Irony in Postmodernist Agenda: Poetics and Politics in Vladimir Nabokov’s 
*Lolita*

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Abstract

Linda Hutcheon describes the postmodernist text as a manuscript that “signals its dependence by its use of the canon, but reveals its rebellion through its ironic abuse of it” (130). Irony is a key word in postmodernist philosophy and a key narrative strategy in the postmodernist text. As a poetics, established through different narrative techniques including intertextuality, parody, and pastiche and it highlights a fragmented text that deliberately questions totalising systems and lacks historical or narrative continuity. Highlighting parody, pastiche and intertextuality the postmodernist literary text reveals an ironic attitude toward unifying theories and totalitarian and stabilizing concepts. Coherence, unity or continuity become challenged notions within the postmodernist convention.

In *Discourse, Figure and The Postmodern Condition*, Jean François Lyotard hints to another aspect of the ironic postmodernist practice, namely ‘the language game’. From a postmodernist perspective, language as a communication as well as reference system falls within the excluded category of universal, totalitarian, and authoritarian grand narrative. The structuralist point of view concerning the linguistic system is called into question within the postmodernist frame of thought. A whole agenda, which can be referred to as postmodernist politics, is indeed responsible for such ironic narrative practises. The apocalyptic vision of endism characterising the postmodern era has actually paved the ground for these ironic narrative practises and this sense of playfulness in the literary text. Such an apocalyptic vision of endism is reproduced by postmodern theorists like Ihab Hassan, Jean François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Hans Bertens who state that through such a cynical discourse, “the postmodernists have accepted chaos and live in fact in a certain intimacy with it” (Natoli 45).

Key Words: Irony, postmodernism, poetics, politics
As a member of the ‘ladies and gentlemen of the jury’, a reader finds him/herself unable to reach a satisfying conclusion about Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita as far as its literary convention is concerned. The text of Lolita resists any idiosyncratic classification or any attempt to tame it within a particular literary genre for it may readily be read as an epistle, a poem, a romance, a fairy tale, an adventure novel, a detective story or a diary. Humbert Humbert tells a story yet his story is stylistically and thematically unconventional.

First published in 1955, Nabokov’s Lolita may chronologically be classified as both a modernist and postmodernist text. To decide whether it is modernist or postmodernist is itself a tricky subject that adds to the novel’s sense of intricacy and resistance to interpretation. The concern of this paper is to decipher the postmodernist element in Lolita, starting from an idiosyncratic postmodernist writing feature, namely stylistic irony. A useful starting point would be a relative definition of postmodernism and a brief examination of irony within the postmodernist framework.

It is a common adage that irony is a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used (Sim 286). In the form of sarcasm and ridicule, irony can articulate a sense of hostility. Irony is also connected with a requirement to deal with reality playfully or non-seriously or at least not to take facts at face value (286). From this angle, irony may readily be approached as the most relevant element within the postmodernist framework. In Contingency, Irony and Solidarity, Richard Rorty suggests that irony or ‘liberal irony’ is the proper attitude to adopt towards life and that the postmodern writer should turn into a ‘liberal ironist’ who playfully refers to irony as a way to avoid the modernist gloomy temper and nostalgia toward the past.

The ironic and unserious tone of the postmodernist narrative is a well established feature that distinguishes the postmodernist narrative practice from the modernist one. Instead of viewing the loss of the past, manifested through claims about the death of the ‘centre’ or the death of the ‘Author’, as tragic in the modernist proposition, the postmodernist views this as a justification of ironic attitudes, playfulness and an opportunity for the narrative text to turn to itself so as to explore its potentialities “without an irritable searching after final truths or unified meanings” (Hawthorn 163).

Although no definition would sufficiently contain the term postmodernism, theoreticians and critics who tried to provide an approximation to this trend agreed upon one common feature, namely irony. Linda Hutcheon, for instance, in A Poetics of Postmodernism, sees postmodernism as “a cultural process or activity […], an open ever-changing theoretical structure transgressing any fixed definition” (3). Agreeing with the majority of theorists, Linda Hutcheon describes postmodernism as intertextual, ironic, contradictory, provisional, heterogeneous, transgressive of generic divisions, ex-centric and marginal. Hutcheon describes the postmodernist text as a manuscript that “signals its dependence by its use of the canon, but reveals its rebellion through its ironic abuse of it” (130).

Irony is a key word in postmodernist thought and a key narrative strategy in the postmodernist text. It can be established through different narrative techniques including intertextuality, parody, and fragmentation. Such narrative techniques are deliberately employed to question totalizing systems of conventional narrative continuity.
Essentially, postmodernism is constructed on irony as it is “fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political” (92). Hutcheon states that the ironic aspect of postmodernism is what clearly distinguishes it from modernism: “What is newer [in postmodernism] is the constant attendant irony” (93). The postmodern engagement with history is “always a critical reworking, never a nostalgic ‘return’ [and] here lies the governing role of irony in postmodernism” (93).

The postmodern literary text is constructed upon a postmodernist endist vision. In fact, Frederic Jameson’s statement about death of the literary ‘grand narrative’ in the sense of an individual, autonomous, and homogeneous text; the Derridean critical approaching of the linguistic sign by which the literary text is constructed, and Rolland Barthes’ assertion of the ‘death of the Author’ or the controlling force in a narrative lead to the ‘death of the novel’ and its apocalypse as a classical convention of literature (Hutcheon 2).

Nevertheless, instead of lamenting the dead narrative, the postmodernist text turns to itself for the purpose of critical and conscious investigation. Linda Hutcheon, in Narcissistic Narrative, states that “cries of lamentation over the death of the novel genre [have been] abandoned” (2) to be substituted by a “self-reflective, self-informing, self-reflexive, auto-referential, auto-representational” (1) fiction. This new fiction displays an “inter- and intratextuality, and narrative mirroring” (2), a deep interest in the creative functioning of language and an obsession with experimenting with generic narrative forms.

Thus, following Hutcheon’s observation, the postmodernist text has little to do with nostalgia and much to do with irony. The postmodernist narrative abandons the lamentation of the dead literary conventions to engage in a narcissistic process of ironic playing with its own destruction as well as construction. The key word in this process is irony or as Linda Hutcheon puts it – in A Poetics of Postmodernism - “the ironic reworking of forms and contents of the past” (98).

Nabokov’s Lolita can readily be classified as a postmodernist text in so far as it approaches irony in a postmodernist fashion. In fact, Nabokov’s text displays an ironic stand point about the notion of the ‘grand narrative’ which no longer pertains to the postmodernist narrative practice. Instead, the pastiche genre is ironically introduced to parody multiple literary styles and to reflect a postmodernist view that meaning lies in the mimicry of the literary conventions and writing means being eclectic, non-traditional and against signification. It is what Hutcheon describes in The Politics of Postmodernism as “both using and ironically abusing general conventions and specific forms of representation” (8).

In Lolita, the eclectic approach is abundantly employed since the text is a thread of different literary conventions and styles. Humbert Humbert’s –the narrator– approach to genres is eclectic. “He dabbles in them without surrendering his story to the narrative logic and trajectory implied by their conventions” (James 45). Poet and pervert, Humbert recurs to poetry as in the example: “It is a poem I know already by heart:

Angel, Grace
Austin, Floyd
Beale, Jack
Beale, Mary
Buck, Daniel
Byron, Marguerite [. . .]” (Nabokov 51).
The poetic style is abundantly used throughout Humbert’s narrative. His description of “the stars that sparkled and the cars that parked” (59) add to the text eclectic construction as a poem and prose. Humbert explicitly confirms his postmodernist eclecticism while building his text. He comments on good examples of the ironic “eclecticism governing the selection of books in prison libraries. They have The Bible, of course, and Dickens (an ancient set N.Y., G.W. Dillingham, Publisher, MDCCCLXXXVII); and the Children’s Encyclopedia (with some nice photographs of sunshine-haired Girl Scouts in short) and A Murder is Announced by Agatha Christie [ . . . ] (31).

Moe than stylistically ironic, eclecticism or the presence of different titles within Humbert’s narrative has an ironic thematic purpose. Indeed, The Bible is reminiscent of Adam’s and Eve’s fall and so it is in Humbert and Lolita’s case. Dicken’s and the Children Encyclopedia are so telling of children’s, as well as 12 -year-old Lolita’s innocence while Agatha Christie’s A Murder is Announced is ironically anticipating the coming events as Humbert’s will commit a murder toward the end of the narrative.

Within the limits of a single page, Humbert Humbert can wander into different forms ranging from the mythic ‘nymphet’s’ to the romance: “Oh Lolita! You are my girl, as Vee was Poe’s and Bea Dante’s” (107); and from the poetic description of his beloved Lolita as “Lolita light of my life, fire in my loins. My sin, my soul” (9) to the grotesque portrayal of Mr Potts as “pink and bald with white hairs growing out of his ears and other holes” (118). Humbert overtly and ironically reflects upon the construction of his tale and compares himself to spider, stressing the threading process he is deliberately experiencing:

I am like one of those inflated pale spiders you see in old gardens. Sitting in the middle of a luminous web and giving little jerks on that strand. My web is spread all over the house as I listen from my chair where I sit like a wily wizard (Nabokov 49).

Humbert’s position in the center around which all the conventional styles revolve testifies to Nabokov’s ironic ‘use and abuse’ of old literary conventions and styles. Irony ‘dedoxifies’, to use Hutcheon’s idiom; it calls into question all doxa, all accepted beliefs and ideologies or all grand narratives. This ironic stance is constructed upon a postmodernist attitude that values the willingness to question all ideological positions and all claims to ultimate truth. This ironic stance is readily noticed as far as the linguistic background of Lolita is concerned. In fact, the text becomes a field in which multiple languages coexist. The English language, French structures like “chocolat glacé” (Nabokov 13) or “Histoire Abrégée de la poesie Anglaise” (16) or “la Petite Dormeuse ou l’Amant Ridicule (129), German expressions of the kind “sicher ist sicher” (123), Russian names as in the instance of ‘Mr Taxovich’ or “Mr Maximovich [whose] name suddenly taxies back to me” (30) and the Italian lexis present through expressions like “primo [. . .] and secundo” (51), add to the text’s ironic play with the linguistic sign as way of resisting the grand narrative of language as a unique, homogeneous and supreme medium of uttering feelings and meanings. The plurality of linguistic signs within the same text equally testifies to the text’s eclectic construction as a postmodernist work in which Nabokov “ironically celebrates the multiplicity of language games and offers ceaseless experimentation in all these games as the highest good” (Mc Gowan 2).
The postmodernist eclectic approach may be rendered to an apocalyptic vision of immanence. The postmodernist writer believes that “in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum” (Wayne 7). Lolita is a text of different styles and different voices. It is a text of intertextuality as the diary: “Sunday. Changeful, bad-tempered, cheerful, awkward [. . .] Monday. Rainy morning ‘ces matins gris si doux’ [. . .] (49-50), the poem, the prose, the fairytale, the road story, the detective story and the romance can be read in Humbert Humbert’s narrative.

Intertextuality in Lolita demonstrates such an apocalyptic vision and while Humbert’s road trip introduces the reader to a country on the verge of postmodernity, Nabokov’s text exposes the reader to different literary styles which are recycled in contexts of irony and experimentation. The main purpose behind Intertextuality and experimentation with generic forms is, as Linda Hutcheon puts it in The Politics of Postmodernism, to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’ are in fact ‘cultural’; made by us, not given to us (1-2). Accordingly, irony is not meant for the sake of wittiness in the postmodernist text. It is rather meant to highlight a postmodernist idiosyncrasy, namely playfulness as a serious reaction to chaos and endism.

Intertextuality within the postmodernist literary work would leave the reader with a fragmented non-linear narrative. Fragmentation or discontinuity is, indeed, a postmodernist attribute. In an article entitled “The Postmodern Weltanschaung and its Relation to Modernism”, Hans Bretens argues that “postmodernists believe in a literature that denies unity” (36). It is rather a literature that establishes a realm in which Man is free to cope spontaneously with experience. Consequently, the logic of chronological order based on causality is ironically undermined in the postmodernist text. Fragmentation is stressed as aesthetic practice in so far as one major theme of postmodernist literature is achieving aesthetic perfection through the deliberate ironic blending of genres and styles. Nabokov writes in this respect:

I’m neither a reader nor a writer for didactic fiction. [. . .] For me, a work of fiction exists only in so far as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being [. . .] where art is the norm (Nabokov 314-15). Through fragmentation, the illusion of reality is denied and the literary conventions of the God-like narrator, the plot and the setting are revisited in an ironic tone.

The narrator of Lolita is unconventional in so far as he is the story teller, the action partaker and the protagonist of the story. He ironically reveals himself as unreliable from the very start of the narrative: “as I look back on those days, I see them divided tidily into ample light and narrow shade” (34). He is indeed unreliable as he does not provide his readers with reality. He rather exposes them to fragments of reality demonstrating the postmodernist ironic emphasis on fragmentation as a playful practice and ‘bliss’.

Reading for the plot, the reader would reach no clear idea since the convention of plot is ironically reviewed in a postmodernist fashion in Lolita. It is actually hard to assert whether the opening pages of Humbert’s narrative are the beginning or the end of the story. Humbert’s
overt declaration for instance, “a few words about Mrs Humbert while the going is good (a bad accident is to happen quite soon)” (105), or his explicit comment on Jean Farlow who “was already nursing the cancer that was to kill her at thirty three” (104) turn the narrative into fragmented events which could ironically end before even beginning. Through the fragmented and discontinuous narrative, in which beginning and end are synonymous, Nabokov works to disappoint the reader’s common expectations concerning the plotted narrative and reveals his predilection to postmodernist narrative practice that ironically shuns linearity and coherence and suggests fragmentation and discontinuity as a substitute.

Within the paradigm of fragmentation, the notions of space and time in Lolita take a new dimension and construct the text as postmodernist. Through the ironic abundance of spaces, Humbert’s narrative could readily be inscribed within the postmodernist stance that defies confinement and closure and highlights openness and plurality instead. Indeed, Humbert’s and Lolita’s road journey and their restless movement from one ‘motel’ to another, create a multitude of spaces and landscapes in the text highlighting the pop culture and conforming to a postmodernist slogan introduced by Leslie Friedler ‘cross the border, close the gap’ which exemplifies the postmodernist ironic attempt to pull art back from a vintage point to the spontaneous flow of daily life (Mc Gowan 2).

Time is also unconventionally employed in Lolita. The past present and the future are ironically blended in the text. Humbert overtly signals his ironic attitude toward time, stating: “my calendar is getting confused” (Nabokov109) and preparing the reader to a new conception of time that trespasses the chronological logic and establishes new parameters that defy the confining limits of order, coherence and linearity.

Although the character of Lolita, for instance, progresses in the narrative – she starts as a 12-year-old girl and ends as pregnant woman – she is kept an unchanging ‘nymphet’ image in Humbert’s memory. Musing over Lolita during the present act of narration, Humbert always recuperates her portrait as a child ‘nymphet’, freezing time at a particular point in the past. Moreover, the narrative starts with Humbert in a state of arrest, which is the effect of a previous cause. This testifies to the credibility of the statement that the chronological order is ironically undermined for the overt construction of future events precedes the past and between the two tenses is the present act of narrating which ironically plays with tenses through past reminiscence and coming incidents.

Intertextuality, experimentation and fragmentation in Lolita are basically meant to reflect upon ‘old’ literary forms and to parody their styles. The postmodernist text is then self-reflexive in as much as it is a text reflecting about another literary text. It is also self-reflexive in so far as it is a “criticism which includes in its own discourse an implicit reflection upon itself” (Hutcheon 13), and here lies the narcissism of the postmodernist literary convention which uses irony to overtly break with the grand narratives of coherence, linearity and singularity and signal the beginning of metanarratives of fragmentation, indeterminacy and plurality.

The writing process within the postmodernist framework becomes self-conscious since it ironically turns to itself to examine its construction process. It is also self-conscious as it turns to the reader and shares with him/her the act of writing. In Lolita, Humbert, the narrator, establishes multiple open conversations with the reader to justify or explain some points during the writing process: “now I wish to introduce the following idea” (Nabokov 17).
In another instance he addresses the reader, saying: “I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay” (17). The repetition of the overt call “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury,” also reveals the highly conscious act of writing and the attempt to make the reader an active element in meaning construction.

Unlike the classical script where the narrator can be omniscient and God-like as he’s the truth holder, this convention is ironically subverted in the postmodernist text and the narrator or even the author seek refuge in the reader who acquires a crucial role in constructing meaning. In *Lolita*, Humbert, on behalf of Nabokov, bluntly puts it: “I have written more than a hundred pages and not t anywhere” (116). This dependence on the reader to create meaning in the text is projected through the clearly expressed urges to the reader: “Please reader: no matter your exasperation with the tenderhearted morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect hero of my book, do not skip these essential pages! Imagine me! I shall not exist if you do not imagine me” (137). Seen from a Barthesian perspective, Nabokov’s dependence on the reader to give meaning to the text may be read as a signaling of the ‘death of the author’ and, subsequently, the birth of the reader as the meaning originator in the postmodernist narrative.

Nevertheless, Humbert’s dependence on the reader does not actually imply his death. It is rather a matter of survival for writing and being understood by the reader is the only condition of existence for Humbert. Rolland Barthes’ argument about the death of the author may be irrelevant as far as the postmodernist text is concerned. Indeed, in the postmodernist literary convention, the author ironically steps into and openly exerts his/her influence on the text. In *Lolita*, Nabokov clearly exhibits his ironic standpoint about the ‘death of the author’ and his assertion of the highly self-reflexive, self-conscious act of writing: “I have camouflaged what I could so as not to hurt people” (226). In another instance, he reveals his direct stepping into the narrative through bracketed statements: “[. . .] (I don’t mind if these verbs are all wrong)” (179). Such bracketed phrases and sentences carry an ironic as well as a humorous tone as in: “after all, there is no harm in smiling. For instance, (I almost wrote ‘frinstance’)” (129).

In sum, irony is a key word within the postmodernist narrative practice. It highlights multiplicity over singularity and reconsiders notions like the grand narrative and introduces metanarratives of intertextuality and experimentation instead. Irony within the postmodernist agenda is equally employed to experiment with conventional literary styles, reflects upon them and come out with a new aesthetic vision. *Lolita’s* openness to diverse literary styles and fragmented structure turn it into a field of meaning that is hard to decipher and here lies the quintessence of *Lolita* as a postmodernist text which never submits to any definite interpretation.
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