It’s All Relative: Time and Space in Nabokov’s *Lolita*

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June 2013
Abstract

This essay offers a deconstructive approach to Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Critics have tended to treat space and time as distinct concepts in the novel: choosing to analyse the role of either one or the other, and even when considering both, examining them in isolation. It’s narrator, Humbert Humbert, however, implies that “time” and “spatial” terms are interchangeable in a way reminiscent of Einstein’s Theory of Relativity in which space-time is a continuum that is experienced relative to the individual observer’s own position in the universe. This essay therefore explores the possibility that Nabokov may have used Einstein’s concept of space-time relativity as a metaphor in *Lolita*.

The essay looks first at the various ways in which the idea of relativity surfaces throughout the novel not just in relation to space and time, but also in its moral, cultural and historic forms. The roles of the Hour Glass Lake, Lolita’s sunglasses and Humbert’s car, three of the novel’s chief symbols, are then discussed in relation to its key elements: the notion of time dilation, the place of the observer and Humbert’s space-time bubble. It next concentrates on how the characters in the novel exemplify the roles of both observer and observed in a modern, self-centred and morally relativistic world. The final section argues that Humbert’s “madness” represents the most extreme consequence of his living in his own solipsistic bubble of space-time, or “dream vacuum” as he calls it.

Key Words: Deconstruction, Einstein, Relativity, Space, Time. Space-Time.
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Introduction

*Lolita* has aroused controversy since its publication over fifty years ago and will undoubtedly continue to enthrall and fascinate readers, both first time readers and re-readers, for many years to come. There are numerous interpretations of the novel and this paper is but one of them. The concepts of time and space have themselves been responsible for many an academic inquiry and my essay will provide yet another angle. I will explore the possible relationship between Einstein’s Theories of Relativity and the novel. In chapter 5 Humbert Humbert, the middle-aged narrator of Nabokov’s novel gives his readers the following information: “I substitute time terms for spatial ones. In fact, I would have the reader see “nine” and “fourteen” as the boundaries – the mirror beaches and rosy rocks- of an enchanted island haunted by those nymphets of mine and surrounded by a vast, misty sea” (L 15).

The above passage, which suggests that temporal and spatial terms are interchangeable, is often cited by critics, and reflects an interest in the link between time and space in the novel. Despite being apparently interrelated, these two significant components of the novel have, however, more often than not been treated as separate and distinct elements in discussions about *Lolita*. Some articles specifically look at time and deal with such things as the connection between story time and discourse time and the contrast between the ways in which time is measured and perceived (Tadashi Wakashami). Others have as their focus how time is redoubled so that the past, present and future appear rolled into one (William Vesterman) or how time is “perverted” in order to postpone and thwart the reader’s expectation of a predictable ending (James Tweedie). Yet other scholars concentrate on analysing the role of space in the novel; the contrasts between Europe and America (Wakashami and Susan Mizruchi), the novel as a road trip across the States (Krystal Chang), the elements of the quest (Jennifer Jenkins), and the relationship between character and landscape (Chang) and dwelling space and characters (Sally Badawi). Even articles that look at both time and space
tend to separate them out from each other in order to analyse their respective role in the novel, as, for instance, Jacqueline Hamritt (1) does in her article on “play” and the structure of \textit{Lolita}.

Although R. Brandon. Kershner is quick to point out that “time and space are …. interconnected for the novelist” and that it is “tempting to find analogies between post-Einsteinian physics and the novelist’s experimentation with radically compressed or rearranged chronology” (58), there seem to be few critics that deal with Nabokov’s treatment of time and space in \textit{Lolita} and Einstein’s conception of space-time in his Special and General Theories of Relativity. Yet, certain key elements of Einstein’s theories on space-time Relativity appear to be present in \textit{Lolita} and look as though they might have a metaphorical role within it. This essay looks at these elements and then attempts to see how they may relate to the author’s choice and use of symbols in the novel, to the interactions of the main characters, and what influence they may have had on meaning in the novel.

I will begin by looking at how much Nabokov’s characterisation of space and time in \textit{Lolita} could be said to have drawn on Einstein’s conception of space-time, its relative nature, and the significance of the observer in that scientific worldview. The main body of analysis is divided into three main sections. The first section will focus on the function of the novel’s main symbolic devices: Hour Glass Lake, Lolita’s sunglasses and Humbert’s car. The second section will look at the idea of characters and the observer and the observed. The third and final section will examine Humbert’s paranoid madness as the ultimate expression of the solipsistic “bubble” the novel’s characters inhabit.
Space-time relativity in *Lolita*

Published in 1905 and 1916 respectively, Einstein’s Special and General Theories of Relativity had by the time Nabokov was writing *Lolita* proved that, despite the way we perceive time and space here on Earth, they are not in fact separate and distinct from one another. Instead, as Einstein demonstrated that space-time is actually a continuum comprised of three space dimensions and one of time, they are inextricably linked to one another on the larger scale of the universe. Nor, according to the physics of Relativity, are space and time universal absolutes like the speed of light, which is the same for everyone, everywhere, and at every time. Space-time is experienced differently according to the position and motion of one observer to another, as may be illustrated by a thought experiment in which one twin remains on the earth awaiting the return of the other twin, who has been travelling through space at close to the speed of light. To the twin accelerating through space, the round trip would seem to have taken just two years, but the same journey will seem to have taken twenty years for the twin who remained on earth. This “time dilation” effect, as it is called, arises from the equations of Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity, which shows that time would flow nearly ten times more slowly for the twin travelling through space at ninety-nine percent of the speed of light than it would for the twin who remained stationary on earth.

Another analogy shows the relative difference of perception and experience between observers stationary on the ground and observers flying overhead in a plane. An observer on the ground watching the plane fly overhead would see it move relatively slowly across the sky whereas an observer in the plane would feel as if he was moving relatively slowly but would pass so quickly over the observer on the ground that he would hardly notice him. Similarly, Humbert observes “a dark-red private plane that drone[s] overhead, and then disappear[s] in the blue,” and its pilot would have seen the “two tiny very busy figures” he saw on the opposite side of Hour Glass Lake (L 96).
It could, therefore, be said that each observer inhabits his own “bubble” – a term used by Humbert on various occasions in the novel - of relative space-time, and that there is what Humbert speaks of as a “plurality of inhabited worlds” (L 11). If Nabokov did have Einstein’s relativistic view of time and space in mind when he was writing *Lolita*, it could perhaps explain the interchangeableness of temporal and spatial terms in the opening quotation of this essay. It could also, for example, explain why time and space are explicitly linked when Humbert and Annabel take “advantage of every blessed quirk in space and time” to touch each other on the beach (L 11). Moreover, it might offer an explanation to why Humbert refers to “minus time-space or plus soul-time” (L 117) when he retrospectively asks forgiveness from Jean Farlow.

Moreover, the use of Einstein’s conception of space-time could explain why, in the opening chapters of the second part of the novel, the distinction that we normally make between time and space has almost totally disappeared from this part of Humbert’s narrative. As a consequence, the reader cannot possibly work out from Humbert’s lists of motel types, names, operators and other features and characters, precisely when, where, and in what order they were encountered in their yearlong travels across the USA. Humbert even feels that he “ha[s] to devise some expectation, some special point in space and time” for Lolita to look forward to in the future (L 170). Nabokov would also seem to be alluding to the notion of space-time when Humbert suddenly realises that “during the brief space of throb-time,” Lolita would have had ample time to pick up the rudiments of driving a car (L 260).

The concept of “relativity” appears to feature strongly in the novel. This is suggested by the relative differences in age and development between Humbert and his child lover, Lolita, and in the differing ages Humbert quotes for the onset of puberty in young girls, which he claims differs from place to place: “thirteen years and nine months in New York and Chicago” (L 46). We first encounter the concept of “relativity” when, instead of just telling us what age he
was when he met Annabel, Humbert gives it relative to when he met the object of his obsession: “about as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer” (L 7).

Similarly, the more his obsession with Lolita deepens the less precise becomes Humbert’s grasp of definite dates and times, and the more relativistic his account of events appears. For example, although Humbert tells us that his diary entries covered most of June 1947, he only gives the day of the week on which the events recorded happened. He never supplies the actual date, or on which Monday or Tuesday in the month these events occurred. So the reader has only a relative idea of when the events he describes happened, and can only say that they took place in and around the Haze house sometime during that month. By Chapter 13 of Part One, during which Lolita becomes “safely solipsised” (L 66), Humbert is using phrases such as “the Sunday after the Saturday already described” (L 62) and “Time: Sunday morning in June”(L 63) which is so relativistic a date and time that it is virtually meaningless to the reader.

The concept of “relativity” is also present in terms of morality when Humbert tries to excuse his so called aberrant behaviour, in relation to other crimes, such as rape and murder emphatically declaring: “We are not sex fiends! We do not rape as good soldiers do” and “no killers are we” (L 98). Later, he again attempts to relativise his crimes by insisting that Charlie Holmes, the boy Lolita meets at summer camp, is the rapist whilst “I am the therapist” (L 168). Then, playing the father, and resorting to a form of cultural relativism, he justifies his behaviour by quoting from a learned book to the effect that among Sicilians, “sexual relations between a father and his daughter are accepted as a matter of course” (L 169). Both historical and cultural moral relativism is introduced by Humbert’s sly endorsement of the “fascinating practices” of “the Ancient World B.C” (L 140).
Relativity also seems to be a feature of the novel’s structure. The twenty-five years before Humbert meets Lolita are sketched in just a few short chapters whereas the couple of chapters describing the two fateful nights at the Enchanted Hunters motel take up a similar amount of narrative space. This condensing and expanding of time in Lolita’s structure may even have been intended to mirror the time dilation effect mentioned in the analogy about the twins, where the rates at which time flows are different for observers moving relative to each other.

The analogy of the twins on earth and in space also shows that the position and movement of the observer is another crucial factor in Einstein’s relative space-time universe. In Lolita we at first appear to see everything from the singular viewpoint of the nymphet-obsessed narrator Humbert Humbert, whose solipsistic and increasingly paranoid infatuation with Lolita colours his every thought and action. However, we also see Humbert and Lolita from the perspective of Lolita’s mother, Charlotte Haze, who sees her daughter in a very different way from Humbert, and whose romantic illusions about her lodger ultimately prove fatal. Lolita herself sees the world, both through the prism of movies and popular magazines, and through the clear-sighted eyes of a precocious young girl growing up in the USA. This multiple observer perspective is perhaps encapsulated in the scene where Humbert first sees Lolita, who peers back at him over the top of her sunglasses.

Each of these characteristics of Einstein’s concept of space-time seems, therefore, to have some counterpart in Nabokov’s novel, and may also have influenced the author’s choice and use of symbols: the Hour Glass Lake, Lolita’s sunglasses and Humbert’s car. The next section will, therefore, focus on some of the novel’s main symbolic devices and the relationship they may have had to Einstein’s ideas on Relativity.
Symbols, Structure and Relativity

In his afterword to *Lolita* Nabokov claims to detest symbols and allegory: “everybody should know that I detest symbols and allegories” (L 357). Yet it is clear from critics’ analyses of the novel’s structure that at least one conspicuous symbolic device does play a part in it. The Hour Glass Lake is most obviously alluded to in the formal structure outlined by Hamrit. She points out that the subdivisions of Part One are echoed in Part Two of the novel using mirroring devices of repetition, duplication, inversion and reversion (3). The first ten chapters of Part One, which cover the period before Humbert meets Lolita, are mirrored by the last ten or so chapters of Part Two, which cover the period after Lolita leaves him. The next twelve chapters of Part One cover Humbert’s stay with Lolita’s mother, Charlotte Haze, until her death at the end of Chapter 22, which are mirrored by the chapters dealing with Humbert’s stay at Gaston’s house in Beardsley before he and Lolita set out on their second road trip. The final chapters of Part One, which narrate Humbert’s taking of Lolita from summer camp following her mother’s demise, up to the point where he has sex with her at the Enchanted Hunter’s motel, are echoed by their fugitive travels across the States for the next year until she returns to school at Beardsley. Hamrit also notes how time is condensed when Lolita does not figure in Humbert’s narrative and expanded when she does: “Thus, whereas the first twenty-four chapters cover twenty-four years, the final nine … cover only two days, or rather two nights, when Humbert and Lolita have sex for the first and second times” (Hamrit 2).

Another way of looking at the condensing and expansion of time in relation to Lolita’s presence in the text is to reverse it. This means seeing the condensing of time at the beginning and end of the novel as an expansion or widening of its world beyond the subject of Lolita, and viewing the expansion of time on either side of the events at the Enchanted Hunters as a condensing or narrowing of focus on Lolita at this central point. Thereby, the growing intensity of Humbert’s sexual obsession with Lolita echoes and makes the novel’s formal
symmetry strikingly reminiscent of the shape of Hour Glass Lake. The hour glass shape is also a very obvious and traditional symbol of time and its passing, one which Nabokov dispenses with quite early on in his book, and which is perhaps representative of the kind of symbol he says later in the afterword that he detests. Although Nabokov may have put this symbol to artful use in the book’s structure (for example, the series of lists that open Part Two are like sand flowing from the top to the bottom of an inverted hour glass), such a manifestly ancient and conventional symbol of time would also have been completely out of tune with the complex modern metaphor of space-time relativity. However, symbols obviously still had their uses, just as the equations of Newtonian physics still have theirs. The author perhaps needed to find less conventional and less hackneyed alternatives to what had become fairly rigid and predictable elements of the novel, and to find some way of creating a more complex, modern “reality” to challenge his twentieth-century readers.

Just as Hour Glass Lake may possibly be seen as a symbol, so too can sunglasses. Sunglasses, and other types of glasses that feature in the text, seem to be an oblique, but more appropriate post-Einstein symbol for what is now regarded as relative space-time. At first sight they would appear to have little or nothing to say about the concepts of time and space since they are clearly a pretty standard symbol of seeing or observing. A lost pair of sunglasses is the “only witness” to Humbert’s tryst with Annabel (L 12), and Lolita “peer[s] at [him] over dark glasses” when Humbert first sees her (L 41). Jenkins also makes note of the sunglasses as “a silent witness” (216) to Humbert’s failed scene with Annabel. However, as we have seen, the idea of the observer and the observed is central to the concept of space-time Relativity. Moreover, they are closely associated with time and space in Humbert’s confession. In the two examples cited above, for instance, both are associated with time in the sense that the one marks the last time Humbert sees Annabel alive, as she dies four months later, and the other indicates the first time he sees the person who would dominate the rest of his life – Lolita.
They are also associated with specific places in the sense that these events happen in the “princedom by the sea” (L 42) and the “Haze house” (L 38), which are arguably representative of the two poles of fantasy and reality between which Humbert seems to oscillate throughout the novel.

Sunglasses are more explicitly linked to time and space when Humbert is fantasising about how to get Lolita on her own during the forthcoming picnic at the lake with her and her mother: “I would say I had left my wrist watch or sunglasses in that glade yonder – and plunge with my nymphet into the wood” (L 58). This passage goes on to speak of the “Quest for the Glasses” (L 58), which he perhaps capitalises to mock their importance as the kind of symbols critics tend to search for. In this case they are not, however, just a symbol for observing, for which they are almost as clichéd a symbol as the hour glass is for time, but as an allusion to relative space-time. It is also perhaps worth noting that the shape of a pair of sunglasses is closely akin to that of the hour glass, but since glasses are common, functional objects, they could be more easily incorporated into the realistic fabric of the novel and thereby making them a more acceptable symbol to Nabokov.

An even less conspicuous and more subtly integrated symbolic device relating to Nabokov’s metaphor of space-time relativity in *Lolita* would appear to be Humbert’s car. He perhaps hints as much when Humbert points to a display of disassembled manikin limbs in a shop window, and before going back into the car, sarcastically says to Lolita: “Look well. Is that not rather a good symbol of something or other?” (L 257) Even his repeated and almost unvarying use of the term “car” seems to have been designed to draw attention to its significance in the narrative. Moreover, cars are the modern means by which people tend to traverse space and time, and like Lolita’s sunglasses, they are often associated in the novel with observing and being observed. They are also literally associated with some of the “sharp turns” (L 38) in Humbert’s life as when the limo he was being driven to the Haze house in
narrowly misses the dog that would go on to be the cause of his future wife’s death, an event which would later free him to “kidnap” and possess Lolita.

Humbert’s own car, which had belonged to Lolita’s mother, seems to function as his own solipsistic, self-deceiving and self-justifying “bubble” of relative space-time. In this bubble of the car, he becomes increasingly paranoid as he senses and fears that Lolita is growing up and distancing herself from him. It is also in this bubble that he has to escape by killing his equally solipsistic and amoral alter ego, the playwright Clare Quilty. Above all, it is in his car that Humbert, together with the “safely solipsized” Lolita, traverses Nabokov’s relativistic space-time, observing from it and being observed in it. Early in the novel he is watched from a car driven by Maximovich, the taxi-driver lover of his wife, Valeria. Then later, shortly after picking up Lolita following her mother’s death, they are pulled over and he is “stared” at by a “bettle-browed” highway patrolman looking for a car the same make as the one he is driving (L 127). This scene is mirrored in Part Two, when he is pulled over by two policemen, who “peer[s]” at him and Lolita with “malevolent curiosity” (L 194).

Humbert himself watches Lolita from the car. First, when he allows her to go to a roller-skating rink and has to remain in the car “among other (empty) cars,” then panics when she is temporarily missing from his sight (L 180). On later occasions, he reluctantly allows her to meet with her girlfriends on condition that he keeps an eye on them from a “discrete distance” (L 210). He feels that he “ha[s] to keep a very sharp eye on Lo” (L 179) as she attracts the attention of other men: including “garage fellows” and “goons in luxurious cars” (L 180). He also admits to going to “a strategic point” and watching other school girls of a similar age to Lolita from his car (L 181). Conversely, cars are also the subject of Humbert’s growing paranoia about being watched as he obsesses about being followed during the novel’s second road trip by “detective Tramp” in a series of vehicles that include a grey Chrysler, a Chevrolet, and Dodge “hallucinations” (L 246). Outside the car Humbert is vulnerable to
being found out, as he nearly is when he is seen naked with Lolita by a woman and her children (L 190). This means that outside this solipsistic “bubble,” he is confronted, albeit briefly, with the immortality and abnormality of his relations with his stepdaughter.

Significantly, Humbert’s car also features in Lolita’s gradual emancipation and eventual “escape” from his solipsistic fixation with her, and in his own parental recognition of the fact that she was growing up and slipping away from him. He wrongly imagines, for instance, that she is trying to escape on her bicycle from the house in Beardsley, and finds, because his car is in the garage, that he has no choice but to pursue his “winged fugitive” on foot (L 234). This suggests that he senses that she begins to develop her own, still childish, way of seeing and experiencing the world outside the grasp of his fantasy of her: beginning to travel in her own relative space-time. Again later when, as he waits outside the car in a gas station and Lolita “slips out of her seat and escapes to the rear of the premises” (L 239), he experiences the same kinds of feeling her mother might have done since “the sound of Charlotte’s last sob incongruously vibrate[s]” through him just as Lolita returns (L 240). This suggests that he too is beginning, through his growing “parental” love for Lolita to liberate himself from his own self-absorbed sexual fantasies and see her through a father’s eyes.

The novel’s closing chapters chart Humbert’s redemption in terms of his relationship with his car, and his killing of his equally solipsistic and amoral alter ego, Clare Quilty. Following Lolita’s refusal to leave with him in his car, Humbert has to temporarily abandon it when it ends up in a ditch. He then drives to Quilty’s home, outside which are parked a number of other cars, and between which his own car becomes sandwiched whilst he is inside. Having shot Quilty, and witnessed the final expiratory “bubble” (L 346) of blood in his mouth, Humbert squeezes his car out and drives off. Finally clear of Quilty’s house, he then veers over to “that queer mirror” side of the road and readily confronts the disapproval of “humanity” in the oncoming cars (L 349) thinking, in a possible allusion to Einstein’s physics
“that nothing could be nearer to the elimination of physical laws than deliberately driving on the wrong side of the road” (L 349). Humbert is finally compelled to abandon his car, which he had apparently christened Melmoth after a cursed and wandering fictional antihero.

In conclusion, it may be argued that his car would seem to be a symbol for the way Humbert’s consciousness navigates the solipsistic and morally relativistic world he has fashioned in accordance with his own predilections, delusions and prejudices. It is also a vehicle in which, for a brief time, he manages to co-opt Lolita into his selfish and perverse world, which is at odds with the shared morality of his fellow drivers. But as she begins to observe things for herself and he begins to see and love her as a daughter, this vehicle for his consciousness is no longer able to stay on the road.

**Relativity and Nabokov’s Characters/Observers**

In Einstein’s relative space-time universe, whether observing from a fixed position or from a car, each character sees the others, and themselves, from a different, or relative, viewpoint. In this “plurality of inhabited worlds” (L 11), as Humbert refers to it, the characters in *Lolita* both observe the others and at the same time are observed by them. The most iconic occurrence of the observer/observed theme is when Humbert first sets eyes on Lolita, who “peer[s]” at him over her “dark glasses” when he is looking at her. At the same time he imagines that, whilst Lolita is “blinking over those stern dark spectacles,” she sees him as “a great big handsome hulk of movieland manhood” (L 42). Later, Lolita’s mother Charlotte informs Humbert how she thinks her daughter sees herself, as opposed to the way that she herself sees her: “You see, she sees herself as a starlet, I see her as a sturdy, healthy, but decidedly homely kid. This, I guess is at the root of our troubles” (L 71). These passages catch something of the relativistic quality of the characters’ observations and judgements, not
just of others, but of themselves. However, whereas Lolita’s mother is to some extent capable of empathically perceiving her daughter’s “movieland” view of herself, Humbert immediately imposes his own self-regarding view of himself onto the young girl. Whilst Humbert’s self-regarding fantasy vision of Lolita later becomes “safely solipsized,” those that remain outside his solipsistic universe are little more than “ghosts,” who haunt the “spectral” (L 132) world outside it and only occasionally intrude into his consciousness. James Tweedie would seem to add weight to this reasoning when he states that Humbert’s solipsism “aims at near complete isolation, and the world beyond his insular existence is always confronted as a threat” (161).

The idea that the other characters who live in the “vast misty sea” that surround Humbert’s own “enchanted island,” (L 15) are little more than “ghosts” first surfaces in Dr Ray’s Foreword and as Tweedie says, “Lolita is a novel in which ghosts do walk” (169). After referring to the alternatives of some of the novel’s lesser characters, and to Lolita’s death in childbirth, he remarks that “the caretakers of the various cemeteries involved report that no ghosts walk” (L 2). When Charlotte has been killed in the car accident, and is therefore no longer within his control, Humbert immediately fears a “ghost” (L 114). However, as we have seen above, she only really intrudes into his conscious world when he fears that he has lost Lolita, and in a rare moment of empathy, he experiences her “last sob” (L 240) vibrating through him. Lolita herself is seen by Humbert as “a small impetuous ghost” when she takes off into the night on her bicycle and therefore [begins] the process of growing up and moving away from him (L 234). Sally M Badawi sees this move away from Humbert as an effort on Lolita’s part to stabilise her world (29). Later, after his failed attempt to make her return to him, Humbert feels that despite her calling him “dad” (L 303), he is nothing to her and refers to her as “my American sweet immortal dead love; for she is dead and immortal if you are reading this” (L 320). This is only metaphorically true as we know that Lolita dies two months after he does, but perhaps it alludes to the idea that “death,” like time, is also a relative
concept. Moreover, it echoes Charlotte’s earlier death after she has found out that, as she had said in her earlier love letter to him, she truly had meant “nothing … nothing at all” to him (L 74).

Humbert’s habit of seeing those who are no longer incorporated into his solipsistic domain as “dead” or “ghosts” is in stark and ironic contrast to the story of the barber’s son. In this episode it is only after the barber has finished talking that Humbert realises that his son “has been dead for the last thirty years” (L 242). The barber’s son has in fact remained alive in his father’s consciousness, and has, metaphorically speaking, been alive all that time. This is in contrast to Lolita and her mother, who are “dead” to Humbert, both metaphorically and in actuality. Humbert is himself a man haunted by ghosts, and this is to some extent what Quilty is – a ghost, whose presence for most of the novel is no more than hinted at. Even when they appear to meet at the Enchanted Hunters motel, we are not told who the mysterious character is who approaches him in the night. Since Quilty is in a sense Humbert’s other self, the side of him that has no self-deceiving illusions about his own guilt, he could be said to be haunted by himself. Tweedie (167) sees the fight between Quilty and Humbert as confirmation that “the two characters are essentially doubles, two sides of the same coin.” He is also a “ghost” to those who are more or less oblivious of him. Like the “perfect little beauty” whose arms passed “into me,” as if he wasn’t there, when she tightening up the strap of her roller skate (L 20). Similarly, he was like a ghost to those who rejected him, as Valeria had done in favour of the “Tsarist,” and “went on talking into me rather than to me” (L 29 my italics).

Hence, in Nabokov’s morally relativistic universe, it is not just Humbert who inhabits his own solipsistic world as though he is by far the most obvious, and in the case of his madness, the most extreme expression of it. This attitude or disposition is also to a lesser extent instanced by characters like Ms Pratt, the head of Beardsley College, who is indifferent to Humbert and his opinions, and so wrapped up in her own modish version of Freudian thought that she never
gets his name right, or suspects the nature of his real relationship with Lolita. Another example of his narrow, self-centred and self-justificatory approach to the world is Fredrick Beale, the man in the “thickly rimmed glasses” (L 114) who knocks down and kills Charlotte Haze. It is he who silently presents Humbert with a diagram he has made of the accident (ignoring the dog that was the real cause of the accident) in order to “demonstrate his absolute innocence and the recklessness of my wife” (L 115). Charlotte Haze can also be said to be guilty of being solipsistic in regard to her daughter, as she consistently sees her in negative terms, as when she underlines only Lolita´s most negative traits, indicating that she is, “aggressive, boisterous, critical, distrustful, impatient, irritable, inquisitive, listless, negativistic (underlined twice) and obstinate” (L 90). Humbert, however, being besotted with her, points out that Charlotte has ignored the comparatively positive adjectives she could have used to describe her such as “cheerful, co-operative, energetic, and so forth” (L 90).

The Hour Glass Lake, Lolita’s sunglasses and Humbert’s car could all perhaps be said to embody different but related aspects of a morally and culturally relativistic world. This world may be seen as being akin to Einstein’s new relativistic universe. This is a world in which Humbert and the other characters exist in their own metaphorical “bubble” of space-time, and like all of us, travel through life seeing everything from their own relatively solipsistic point of view.
Relativity and the meaning of Humbert’s “Madness”

If Humbert’s paedophilia is the most obvious manifestation of a more general and widespread phenomenon, then his “madness” is perhaps its most extreme expression since a madman is condemned to live in a world that bears little or no relation to the, albeit self-centred, “reality” that the rest of us inhabit. Badawi refers to Humbert’s world as “his private universe” and seeks to relate it to Humbert’s attempts to access the past (31). This final concluding section of my essay will, therefore, concentrate on the fragmentation and breakdown of Humbert’s mind to see how it may relate to the metaphor of relativity, and to its broader meaning within Nabokov’s great novel.

In Chapter 5 of the first part of the novel, Humbert Humbert tells us that his “world [is] split” due to his attempts to reject his body’s taboo desires (L 17). On his arrival in the USA, this fragmentation of Humbert’s mind leads him to suffering “a dreadful breakdown,” and being hospitalised twice in succession due to the conflict between “the solace of research” and his “excruciating desires” (L 34). He then suffers “another bout of insanity” or “melancholia” on his release and returns to “civilisation,” but is restored by playing up to the various diagnoses of his psychiatrists (L 36). By the time he meets Lolita, Humbert notes in his diary that he might have “another breakdown” if he stays in the Haze household any longer, “under the strain of this intolerable temptation” (L 51). This obsession with Lolita also compels him to take on a series of roles and masks relative to those of the other characters. For instance, just as he had played different roles in order to fool his doctors, he has to take on a number of differing roles in relation to Lolita and her mother Charlotte in order to sustain his fantasy life and hold on to his prize.

In relation to Lolita he has to play a series of self-justificatory roles, seeing himself as her dream man, the protector of her purity, her real father, the seduced lover,” her therapist, “her
daddum” (L 168), and finally to Quilty, her father. Likewise, in relation to Lolita’s mother, whom he only married to gain access to her child, Humbert has to act out the role of a loving and dutiful husband and that of a grieving widower after she has been killed. He is also forced to play the conscientious step-father in relation to other characters in the novel, like the Farrowes and Mrs. Pratt for example. In fact, Humbert finds that he has to play the same role in relation to just about everyone he encounters and not least in relation to himself if he is to maintain his sanity. Therefore, just as he is imprisoned for the murder of Quilty, Humbert is also imprisoned within his own self-deceiving and self-justifying world in which he can neither be himself nor relate to others in a truthful way.

That all this deception of himself and others takes its toll on Humbert’s self-possession can be seen when he and Lolita arrive at the Enchanted Hunters motel, where his mind shows signs of fragmenting again. In this instance he gets his own name wrong whilst rebuking the receptionist: “The name” I said coldly, “is not Humberg and not Humbug, but Herbert, I mean Humbert, and any room will do” (L 133). By the time Humbert meets Mrs Pratt at Beardsley, the fragmentation of his personality has possibly progressed to the point where the reader cannot be sure whether it is her or Humbert who repeatedly mispronounces his name since he never contradicts or rebukes her for it in his narrative.

Humbert’s growing isolation within his own solipsistic universe is a further contributory factor to his “madness.” Whilst Humbert’s fantasy of Lolita has become “safely solipsized” those that remain “outside any orbit of importance” (L 227) are little more than “ghosts” who haunt the “spectral” world beyond his consciousness and only occasionally intrude into it (L 132). Lolita herself is seen by Humbert as “a small impetuous ghost” when she takes off into the night on her bicycle” (L 234). After this failed attempt to make her return to him, he sees her as “my American sweet immortal dead love” (L 320). This unreal reaction to his rejection
is in ironic contrast to the story of the barber, where Humbert only realises that the barber´s son [has] been dead for the last thirty years” after he had finished talking about him (L 242).

Humbert is himself a man haunted by “ghosts”, as we have seen in the “Detective Trapp” section of the novel, where he descends into a paranoia believing he is being followed “by a veritable Proteus of the Highway” (L 258) and convinces himself that Trapp has taken Lolita and has “planted insulting pseudonyms” for his special benefit (L 283). He is even haunted by his own guilty self, Quilty, whose mysterious presence is only dimly sensed before he realises the role that he and the playwright have played in Lolita’s life. The tense and mutually uncomprehending conversation he has with Quilty at the Enchanted Hunters about the shared object of their passion is illustrative of the wilfully solipsistic realm they share with each other.

In thinking back on the crime he committed that night, Humbert comes to see what such obsessive and extreme solipsism has led him to do: “As I look back … at that strange and monstrous moment, I can only explain my behaviour then by the mechanism of that dream vacuum wherein revolves a deranged mind” (L 137). This chilling sense of isolation and the constant need to play a series of false roles, which have lead to paranoia and the fragmentation of his personality, could be said to represent the extreme consequences of living in a socially fragmented and morally relativistic world. This is a world where every individual to some degree or other lives in their own “dream vacuum,” has to some extent to play a series of different roles depending on who we are dealing with, and views the world through the more or less distorting lens of desire and delusion.
Conclusion

As mentioned in the Introduction, critical examinations of the concepts of time and space in *Lolita* have tended to fall into three more or less distinct camps: articles concerned with time, articles concerned with space and articles that deal with both space and time, but which nevertheless treat them separately. What I have tried to do is to look at the relationship between space and time in the novel as a complete whole, which led to examining how it may have been influenced by the concept of space-time in Einstein´s Theories of Relativity.

The line of argument has been based throughout on the proposition that certain elements of Einstein´s theories on space-time Relativity can be found in Nabokov´s *Lolita*. In order to give this proposition sound anchorage and focus I studied the use of symbols, characters as observers, and what possible bearing these elements may have on the meaning of the novel. I chose to deal with these aspects of Relativity in three separate sections. Firstly, in regard to certain time-related symbols in the novel I dealt with the Hour Glass Lake, Lolita’s sunglasses and Humbert’s car. Secondly, I studied Relativity in relation to some of the main and lesser characters/observers and how they each see the world from their own more or less relative viewpoint. Thirdly, I looked at the possible relationship between Nabokov’s characterisation of relative space-time and the meaning of Humbert Humbert’s “madness.”

It is my conclusion from studying these aspects of the novel that Nabokov’s metaphor for the morally relativistic post-war world inhabited by Humbert Humbert may be related to Einstein’s view of relative space-time, thereby applying a scientific outlook to literature and our view of the modern world. It may appear to be a preposterous idea that Nabokov may actually consciously have had Einstein’s Theories of Relativity in mind when he was writing *Lolita*. Whether he was aware of these theories or not to the extent I imply, my analysis of the work has shown that they have some bearing on Nabokov’s characterisation of time and space.
in his novel. This is particularly true about such aspects of the concept of relativity as time
dilation, the observer’s relative position in space-time, and the idea that each of us exist in our
own, “bubble” of space-time, do seem to have their counterparts in the novel.

In conclusion, I would after all like to argue that the idea that Nabokov was influenced by
Einstein’s theories when writing Lolita may not be as far-fetched as may first appear, and is
worth pursuing by literary critics. This idea could be leant some weight by the work of
Raymond M Vince, who has noted that ideas around space and time have changed throughout
history, and that there appears to be a relationship between the work of Scott Fitzgerald and
the ideas of Einstein (86). So perhaps it would also be of value for more research to be done
into the possible connections between the concept of relative space-time and Nabokov’s
characterisation of it in the novel Lolita.
Works Cited

Primary Source


Secondary Sources


