story. This adds to the feeling that Quilty is playing with Humbert, making the audience more sympathetic to Humbert, who is oblivious to what is really going on.

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86 See Appendix B, image 4.
87 See Appendix B, image 5.
Lost in translation

Even though the techniques mentioned above are used to establish the unreliability of the film’s narration, it doesn’t have the desired effect that Nabokov accomplished in the novel. Humbert’s narrative voice is haunting in the way in which it accomplishes to manipulate the reader into siding with and rooting for the protagonist to win against his rival, Clare Quilty. The reader’s ethics are to a certain extent flipped and they become sympathetic with Humbert’s woes in seducing and losing Lolita.

In the film, the audience is sympathetic to Humbert’s story in a similar manner, but for different reasons that the protagonist’s successful manipulations. One of the reasons why the relationship between Lolita and Humbert seems less revolting, is because Sue Lyons – the actress playing Lolita – doesn’t seem like the young, innocent girl of the book. She lacks the immaturity her character has in the novel, so that Humbert’s obsession with her seems less criminal and leans more towards the romantic. Kubrick had to work with certain constraints when making this film adaptation, one of them being the input of a censor “who hated to think that a film might sexualize a girl who was obviously far too young for adult sexuality”88. But this is just the point the novel is trying to make, so by removing this aspect in the film, it also reduces the power of ethical unreliability by the narrative voice. “Lyon’s maturity reduces the tension in the first half of the film, when we wonder if Humbert will succeed in ‘seducing’ Lolita, because Lolita seems such a willing and capable party in it,” so the reasoning for creating an unreliable narrator seems less apparent as well. In the novel, Humbert is unreliable because he is defending himself for his seduction of Lolita, as well as for the murder of Quilty. In the film, the audience is already aware of the fact that Humbert is going to kill Quilty, but it doesn’t put him in a villainous position, instead the viewer looks at him as the

88 Follett, K. Lolita: Review.
hero of the story and since Lolita seems old enough to be seduced, the unreliability established by the filmic narrative agent, seems an unnecessary addition.

It is my conclusion that unreliable narration is established in the film by the filmic narrative agent, but that the effect it has on its audience is less daunting than the technique used by Nabokov in the novel. Because the film is set-up as a frame story, the audience is directed to side with Humbert from the very first scene. Humbert Humbert talks to us, the viewers, several times using the voice-over technique, creating a discrepancy between the present and the past because of his retrospective telling and it also raises the question whether what we hear is truth, or the protagonist’s vision on the truth, illustrated by him musing about killing Charlotte, who then later dies in a supposed accident. The music used in the film changes this story of pedophilic obsession into an ironic interpretation of love. It also makes the audience aware of Quilty’s manipulations, making it arguable that it is him and not Humbert who is the unreliable narrator of the film. Follet states that “Sellers’ playfulness is such a brilliant, puncturing foil to Humbert’s stuffy pretentiousness that he easily wins us over—we can see the story through Quilty’s eyes, understanding Humbert for the awful fool he is.” I wouldn’t agree with the idea that he is the only way in which unreliable narration is established in the film, but he does add to the audiences’ sympathetic reception towards Humbert’s wrong-doings, making it easier to acquit him for his crimes. Lastly, the camera’s eye ironically shows a different story by making the audience pay attention to more than that which is told to us, and by foreshadowing the ending of the plot. Yet, even though these techniques help make Humbert a more sympathetic character, the audience’s response to the manipulation is not one of shock by the way in which their ethical values have been turned upside down, as it did in the novel. Instead, the viewer seems to take a more complacent role, finding the manipulation more comical than terrifying.
Lolita wasn’t the only novel Stanley Kubrick decided to adapt to the medium of film. A Clockwork Orange is an interesting second case study to look into, since it establishes unreliability and an unreliable narrator as well, but in different ways from the previously discussed work.

In this part I will look at how the concept of the unreliable narrator comes into play in Anthony Burgess’ novel and how Stanley Kubrick uses the technique in his film adaptation. First I will focus on the novel published in 1962 by giving a brief summary of the story and then I will focus on the way unreliable narration is established. Then, I will look at Stanley Kubrick’s film adaptation of the 1972 cult classic.

Before continuing with the analyses, it should be mentioned that when quoting from both the novel and the film, it will become clear to the reader that the language in the story isn’t considered to be ‘normal’ English. Burgess created a new type of language, called Nadsat, which is a variation of English including both Russian influences as words from the Cockney dialect. This different language style, and the function it has when considering the unreliable narration, will be addressed in more detail later on.

A CLOCKWORK ORANGE: THE NOVEL (1962)

ALEX’S ULTRA-VIOLENT RETELLING: A SUMMARY

Anthony Burgess’ novel of 1962 opens with the line “What’s it going to be then, eh?”, which starts a story that leaves the reader questioning just that: What is going to happen next in this dystopian ultra-violent world? The main character, Alex, roams the streets at night with his three friends or ‘droogs’ as he calls them, beating up random strangers and raping
unsuspecting women. They have their own costumes, their own violent behavior and they use their own language.

At one of their violent outings, they arrive at a cottage nicknamed ‘HOME’, where a writer and his wife live. Alex and his men beat up the man and rape and assault his wife right in front of her husband. Afterwards, they go back to their favorite hangout, the Korova Milkbar, making it clear that this is just an ordinary day for the youth in this distorted world. When his own men start to question his authority, Alex feels the need to step up his game. They go rob the Mansion of Manse, and Alex’ so-called droogs, turn against him and he ends up arrested.

In prison, Alex finds comfort in religion and especially the closeness to its music, for which Alex has shown an intense passion. After being locked up for over two years, he is offered the opportunity to take part in an aversion therapy using Ludovico’s Technique, in which he is shown images of violence while taking medicines that make him sick. The therapy doesn’t have the desired effect, however. Instead of only feeling ill when he comes into contact with violence, Alex also gets sick whenever he feels joy or attraction to things. One of his greatest pleasures, music, is taken away from him because of this. The question that is emphasized by this is uttered by the prison chaplain:

“Is a man who chooses the bad perhaps in some way better than a man who has the good imposed upon him?”

When Alex is released from prison, the side effects of his aversion therapy become a big problem. Two policemen, who happened to be two of his ex-droogs, beat him up and leave him for dead. Ironically, he finds shelter in the cottage nicknamed ‘HOME’, where he finds the husband, now in a wheelchair and with a dead wife. At first, the man doesn’t

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89 Burgess, A. *A Clockwork Orange*. 71.
recognize him, but when he does, he wants to use him in a propagandistic action against the
government that endorses Ludovico’s Technique. They drug him, leave him in a room and
play his favorite music, almost forcing him to commit suicide. Alex can fight against the urge,
but ends up hurt nevertheless.

In the hospital, Alex is told he is cured, thus getting back to the state he was in at the
beginning of the novel. He is considered a victim and gets off scot-free. The last chapter
shows Alex after his stay in the hospital. He shows maturity when he bumps against someone
from his past who has gotten married and is now clearly not a young delinquent anymore, but
rather a mature adult. Alex’s love for the ultra-violent seems to be a thing from the past, and
the novel ends in a rather uplifting tone, suggesting that Alex has grown up and is ready to
leave his criminal past behind him.

The novel, however, has two endings. It was Anthony Burgess’ intention to have a
novel with twenty-one chapters, fitting with the age a man or woman reaches the age of legal
adulthood. Yet, Burgess’ American publishers found this final chapter, as the author himself
put it, “a sellout, bland, and veddy veddy British”90. So, in the American version of the novel,
this last chapter has been removed. Burgess’ final chapter found in the British edition, offered
a tamer cure than the one provided in the twentieth chapter. Alex is three years older and he
finds that the mischief that he used to love in his youth, now no longer excites him. “He
grows bored with violence and recognizes that human energy is better expended on creation
than destruction. My young hoodlum comes to the revelation of the need to get something
done in life,”91 Burgess writes. In the American version, however, the potential of violence
remains. The State’s damage to Alex is reversed, which means that he doesn’t get sick at the
thoughts of his pleasures anymore. Deleting the twenty-first chapter doesn’t show Alex’s

90 Maruna, S. Making Good. 86.
growth and therefore it has a more pessimistic ending, since after everything Alex went through, his love for violent behavior is still there. “The twenty-first chapter gives the novel the quality of genuine fiction,” he concluded, “an art founded on the principle that human beings change … The American or Kubrickian Orange is a fable; the British or world one is a novel”92.

UNRELIABLE NARRATION IN THE NOVEL

Characterizing Alex and Manipulating the Reader

No foreword is used to introduce the reader to the voice of A Clockwork Orange’s main character Alex, so instead we are immediately immersed into his world and his worldview. Like Humbert Humbert, Alex tells his story from a first-person narrative perspective, which adds to the sincerity of his words. He tells us in great detail about his everlasting suffering as a member of this distorted society in which he has to resort to violence – even though he does seem to take a lot of pleasure out of it.

Using the first-person to narrate this story adds to the sympathetic reaction the reader has: it makes it easier to understand that Alex is the clockwork orange the title of the novel refers to, something not really fitting together and as Burgess himself put it, something that “has the appearance of an organism lovely with colour and juice but is in fact only a clockwork toy to be wound up by God or the Devil or (since this is increasingly replacing both) the Almighty State”. It is the “application of a mechanistic morality to a living organism oozing with juice and sweetness”, someone with robotic mannerisms, yet still human. As Alex himself questions after the Ludovico treatment:

“Me, me, me. Am I like just some animal or dog ... like a clockwork orange?”93

Using this intimate perspective to tell his story makes it easier for Alex to put himself in the position of the victim, potentially manipulating the reader into reacting more sympathetically and empathetically towards him and his crimes.

Yet it cannot be ignored that Alex does take a lot of pleasure out of his violent acts, seeming to thrive on them and the power he has over his group of droogs. As Alex himself says: “But what I do I do because I like to do”94. He describes the gory details of his crimes by using aestheticizing language, showing us that he takes a lot of delight in the violence he bestows on others and that he considers it to be something beautiful, a form of art:

“My endeavour shall be, in such future as stretches out its snowy and lilywhite arms to me before the nozh overtakes or the blood spatters its final chorus in twisted metal and smashed glass on the highroad, to not get loveted again. Which is fair speaking.”

This justification for his criminal actions should show us that Alex is not a reliable source, fitting within Phelan’s classification of misreporting and misevaluating, since the former is “typically a consequence of the narrator’s lack of knowledge or mistaken values”95, which then almost always occurs with the latter. Here we see how Alex’s values are mistaken, since he equates violence with beauty. He has a distorted outlook on life and his ethical perspective seems off balance. He also has a very biased sense of justice, which becomes clear when he hears about the death of one of his old gang members, Georgie:

93 Burgess, A. A Clockwork Orange, 94.
94 Burgess, A. A Clockwork Orange, 31.
95 Phelan, J. Living to Tell About it. 51
“The starry murderer had got off with Self Defence, as was really right and proper. Georgie being killed, though it was more than one year after me being caught by the millicents, it all seemed right and proper and like Fate.”

These psychological issues make it all very clear that he cannot be trusted with telling us his own tale and he should therefore be considered to have an unreliable voice.

Stepping outside of the story world, it is quite interesting to point out that the name Burgess chose for his main character, “Alex”, can have multiple meanings. The name is a “comic reduction” of the Greek conqueror Alexander the Great, where it stood for “defending men” from the Greek αλεξω (alexo) "to defend, help" and ανηρ (aner) "man" (genitive ανδρος). This is quite contradictory to what Alex’s role in society really is. The name could also be read as ‘a-lex’, lex being the Latin word for law, thus suggesting lawlessness. Choosing to give the main character this name thus adds a certain paradoxical potential to his actions as well.

Alex tries to get the reader on his side by showing us that he is not “all bad”. He has some redeeming qualities, specifically his love and passion for music. In several scenes the reader gets into Alex’s mind as he describes a piece of music he’s passionate about and which causes him to reconnect with his feelings. It is shown very clearly that Alex is not a fan of all music, though. When an old, drunken man is singing outside of the Korova Milkbar, Alex stoically watches as Dim punches him and beats him up, afterwards leaving the man lying in a pool of his own blood. In contrast with this, Alex has a very different reaction when Dim badmouths a girl singing the opera Das Bettzeug by Freidrich Gitterfenster in the same bar previously mentioned. Instead of allowing Dim to speak his vulgar words about the girl and her song, Alex smacks him. This, combined with him describing to us how the song gives him goosebumps, shows the reader that he is affected by this particular art form.

96 Burgess, A. A Clockwork Orange, 58.
“It was the music, see. I get all bezoomy when any veck interferes with a ptitsa singing, as it might be.”

The love and affection he has for classical music seems very out of character after we’ve been able to witness him being so very violent and it throws the reader off. By juxtaposing violence and classical music, Alex is trying to show us how there is beauty in both of them and by doing so he’s looking for a way to manipulate the reader into believing that his violent tendencies are a form of art as well, and not something we need to condemn him for so harshly. Whenever Alex is describing his fondness for classical music, he makes use of poetic devices such as metaphors, similes, exaggerated diction and sensory details to clearly emphasis that he believes this to be a higher power. The following quote illustrates this:

“Oh it was gorgeousness and gorgeosity made flesh. The trombones crunched redgold under my bed, and behind my gulliver the trumpets three-wise silverflamed, and there by the door the timps rolling through my guts and out again crunched like candy thunder. Oh, it was wonder of wonders. And then, a bird of like rarest spun heavenmetal, or like silvery wine flowing in a spaceship, gravity all nonsense now, came the violin solo above all the other strings, and those strings were like a cage of silk round my bed. Then flute and oboe bored, like worms of like platinum, into the thick thick toffee gold and silver. I was in such bliss, my brothers.”

By seeing the beauty in music and then later connecting it back to violence, he is trying to argue for the aestheticization of violence.

Another way in which it becomes clear that Alex should not be trusted, is shown by him constantly lying to authority figures, which suggests to the reader that he may be lying to

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98 Burgess, A. *A Clockwork Orange*, 27.
them as well. When the police arrest him at Victoria Flatblock, after breaking into the house and having assaulted the woman living there, he doesn’t come forward with the truth. Instead, he attributes all of the crimes to his friends, saying:

“Bog murder you, you vonny stinking bratchnies. Where are the others? Where are my stinking traitorous droogs? One of my cursed grahzny bratties chained me on the glazzies. Get them before they get away. It was all their idea, brothers. They like forced me to do it. I’m innocent, Bog butcher you.”

In prison, Alex manipulates the chaplain by making him believe he has become a devoted Christian, investing most of his time in studying the Bible. This is yet another one of Alex’s manipulative tricks, since he gains easier access to the classical music he seems to adore when joining the Bible studies. By lying to the chaplain, Alex gets what he wants, so why would he not lie to the reader to make him seem more sympathetic than he actually is?

During a couple of their most violent acts, Alex and his group of droogs put on masks to disguise themselves.

“We put our maskies on – new jobs these were, real horroshow, wonderfully done really; they were like face of historical personalities (they gave you the name when you bought) and I had Disraeli, Pete had Elvis Presley, Georgie had Henry VIII and poor old Dim had a poet veck called Peebee Shelley; they were a real like disguise, hair and all, and they were some very special plastic veshch so you could roll up when you’d done with it and hide it in your boot”

The use of these masks has different functions, one of them being that it creates a form of protection. Taking on another face allows the group to bestow violence on others, without being recognized as the culprits. It gives them a secret identity. It also gives Alex a sense of

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entitlement, since Disraeli was a 19th century British Prime Minister, wearing his face as a mask gives him the power to govern over his group and do the things he wants to do because he feels he has the right to do them. The mask makes him an authoritative figure. Lastly, the masks are also very accessible. After using it, Alex can throw it away quickly if he’s ever in a hurry and afterwards he can easily decide who to be next.

All of this shows the reader how easy it is for Alex to become someone else, making us question if he is really portraying himself as he is, or if he is taking on another’s identity in his narration as well. What mask is Alex truly wearing?

**Alex: The Narrator**

Throughout Alex’s retelling of the story, he consistently addresses the reader making it clear that this is a story being told to us by a not so impartial narration. By calling the reader his “brothers”, he tries to establish a bond between himself and us, implicating us in his actions. The ending of the book emphasis that Alex believes his readers to be “one of us” by directly addressing them:

“That’s what it’s going to be then, brothers, as I come to the like end of this tale. You have been everywhere with your little droog Alex, suffering with him, and you have viddied some of the most grahzny bratchnies old Bog ever made, all on to your old droog Alex. And all it was was that I was young. But now as I end this story, brothers, I am not young, not no longer, oh no. Alex like groweth up, oh yes.

But where I itty now, O my brothers, is all on my oddy knocky, where you cannot go. Tomorrow is all like sweet flowers and the turning vonny earth and the stars and the old Luna up there and your old droog Alex all on his oddy knocky seeking like a mate. And all that cal. A terrible grahzny vonny world, really, O my brothers. And so farewell from your little droog. And to all others
in this story profound shooms of lipmusic brrrrrr. And they can kiss my shames.

But you, O my brothers, remember sometimes thy little Alex that was. Amen.

And all that cal.101

As can be seen from the quote above, Alex repeatedly refers to himself in the third person as well. This is, as was mentioned in the analysis of Nabokov’s Lolita, a way for him to distance himself from the narrated events, and it adds a comical aspect to the violence. When describing a scene in which he lures two young preteen girls of about ten years old back to his house in order to drug and rape them, he calls himself our “Faithful Narrator”102. Yet, when talking about the implications that his actions have, he seems less faithful than he wants us to believe he actually is. When writing that the girls “hardly feel very much”, he is trying to make his actions less severe and he is trying to come up with excuses telling us that he was “very very drunken”, making it seem as if he is more a Narrator in Denial, than a Faithful one. It seems as if he only refers to himself whenever he needs the reader to feel extra sympathetic towards him, for example after he got arrested he states: “I was not your handsome young Narrator anymore”103, cue the tears.

The way in which A Clockwork Orange has been structured, suggests that the narration of this story has been well-thought out and premeditated. The novel has been divided into three parts, which could be seen following the Christian cyclical structure of sin, punishment and redemption. This is in alignment with the message of the book, emphasizing the importance of choice and free will in the lives of human beings. Each of these three parts have seven chapters and the regularity in its structure, could perhaps be meant to juxtapose the irregularity of the world it proposes. Several scenes in the novel are also mirrored to one another, the most obvious one being the repetition of the opening line “What’s it going to be

101 Burgess, A. A Clockwork Orange, 141. [own emphasis]
102 Burgess, A. A Clockwork Orange, 33.
103 Burgess, A. A Clockwork Orange, 51.
then, eh?”. It underscores the symmetry of the novel, as well as reinforcing the theme. In the first part, the sentence symbolizes Alex choice in deciding whether he wants to be good or not, while in the second part this choice seems to have been taken away from him, making him a pawn in the government’s games. When the question is posed in the third part of the novel it almost carries a whimsical connotation, since Alex has been completely stripped from all of his choices and the question is therefore rather empty and hollow.

Besides the structure, the novel also uses foreshadowing dreams to point out that this story is happening in retrospect and therefore more likely to have been adapted to suit the narrator’s goal of getting the reader to side with him. In the first part of the novel, Alex dreams of his friend Georgie as a military general, allegorically representing Alex’s own fears of losing his authority over the group as well as losing the social security they provide him. In the next chapter, this dream comes true when his droogs pronounce a “new way” of doing things, which then eventually ends with Alex being arrested at the end of the first part. While listening to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, he starts fantasizing:

“O my brothers, I was in like a big field with all flowers and trees, and there was
a like goat with a man’s litso playing away on a like flute.”

To the classical composition, he adds these words:

“Boy, thou uproarious shark of heaven,
Slaughter of Elysium, Hearts on fire, aroused, enraptured
We will tolchock you on the rot and kick your grahzny vonny bum.”

The flowers in his dream represent the good, while the flute could be considered to be a representation of the lustful side of one’s personality. Even though he is surrounded by “all flowers and trees”, his lustful desires are still present and his ultra-violent tendencies are

104 Burgess, A. A Clockwork Orange, 49.
always there. Other people’s fantasies seem to come true, as well. Alex’s father has a dream, which he narrated to his son, saying that:

“I saw you lying on the street and you had been beaten by the other boys…And, you were like helpless in your blood and you couldn’t fight back.”

The same scene takes place after Alex is released back into the real world. He is beaten up by two policemen, who happen to be ex-members of his gang. The dreams thus seem to be a premonition for what is to come.

The use of these dream sequences is quite similar to Humbert Humbert blaming Faith for his actions in Lolita. In both novels, they distance the narrator from the actions, making them seem less implicated in their crimes. Since both novels were told retrospectively, it also adds to the unreliability of both characters since they could have easily added these elements to look like mere pawns in destiny’s game.

Similar to Nabokov’s appearance in Lolita as Vivian Darkbloom, Anthony Burgess’ makes himself present in A Clockwork Orange by creating a character based on himself. F. Alexander is a satirical interpretation of the writer and the novel we are reading. When Alex picks up the manuscript he finds in F. Alexander’s study, it also happens to be called ‘A Clockwork Orange’, and our protagonist starts making fun of the title in a similar manner in which the reader of Burgess’ book might have done. A short summary of the manuscript is read aloud, making it clear that we are actually reading this book:

“The attempt to impose upon man, a creature of growth and capable of sweetness, to ooze juicily at the last round the bearded lips of God, to attempt to

105 Burgess, A. A Clockwork Orange, 34-35.
impose, I say, laws and conditions appropriate to a mechanical creation, against
this I raise my sword pen.”\textsuperscript{106}

This metafictional aspect makes the reader become a character of the world being created, of the fictional world in which violence and rape is being ‘normalized’. We become accomplices in what is being told, therefore less likely to judge objectively.

\textbf{Style}

Unlike \textit{Lolita}, Anthony Burgess’ novel does not start with an introductory foreword that gives fair? warning to the reader about the narrative voice of the following story. \textit{A Clockwork Orange} immediately falls into the story and the reader’s first reaction might be slight discomfort, but quite soon they get sucked into Alex’s world. The reason for this is the language used by the novel’s narrative voice, called \textit{Nadsat}. The use of Nadsat, a Russified version of the English language combined with elements of the Cockney-dialect, meant to “muffle the raw response we expect from pornography”, turns the book into a “linguistic adventure”\textsuperscript{107}.

It has several functions in the novel, the first being that it distances the reader from what is being told. Because of the unknown words being used to describe the violence, the reader’s attention has been divided between understanding the words and interpreting what they mean, making it more difficult to really comprehend the severity of the violent actions of Alex and his ‘droogs’. Nadsat thus becomes a way to censor the violence. It is noticeable that just those words evoking a violent image in the reader’s mind are replaced by the unknown Nadsat lexicon, switching ‘blood’ for ‘knovvy’ and ‘to kill’ for ‘oobivat’. Since we aren’t familiar with these words, they don’t have the same emotional effect on the reader, making it

\textsuperscript{106} Burgess, A. \textit{A Clockwork Orange}, 21-22.

\textsuperscript{107} Burgess, A. \textit{A Clockwork Orange}, Introduction: xiv.
easier to have a more compassionate opinion about Alex and his actions. The clarifications for these Nadsat words can be found in many glossaries added in different editions of the novel, including the one included in *A Clockwork Orange: The Restored Edition*, published on the fiftieth anniversary of the novel in 2012.

Nadsat also adds to the pleasure the reader experiences from engaging in the story. Participating in this “linguistic adventure” makes reading the novel some sort of scavenger hunt, with the reader looking for the correct interpretation of the words. Adding to this, it also makes the reader feel included in the activities of Alex and his group of misfits. The language being used here is similar to what teenagers – and other social entities – might use to increase the in-group feeling, making those using their language apart of their world, and those who don’t excluded from it. As the reader is being addressed in this language that Alex only seems to use with his friends, but not with his parents or authority figures, they feel as if they’re a part of the in-crowd. This inclusivity makes it harder to condemn Alex for his actions, since that would force them to take a closer look at themselves too. The imaginative use of Nadsat also reflects on Alex’s character, establishing him as an intelligent, perceptive person who is a poet with words, turning anger and violence into beauty, showing that he is able to express himself with wit and insight.

Alex the Narrator likes to play with his language and several times the perceptive reader may notice him adapting his speech to social situations, making his language use a manipulative tool to make people see him differently than he really is. In the very first chapter of the novel, Ales uses a formal tone to disarm a man on the street to make his victim an easier target. He manipulates the man into believing he means no harm by using a different language. The reader should thus be warned by this and be cautious to *what* he is being presented and *how* it is told to them. Alex and his *droogs* create a reason for beating the man up – accusing him of reading pornography – as a way to justify their actions. It is a way to
show the reader that he’s not doing this simply because he likes it, but because he feels he has to. The reader should not be fooled by this, however, since Alex goes on depicting the violent act as some type of artful expression. “Then comes out the blood, my brothers,” he describes, “real beautiful”\textsuperscript{108}.

He also uses the archaic pronouns ‘thee’, ‘thy’ and ‘thou’ whenever he needs to talk down to someone or when he is not in control of a situation:

“We hadn't done much, I know, but that was only like the start of the evening
and I make no appy polly loggies to thee or thine for that.”\textsuperscript{109}

This is again a way for him to misdirect the reader’s focus by making them zoom in on deciphering what is being said, instead of looking at what is going on.

**The Truth Between the Lines**

At certain points in the novel, it is made clear to the reader that what Alex is telling us, is not always showing us the complete picture of the depicted events. Sometimes the dialogue reveals more than what Alex has previously mentioned:

“[o]ne of a certain fat boy’s friends was ambulanced off late from near the Power
Plant and hospitalized, cut about very unpleasantly, yes”\textsuperscript{110}

The scene described here was first downplayed by Alex, making it seem less severe than it actually is. Later, the same happens when the reader is reintroduced in the third part of the novel to the writer, F. Alexander, we encountered in the first part. Here, we learn that the wife who was raped and beaten by Alex and his *droogs*, died after the attack. If Alex hadn’t

\textsuperscript{108} Burgess, A. *A Clockwork Orange*, 7.
\textsuperscript{109} Burgess, A. *A Clockwork Orange*, 8.
\textsuperscript{110} Burgess, A. *A Clockwork Orange*, 30.
come back to the same house, the reader would have never known how bad it actually was. These scenes, in which the actual events are downplayed, happen whenever Alex is talking about his most violent acts and the misrepresentation of these crimes emphasizes his unreliability as a narrator.
A CLOCKWORK ORANGE: THE FILM (1972)

STANLEY KUBRICK’S ADAPTATION

Stanley Kubrick’s film adaptation of Anthony Burgess’ novel *A Clockwork Orange* came out in 1972, but he wasn’t the first artist who saw potential in this literary work. In 1965 Andy Warhol, the famous American pop artist, filmed an adaptation of the novel, but it didn’t attract a very big audience. The film, *Vinyl*, was a very loose adaptation of the work it was based on. “Vinyl is such a loose adaptation of the source novel that even people who have seen it should be forgiven for not realizing that it is built on Burgess’s literary scaffold,”[111] the International Anthony Burgess Foundation wrote about this.

After Warhol’s film, several others attempted creating a screenplay for the novel. Anthony Burgess’ himself had written one and Nicolas Roeg was chosen to direct this version, but production fell through for unknown reasons. Terry Southern, who also attempted writing a screenplay for the novel, had previously written dialogue for Stanley Kubrick’s *Doctor Strangelove* and it was Southern who first told Kubrick about Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange*. Kubrick started working on the script in 1970, finished it and started shooting in and around London. It was released in December of that year in New York and a month later it could first be seen in the city in which it took place.

In comparison with Kubrick’s earlier adaptation of Nabokov’s *Lolita*, this time he did have the opportunity to make it as gritty as the book. Nudity and violence aren’t hidden behind fading scenes or allusions, and as Kubrick himself stated in an interview with *Sight & Sound*:

“There may even be an argument in support of saying that any kind of violence in films, in fact, serves a useful social purpose by allowing people a means of

[111] *In Film, “Andy Warhol’s 1965 Film” on openculture.com*
vicariously freeing themselves from the pent up, aggressive, aggressive emotions
which are better expressed in dreams, or in the dreamlike state of watching a
film, than in any form of reality or sublimation.”

After getting several death threats for the violence shown in the film, Stanley Kubrick
decided to instruct his production house Warner Bros to ban all screenings in the United
Kingdom and therefor the film stayed out of circulation from 1976 until 1999, Kubrick’s year
of death. This only added further to the appeal of the film, similar to Lolita’s gaining success
after it was banned in libraries across the United States.

UNRELIABLE NARRATION IN THE FILM
Andrew Biswell, Anthony Burgess’ biographer, wrote about the script for Kubrick’s film
adaptation that it “is an elaborate reworking and reimagining of A Clockwork Orange rather
than a straightforward adaptation”113. He continues listing the differences, mentioning how
the film “introduces a number of Nadsat words not present in the original, as well as a series
of extravagantly bloodthirsty dream-visions … [in which Alex is] urged on to further
atrocities by the classical soundtrack which plays constantly in his head … Burgess’ stage-
directions make it clear that this cinematic Alex is intended to represent the suppressed
violent desires of the audience”. This quote makes it clear that the Alex in Kubrick’s version
demands for a participation of the viewers, which then implicates them and puts them on the
same level as our main protagonist. Therefore, a closer look at the status of reliability of the
film’s narration, established by, as Markus Kühn put it, both the “visual narrative instance”
and the “verbal narrative instance”.

First I will look at how the film is told through Alex’s eyes, and how this focalization
establishes Alex’s bias to the story enfolding in front of the audience. However, Alex is not

112 Strick & Houston. “Interview with Stanley Kubrick regarding A Clockwork Orange”
113 Biswell, A. The Real Life of Anthony Burgess, 338.
Focalization

*A Clockwork Orange* starts with an opening sequence shot in the Korova Milkbar. The camera is on Alex, introducing the audience to him immediately, showing us who we are here to watch\(^{114}\). A close-up shot of his face introduces the viewers to the distorted world we are falling into by showing one half of Alex’s face *with* long eyelashes and the other one *without*. He keeps holding the audience’s eyes and it dawns on the audience that we are here to watch *him* and that this story is going to be focalized through his eyes. This is his world; we are only here because he wants us to be.

Throughout the film it is made clear that Alex is the focaliser, but the scene where it becomes most obvious, is when Alex awakens from being drugged by Mr. Alexander to the sounds of his beloved Beethoven, whose classical music now makes him feel incredibly sick due to the Ludovico Treatment\(^{115}\). The scene opens without Alex waking up in an unknown bedroom. His face is on the foot-end, so his position on the bed is symbolic for how he feels: out of place. When the realization hits, the scene moves towards a room below Alex’s and we get a change in point of view to that of Mr. Alexander. The close-up of the writer shows a similarity with Beethoven’s famous bust and the scene can therefore be interpreted as a glimpse inside of Alex’s mind. We see the scene focalized through his mind, we get to see his nightmarish version of Beethoven become reality and it is Alex who believes the husband to

\(^{114}\) See Appendix B, Figure 1.

\(^{115}\) See Appendix B, Figure 2-7.
look like this because he assumes that Mr. Alexander is finding enjoyment in torturing him. When the camera zooms out, it shows the writer sitting behind a billiards table, which is being used to prop up speakers, while an unknown character is seen playing pool. The image seems an exaggerated portrayal of what’s going on, giving a nightmarish feeling to the scene. The room is covered in dark shadows, contrasting the brightness of the room Alex is in upstairs. This makes it all the more likely that this is what Alex sees and that it not shows what is really there. So, the visual narrative establishes an instance of misreporting. When the camera is again on Alex, we get a close-up of his face, which symbolizes him realizing that the only way to stop the pain his in, is by jumping out of the window and killing himself. The camera moves towards Alex’s back and everything in the frame stands in contrast to the bright light of the windows that beckons Alex toward it. The camera’s lens becomes like a magnet, drawing Alex towards the ground. The last scene could then be considered a testament to the first-person experience of this sequence. The final shot takes the guise of Alex’s literal first-person point of view, also known as a P.O.V., as gravity pulls him to freedom below. This sequence of events best illustrates how the eye of the camera shows Alex’s point of view, making it a biased representation of his story.

**Camera’s Eye**

Even though the film is mainly focalized through Alex’s eyes, the camera does show the audience more than what Alex’s eyes can see. Before our protagonist and his *droogs* enter the Alexanders’s home, the camera shows the husband typing in his study and Mrs. Alexander going to the door. The viewers get a glimpse of the two before Alex does. Later, when Georgie tells the gang about the Health Farm, the audience gets to see the inside of the house, where the woman is doing yoga exercises. When Alex demands to be let inside her house, we see her calling the police, something that Alex is rather surprised by later on.
The eye of camera also guides the audience towards a certain interpretation of the scenes. When Alex beats up a man at the beginning of the film, the camera zooms in on the old man’s bottles of alcohol. This makes it seems as if the camera wants the audience to see this as some form of excuse for the fact that Alex and his droogs start beating him up. The actual violence is not made prettier, but it is shown with a distance shot, making the viewer take a distance from the violence, and therefore a distance from Alex’s violent behavior as well. During the rape scene of Mrs. Alexander, Alex is looking directly at Mr. Alexander while he’s talking, but the camera has taken the P.O.V. of the husband, so Alex is in fact talking to us as well and by doing so, he is implicating us in what’s going on. According to Giannetti, “the camera is used as a method of commenting on the subject matter, a way of emphasizing its essential rather than its objective nature.” This causes for “a high degree of manipulation, a reforming of reality.” When in an earlier scene Alex says to his Post-Corrective Advisor, Mister Deltoid, “You can rely on me, sir”, Alex’s back is turned to the camera and the audience can only hear his voice, they don’t get to see his face. This makes it more difficult to decide whether or not he is being insincere or not. The camera thus adds to Alex’s unreliability.

The Voice-Over Technique

Once again, Kubrick uses the voice-over technique to establish a disconnection between what is being said and what is being shown. This time, he elaborates on the technique and thirty-three voice-over comments can be identified in the film. Alex’s voice starts the film, which shows that the technique is used here in a more expository function. It shows the audience who is talking and it elaborates on who Alex is. The Nadsat language

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116 See Appendix B, figure 8-9.
117 See Appendix B, figure 10.
118 Giannetti, L. Understanding Movies. 4.
used in the book is introduced in this way as well, having a similar effect as in the novel. It slightly confuses us, but it also makes us invested on what is being told since we feel like a part of the world we’re being sucked into.

Similar to Alex’s narration in Burgess’ novel, the voice of Kubrick’s protagonist emphasized his reliable status by directly addressing the audience. He calls himself “Your Friend and Humble Narrator” and the viewers are made aware that this is a story being told to us by Alex referring to himself as “Your story-teller”.

Alex’s voice also tries to establish a connection with the audience by implicating us in what is going on:

“And would you believe it, O my brothers and only friends, there was your faithful Narrator being held helpless, like a babe in arms, and suddenly realizing where I was and why HOME on the gate had looked so familiar.”

We become his “brothers” and “only friends”, making us sympathetic with this lonesome character and the issues he is dealing with.

**Music and Performance**

That an ironic connection is established in this film between violence and music becomes clear very early on. The tagline of the film reads: “the adventures of a young man whose principal interests are rape, ultra-violence and Beethoven”\(^{120}\). Mentioning all three in one and the same sentence makes it seem as if they are all on the same level. Music becomes, just like his tendencies to rape and revert to ultra-violence, a way for Alex to illustrate his free will. It also seems as if it is his only redeeming quality and making ‘Beethoven’ one of his

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\(^{119}\) Burgess, A. *A Clockwork Orange*, 113.

\(^{120}\) See Appendix B, Image 11.
principal interests, shows the audience that he has not lost all connection to humanity just yet. It therefore forces a (subconscious) connection between the spectator and Alex.

Both classical music pieces and popular songs have been used in this adaptation\textsuperscript{121}. The first piece of music appearing in the film is during the opening credit sequence, in which Henry Purcell’s *Funeral Music for Queen Mary* is used. American composer and musician Wendy Carlos made a Moog synthesizer version of the classical piece and the title cards of the credits are cut to structural points in the music. The sound of the synthesizer creates a sense of doom, adding to the strangeness of Alex’s appearance as well as the décor used in the Korova Milkbar. Throughout the film, this march appears when the characters shown demonstrate some type of authority. In the opening scenes, it is Alex who is in control over his *droogs* and it adds as well to his authoritative way of capturing the audience. After the Ludovico Treatment, during a demonstration of its effects, the song illustrates a shift in power. A topless woman has authority in this scene, since she seems to dominate Alex’s negative response towards the pleasure he feels for her naked beauty, and the music illustrates how she holds power over the room. Purcell’s classical piece appears for the last time when Alex gets beaten up by his former gang members. We hear that the music has changed, with additional percussive hits mirroring the punches of their fists. The score reflects the violent way in which they use their authority and because this is the moment where the song returns, it adds an ironic undertone to the loss of Alex’s power as well. The music is used as a way to make Alex seem more sympathetic. He is a fallen character, beaten down by that which once made him strong.

Purcell is not the only English composer used in Kubrick’s film. Also Edward Elgar makes an appearance with his *Pomp and Circumstance* marches. It is used in those scenes dealing with the Ludovico treatment. The composition originally exists out of four marches,

\textsuperscript{121} Gengaro, Lee C. *Listening to Stanley Kubrick: The Music in his Films*. 
but Kubrick only used two of them. The first march appears in the scene in which the Minister of Interior visits the prison looking for a subject to participate in the treatment, the fourth march when Alex is brought to the clinic where they will treat him. The historical background of the marches adds symbolic meaning to these scenes, since they were both written before the first World War, and they carry a certain patriotic spirit with them. This patriotism adds to the irony of the scene, since Alex is being tortured by his government. Another ironical connotation can be found in the intro of the first march. This has become known in the United States as the music being played at graduations and the audience watching these scenes would most likely make the connection, interpreting this as a rite of passage. Since the song was not used in the novel, it would seem very unlikely that Kubrick was not aware of the song’s symbolism and therefore we should look at this addition as another way in which the film is trying to guide the audience in a direction that shows the main character in a most favorable way.

Burgess’ novel mainly focus on Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, while Kubrick uses a plethora of songs. Rossini’s *Overture to the Thieving Magpie* gets the most screen time, even though it wasn’t included in the novel. The song is used in moments of conflict, such as the gangs encounter with Billyboy and his friends. The music is used in an ironic way, because it works against the actions depicted in the scene. The incongruity of hearing such beautiful music, while watching such a violent scene creates a deeply disturbing experience. Only two sounds can be heard: the overture to the opera and the screams of the woman about to be raped. The original story of Rossini’s opera is considered to be a rescue opera. A heroine is saved from being executed at the very last second. She was unjustly accused of stealing, thus making her ‘the thieving magpie’. In *A Clockwork Orange*, it is Alex who becomes the magpie, since he is the one taking away Billyboy’s momentum and authority. The fight scene that follows is choreographed in such a way that it looks more like dance than a violent
encounter. In Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* music is often connected to performance, turning scenes that are supposed to be serious and horrifying into comical spectacles. In an interview with Penelope Houston, the film director said:

“In cinematic terms, I should say that movement and music must inevitably be related to dance […] From the rape on the stage of the derelict casino, to the super-frenzied fight, through the Christ figure’s cut, to Beethoven’s Ninth, the slow-motion fight on the water’s edge and the encounter with the cat lady where the giant white phallus is pitted against the bust of Beethoven, movement, cutting, and music, are the principal considerations – dance?”

Turning this fight into a dance is a way of distancing the audience from the violence. It also makes it easier to sympathize with Alex, since the music enforces a feeling of excitement, similar to the excitement Alex feels during the fight. The music, the choreography and the setting of the theatre transforms the portrayal of criminal acts into a performance piece and it allows the audience to enjoy them without feeling revolted by his enjoyment of violence.

As stated before, Kubrick also uses popular music in the film, with *Singin’ in the Rain* as the most notable song. Even though it was chosen by accident, it is used three times and they are probably the most memorable scenes of the entire adaptation. While filming, Kubrick felt something was missing and he asked McDowell – who plays Alex – if he knew any songs by heart and this musical tune seemed to be the only one that came to mind. It is used for the first time in the rape scene of Miss. Alexander and the joy of the song juxtaposes the humiliation and horror of the Alexanders perfectly. It also emphasized how casual violence really is to Alex. The song makes violence seem casual and therefore, the audience is presumably less likely to be shocked by it, since the music allows us to see it as something

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122 Houston, P. “Kubrick Country” 42-44.
trivial. The music is powerful because it can create very contradictory feelings in the ones watching the scene: on the one hand you want to laugh at the absolute disjunction between hearing this song and Alex acting like he's Gene Kelly, and on the other hand you’re incredibly disturbed by the horror of watching a woman being raped.

When Alex returns to the Alexander house, he is caught singing the song in the bath, which ruins his anonymous status. Lastly, the song is used during the final credits, suggesting that Alex will continue his path of violence and destruction. As Kubrick himself said:

“I think this [Alex’s love of rape and Beethoven] suggests the failure of culture to have any morally refining effect on society. Hitler loved good music and many top Nazis were cultured and sophisticated men but it didn’t do them, or anyone else, much good.”

Choosing the right actor for the role is also an important element to establishing the desired form of narration:

“In terms of working with actors, a director’s job more closely resembles that of a novelist that of a Svengali. One assumes that one hires actors who are great virtuosos. It is too late to start running an acting class in front of the cameras, and essentially what the director must do is to provide the right ideas for the scene, the right adverb, the right adjective.”

Malcolm McDowell’s performance also adds to the protagonist’s unreliability, since he is successful in making us feel everything that is going on within Alex’s head, therefore making us more perceptible to believing his side of the story.

123 Ciment, M. “Kubrick on A Clockwork Orange.”
Adapting The Story

Kubrick decided to change several elements from the novel in making the film adaptation. One of the most noticeable changes is when Alex lures two children – in the book they are ten years old – to his house, where he drugs and rapes them. This is probably one of the most condemning scenes in the novel, but in the film this scene has been transformed into a more comical one. In the adaptation, the girls are women in their early twenties, which might have something to do with censorship issues Kubrick had to deal with. Changing their age alters the scene into consensual sex instead of rape and the audience doesn’t have the same reaction to it as they would have had if Kubrick stayed true to the novel. So, instead of the scene showing us how Alex is truly an immoral character, the threesome is fast-forwarded and music is added to make it more comical and the audience sees Alex as a fun guy enjoying life and taking full advantage of his freedom, not as a criminal.

The ending of the film was taken from the American version of the novel, showing a more pessimistic outlook on human behavior than Burgess intended with his story. Alex ironically states that he was “cured all right”, followed by the mocking return of Singin’ in the Rain while the credits role. According to Rosa Maria Díez Cobo\textsuperscript{124}, the omission of the original twenty-first chapter creates an ambiguity to the message of the film. Because the protagonist is deprived of the possibility for a conscious regeneration, where he can actively decide to be better than he has been in the past, it “transforms the original anti-behaviorist denounce into a satiric black comedy or dystopic fable of futuristic hypothetical society where humanity would have sealed their future by proving to be tyrannized by its own perverse instincts being incapable of any moral progress”. This also influences the way the audience perceives the film, since they are more likely to look at Alex’s violent, criminal behavior as a

\textsuperscript{124} Cobo, Rosa Díez. "Parody and satire".
cautionary tale and instead of condemning him for his actions, they are forced to look inwards and take a look at the violence within themselves. What we then respond to and what then makes it easier for us to acquit Alex is, according to Kubrick:

“Alex’s guiltless sense of freedom to kill and rape, and to be our savage natural selves, and it is in this glimpse of the true nature of man that the power of the story thrives”\textsuperscript{125}

\textsuperscript{125} Weinraub, B. \textit{Kubrick Tells what Makes ‘Clockwork Orange’ Tick.}
CONCLUSION

The aim of this dissertation was to demonstrate that a closer examination of the unreliable narration in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* and in Anthony Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange* leads to a greater understanding of the novels’ meaning and value, which then leads to a deeper appreciation of them as well. This has been done by taking a closer look at how the technique is established by the first-person narrator in both novels, then comparing it to how unreliable narration gets translated onto the big screen, in these cases done by film director Stanley Kubrick.

Humbert Humbert’s unreliability in the novel is introduced in the foreword, where the psychologist John Ray, Jr. takes the word, creating ambiguity for the story that follows. The protagonist’s untrustworthy narration is established by the way in which he is characterized, as well as his own manipulation of the story being told to the audience. Humbert is not only the main character of the novel, he is also the narrator, and since he is personally invested, it is most likely that in his narration he is guiding the audience into a direction most favorable to him.

The film adaptation of *Lolita* works with different devices than those used in the novel. One of those being the ‘voice-over technique’, which establishes a verbal instance in which Humbert Humbert takes the word. Since a film cannot establish narration the same way a novel does, it has to rely on other elements than just the narrator’s voice. In Kubrick’s version, music plays an important role in guiding the audience into a more romantic interpretation of the story, while he camera is used to leave clues about where the plot is going, often foreshadowing later events.
In *A Clockwork Orange*, Alex takes the word, and he guides the story into one where his audience is more sympathetic to him and his situation. By connecting his love for violence to his passion for classical music, he wants to humanize himself and diminish the negative response that his readers might have whenever he portrays ultra-violent behavior. Yet, because of him constantly manipulating the people around him, either by taking an authoritative stance, by changing his language or by showing an odd devotion to religion, the audience should be warned by his untrustworthy character. Just like Humbert, Alex also tells his story from a first-person perspective in which he is the narrator, guiding the narration wherever he wants it to. The language of Nadsat has the effect of filtering the violent actions, since the bloodiest words are changed into unknown lexicon. Alex also implicates the readers by calling them ‘brothers’, making them question whether they really are that different from Alex, and therefore correct in judging him.

In Kubrick’s adaptation, the voice-over technique appears more frequently than in *Lolita*, but it has the same effect, namely that Alex addresses the audience, making it clear that this is *his* story, and thus that he benefits from a more favorable portrayal of his own actions. The camera’s eye reveals that it knows more than Alex does, thus allowing the audience to be more knowledgeable than the story’s protagonist as well. Since the camera is often used to comment on what is shown, it has a higher degree of manipulation, leading to “a reforming of reality”. In the film version of *A Clockwork Orange*, the musical aspect is even more important than in *Lolita*, since in the novel it could be seen how deeply affected Alex is by musical performances. The film score adds a theatrical element to the scenes, making them more into performance pieces than accurate accounts of violent behavior.

The devices used in both novels for establishing unreliability are fairly comparable. Both protagonists are made to be charming and likeable, and they manipulate their readers in similar ways, either by pulling the reader into the story by addressing them directly, or by
their stylistic language use. In the film adaptions, we also get similar techniques, but when comparing them to the effect they have in the film with the response the reader has in the novel, there is a bigger difference. Even though unreliable narration is also established in the film, I believe that the effect it has on its audience is less daunting than in Nabokov’s novel. In Alex’s story, as well, the violence becomes less horrifying in the film than in the novel written by Burgess. You could argue that this is partly due to the censorship rules both films had to keep to, but it is my conclusion that it is more than that. Because in both novels the protagonists are also the narrators of the story being told, the audience becomes more invested and more likely to be guided into the direction they are being taken. In the film however, because the narration is not only established by the narrative voice of either Humbert Humbert or Alex, but also by other filmic devices, such as camera and sound, the audience becomes less invested. The distance between the audience and what is shown is bigger, and therefore the effect the unreliable narrative technique has, also less daunting.

When considering unreliable narration in literature and comparing it to the medium of film, further research is definitely recommended. Other novels could be compared to their film adaptation, such as Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*, Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* or Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, to name a few. It could also be interesting, however, to take this dissertation as a starting point and to look into the audience’s reception of the works discussed, focusing on their ethical reaction to it and whether or not using different media have a different effect on them.


McQuiston, Kate. We'll meet again: musical design in the films of Stanley Kubrick. Oxford University Press, 2013.


Nabokov, V. Lolita. 1997: front cover


APPENDIX A

Figure 1

APPENDIX B

Figure 2

Figure 3 - 00:18:41
Figure 4 - 00:18:49

APPENDIX C

Figure 7 - 00:00:45

Figure 8-7 – 1:58:41 - 2:01:32
Being the adventures of a young man whose principal interests are rape, ultra-violence and Beethoven.