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Lana Del Rey's "Off to the Races" and Its Allusions to Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

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Abstract

No matter the era, ones always relate to the popular media whether it is literary words, song lyrics or movies. Yet, sometimes ones do not recognize the reference from a particular textual discourse swirling around them. From this premise, Lana Del Rey's "Off to the Races" is deemed as the perfect example of this issue. Lana Del Rey's "Off to the Races" is an intriguing song, for its lyrics are said to have some relations to Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita. For her adaptation on Nabokov's Lolita, Del Rey has been attacked for ostensible discrepancies on who Lolita really is. Thus, this study attempts to prove the relation between Lana Del Rey's "Off to the Races" to Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita through Julia Kristeva's theoretical ideas on intertextuality. The discussion of this study indicates that, indeed, there is a relation between Lana Del Rey's "Off to the Races" to Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita. The lyrics of "Off to the Races" contains several lines and phrases indicating that Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita plays important role in its meanings. However, the some adaptations and reversal of the relationship between Lolita and Humbert in "Off to the Races" brings an entirely altered meaning to the song than the meaning in the original text.

Keywords: *intertextuality, lyrics, Lolita.*

Introduction

Fire of my life, fire of my loins.

Ones might recognize this as the lyrics of Lana Del Rey's "Off to the Races". Others might recognize this phrase as the snippets of Nabokov's scandalous novel, *Lolita*. Both tell the stories of a young teenage girl who falls in love with an older male figure. Yet, both of them are written in totally different era. The former was written in 2011, while the latter was written in 1955 and also with completely different depiction of who Lolita is.

Elizabeth Woolridge Grant or also known by the stage name Lana Del ReyLana Del Rey, born as Elizabeth Woolridge Grant, was born on June 21, 1986 in New York. She is now considered as one of the most prominent figures in 'indie' music industry in America these days. Applying dark concept for most of her song lyrics, Lana Del Rey becomes widely accepted as the pop music female singer. So far, the most fascinating song lyrics suiting the dark concept of Lana Del Rey's style is "Off to the Races". It is said that Lana Del Rey has an obsession with Vladimir Nabokov's masterpiece, *Lolita*.

"Off to the Races" is often deemed as controversial since the criticism leveled against pop singer Lana Del Rey mainly raises a number of questions about a girl who chooses whether to exploit their sexual assets in order to make it to the top, or to refuse these pressures and risk. Through its lyrics, "Off to the Races" tells the story of a girl who falls in love with an older man. Since a lot opposed to their relationship, she asks him to come and save her.

Yet, both of Lana Del Rey's way of depicting the 'Lolita' in her lyrics are said to be in

contrast to Nabokov's *Lolita* which tells the story about a teen girl, Dolores Haze, who falls in love with her own stepfather, Humbert. It is safe to say that "Off to the Races" can be assumed as the embodiment of satire or even a parody of Nabokov's masterpiece, Lolita. Thus, this study attempt to discuss the allusions in Lana Del Rey's song lyrics entitled "Off to the Races".

Following the issue aforementioned, this study, in terms of methodology and scope of the study, is largely a textual analysis based research. Thus, a close reading to analyze the representation of who Lolita is as depicted by both Lana del Rey and Vladimir Nabokov is mandatory. Along with the close reading, this study also attempts to apply Julia Kristeva's theoretical view on intertextuality as the reading method to reveal the allusions of Nabokov's *Lolita* to Lana Del Rey's altered version of who Lolita is.

Intertextuality as Term and Concept

Intertextuality is introduced by Julia Kristeva as a derivation of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism theory. Dialogism theory, according to Bakhtin, a text appears as an interaction of distinct perspectives or ideologies, borne by the different authors. Bakhtin believes that the relation of meanings within a text is always open and dynamic for it opposes binary opposition as proposed by structuralists. This idea is adapted by Kristeva, which she concludes that no original text exists, for a text is said to be a mosaic of other texts (Culler, 1977). Intertextuality also signifies that a text is made up of other texts whether it is mentioned explicitly or implicitly by its author (Mambrol, 2016). Given this concept, intertextuality by means applies intersubjectivity, an awareness that within a text exists associations or connections between a text with the other texts, in its reading process.

According to Ratna (2015), intertextuality comes from the words inter and text, or in Latin *textus*, which is coined to illustrate the relationship between a text to other texts. Thus, in its simplest sense, intertextuality is a way of interpreting texts which focuses on the idea of texts' borrowing words and concepts from each other. With this impression, it can be assumed that, every writer, both before writing his text and during the writing process, is a reader of the texts written before his text. They either borrows from the prior or concurrent texts and discourses in the network through allusions, impressions, references, citations, quotations and connections or is affected by the other texts in some ways. Thus, an author's work will always have echoes and traces of the other texts to which it refers either directly or indirectly and either explicitly or implicitly. It will also have layers of meanings rather than a solid and stable meaning.

Further, Ratna also asserts the idea that when a text is read in the light of the texts to which it refers or from which it has traces, all of the assumptions and implications surrounding those referred texts will shape the critic's interpretation of the text in question. It is because a network of other texts provides the reader, critic and interpreter with the contexts of possible meanings and therefore it would not be misleading to say that his or her meditation on the meaning of the text at hand is shaped by the quotations from, absorptions and insertions in and transformation of another text or discourse.

In addition to Ratna arguments, it is said that intertextuality also foregrounds associations between a literary text and the vast cultural network. Since modern theories view text as something lacking in any kind of independent meaning, "the act of reading […] plunges us into a network of textual relations. To interpret a text, to discover its meaning, or meanings, is to trace those relations. Reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts" (Allen, 2000, p. 1). Hence, the intertextual analysis requires that the reader/interpreter pursue the intertextual echoes in a text in order to get the text's meanings.

To get a grasp of intertextuality, ones must have the common ground for a very fundamental concepts known as hypogram and pastiche. Hypogram is the concept introduced by Michael Rifatterre (1978) which means a propositional structure of the matrix of a text. A hypogram can be a single word, a

few words, a single sentence or even a string of sentences. In intertextuality, hypograms functions as the sign used by the readers of a text to give a glimpse of the relation between the text they are reading to other texts. While pastiche is a creative work that imitates another author or genre (Allen, 2000).

Recently, during the post-structuralism era, the original idea of intertextuality is frequently used in the analysis of literary and lyrical texts. While the term is ostensibly simple and refers to the relationships between texts, different scholars also apply intertextuality in some diverse ways. The two methods of viewing intertextuality which are proven useful for scholars include the relationships between musical ideas alongside with the relationships between textual, whether it is to read poetic or lyrical ideas. Many scholars, especially earlier ones, employ only one of these two methods. Based on the idea of intertextuality and its use by various musicologists, this thesis examines intertextuality as a complex phenomenon because of its dual nature, not in spite of it (Price, 2017).

Intertextuality, later on, becomes a term borrowed from literary criticism and employed in musicology since the 1980s, has replaced the earlier term *imitatio*, which served to show "the citation by one composer of a musical idea previously used by another composer." However, *imitatio* fell out of common use, as it implies a kind of specificity that intertextuality escapes. Intertextuality is ideal to "facilitate discussions of musical meaning" and serves as a safer term with regards to uncertain historical evidence. But because of its origins in literary criticism, the exact definition used by scholars in musicological works is at times difficult to pinpoint (Price, 2017).

In short, a text derives its meaning not from the author's creation but from its relation to other texts. Meaning becomes approximately exists in the network of textual links and can be found between a text and all the other texts, to which the text refers and relates. Hence, meaning is said to be embodied within a text and its relations to the other texts. Yet, the reader/interpreter cannot get a stable meaning of a text because the meaning is produced in the spaces between the texts and because the meaning is always shifty and elusive.

Summary of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

Lolita, written in 1955, is a provocative, scandalous, yet alluring novel by Russian author Vladimir Nabokov. It is a psychological and erotic thriller about a middle-aged man who has such a disturbing affair with barely legal twelve-year-old girl named Dolores Haze. The novel is narrated by HumbertHumbert (H.H), who writes his confession while in prison awaiting his murder trial. Humbert is a middle-aged European expatriate living in the United States. He is a hyper-civilized European who exemplifies Old World culture. He is highly-intellectual and well-educated despite the fact that he is mentally unstable. This amiable and debonair man is also having a depraved sexual orientation where he is absolutely lusting after young girls, who he refers to as the "nymphets."

The novel begins with a forward written by a fictional psychologist called John Ray, Jr., Ph.D. He explains that the novel was written by a man in prison, known by the pseudonym "HumbertHumbert." The author died of coronary thrombosis before his murder trial began. Ray received the manuscript from Humbert's lawyer. Ray acknowledges that the author writes beautifully about his despicable actions and hopes the novel encourages parents to raise their children properly. In addition to that, he predicts the novel will become popular among psychiatrists.

When the story begins, it starts with the description on the ways the narrator was raised on the French Riviera. His father owned the Hotel Mirana. As a thirteen–year-old, Humbert falls in love with 12-year old Annabel Leigh, who is the daughter of family friends. The two young lovers almost make love in a beachside cave but get interrupted by two men swimming. Humbert never gets to see his beloved Annabel again. She dies from typhoid a few months later, which haunts Humbert. Annabel is Humbert's ideal nymphet.

Humbert moves to Paris and London as a young man to receive a literary education. During this time, he remains attracted to young girls and tries to find excuses to be close to them. To satisfy his sexual desires, he visits prostitutes in Paris. Humbert, then, begins his career as a English literature teacher. For he has become teacher, he tries to quell his perverse sexual desires by marrying Valeria. Yet, his marriage does not end his obsession with young girls, who remind him of Annabel. The two are married for four years until she runs off with Maximovich, a Russian taxi driver.

After his failed marriage, Humbert moves to the United States. His uncle provides him with an annual stipend to help him immigrate. First, he lives in New York and writes a book on French literature while working at a university. After a decline in his mental health, he spends several years in and out of mental institutions. He holds a series of odd jobs including going to the Arctic on a scientific expedition.

After his release from the sanatorium, Humbert moves to suburban New England town. He lives as a boarder in the home of Charlotte Haze, a young widow who resembles a movie star. Charlotte dreams of moving up in the world and falls madly in love with the refined, educated, European Humbert. She has a 12-year old daughter named Dolores, also known as Lolita. Charlotte is prone to jealousy and views her daughter as a spoiled, bratty pest. Humbert falls in love with Lolita immediately when he spies her sunbathing.

While Charlotte falls for Humbert, he becomes obsessed with Lolita. He spies on her, finds excuses to touch her, and flirts with her. Lolita is a typical young girl interested in comics and singers. She wants to be a movie star. He also writes in a diary about his fantasies about the young girl. Charlotte sends Lolita off to summer camp to begin a romantic affair with Humbert. While Lolita attends summer camp, Charlotte and Humbert get married. Humbert does not marry Charlotte because he loves her, but rather to remain near Lolita and be her stepfather. Charlotte plans to send Lolita to a boarding school after she returns from camp. This announcement causes Humbert to consider killing Charlotte to have Lolita all to himself. While Lolita is at camp, Charlotte discovers Humbert's diary. She realizes that Lolita is the true object of her husband's affections. After confronting him, she storms out of the house bringing along his diary. However, while running across the street to escape Humbert's anger, she is hit by a car and dies instantly.

Automatically, Humbert becomes Lolita's legal guardian. Then Humber decides to pick her up from camp. For the next two years, Humbert and Lolita are travelling around the United States. They stay in motels, visit tourist attractions and all while having a sexual affair. Little does Humber know that Lolita is able to manipulate Humbert to give her anything she wants even when she proposes to settle down on a new town.

Afterwards, Humbert and Lolita settle in an East Coast college town. Humbert works as a lecturer at Beardsley College while Lolita attends a local school until they set off on another roadtrip. During the course of their travels, a man begins following them. After Lolita becomes ill, Humbert takes ger to the hospital. Humbert is furious when he discovers that a man claiming to be her uncle picked her up.

Humbert searches high and low for Lolita within the last two years. He finally finds Lolita, who is now married to an engineer named Dick, and is expecting a child. Humbert also learns that Clare Quilty, a playwright whom Lolita met while in a school play, was the man who took her from the hospital. Quilty was her lover until he wanted Lolita to pose for child pornography films and she refused. Upon hearing this, Humbert finds and kills Quilty and subsequently is arrested. In prison, he writes his memoir with the stipulation that it can only be published after Lolita's, or now known as Mrs. Richard F. Schiller, death because of childbirth (Nabokov, 2000).

Allusions in Lana Del Rey's "Off to the Races"

The archetype of nymph, or a nymphet, as Vladimir Nabokov names it in his personal take on the myth in the novel Lolita, can also

respectfully be traced in Lana Del Rey's adaptation in her song lyrics "Off to the Races". The allusions to Lolita in Lana Del Rey's lyrics to depict Nabokov's protagonist, Lolita, on the surface is rather willfully slutty than sexually victimized. This case, if ones were right to assume, is a form of adaptation of the original Lolita text. The Nabokov references in Del Rey's lyrics range from Lolita-like speakers who relate personal experiences similar to those of Nabokov's title character to unmistakable references to her name as well as quotations from the novel.

On the first stanza of the lyrics, Lana Del Rey mentions "my old man is a bad man". Generally speaking "my old man" is a term given to a paternal figure, however in this lyrics, the speaker calls her love interest by this name. By comparing the first line to the entire plot of the novel, it is safe to assume that the speaker talks about Humbert's deviant behaviour during her days with Lolita when he tells Lolita that he is "just [her] old man, a dream dad protecting his dream daughter" (Nabokov, 2000, p. 98), while Lolita blindly trusts his judgement.

The following stanza where the speaker addresses her love interest that she does not mind being watched when she swim in "white bikini" while her lover sips cocktail by the pool (Rey, 2011). Though it is less explicit, Del Rey, again, borrows from Nabokov's Lolita through the usage of the phrase "glimmering darling" (Rey, 2011). This phrase refers to Humbert when he observes a sleeping Lolita, he describes his desire to Lolita by "move[s] toward my glimmering darling, stopping or retreating every time I thought she stirre[s] or [is] about to stir" (Nabokov, 2000, p. 94). The lyrical borrowings in this songs are not accidental. All of them somehow help to portray the features of the relationship whose story the artist tries to narrate.

Through this stanza, the evidence that the speaker might refer to Lolita is the similarity where Nabokov's *Lolita* goes on a swimming pool in California because she "adored brilliant water" and he will always "settle down in the rich post-meridian shade after [his] own demure dip, and there [he] would sit" (Nabokov, 2000, p. 106). Yet, Del Rey's Humbert and Lolita also portrays a contrast in which Humbert is the epitome of high culture, while Lolita is the epitome of low culture indicated from the way Humbert merely observing Lolita swimming while "sipping on [his] Black Cristal" and Lolita who has a familiarity with chasers drinks (Rey, 2011).

On the third stanza, the most obvious allusion is given by Del Rey, for the phrases "light of my life, fire in my loins" has the closest similarity to "light of my life, fire of my loins", the most iconic introductory line, of which Humbert says when he describes the way Lolita grabs his heart (Nabokov, 2000, p. 1). Given such evidence, the following lines also continues with less poetic but more straight-forward for they say

Be a good baby do what I want […]
Gimme them gold coins
Gimme them coins (Rey, 2011)

The mentioned lines show that they surely allude very specifically to the nature of Lolita and Humbert's relationship later on in the novel, based on the exchange of money for sex. After getting what she wants, Del Rey illustrate her Lolita to

… off to the races, cases
Of Bacardi chasers
Chasing me all over town 20
'Cause he knows I'm wasted,
Facing time again at Riker's Island
And [she] won't get out (Rey, 2011)

The lined mentioned illustrate Lolita and Humbert's relationship which revolves around the nature of give-and-take. While Nabokov's portrayal of his Lolita as the "subject and object of every foul poster" (Nabokov, 2000, p. 97), it illustrates an important point about woman's place in such consumerism nature. Del Rey's Lolita portrays this portrait of an insatiable female desire for things such as luxurious alcoholic drink called Bacardi. Not only that, Del Rey's Lolita also seems to go after pleasurable activities for she often ask her older lover to take her to "Chateau Marmont", "Cipriani" and "Coney Island" (Rey, 2011) in exchange of sexual intercourse with Humbert.

Further, the description of Lolita and Humbert's relationship also indicates that while Humbert in Nabokov's *Lolita* is the one who is obsessed to Lolita and always freely advocates whenever and wherever possible, yet the opposite occurrence is depicted in "Off to the Races". The fact that Lolita in Nabokov's novel is predominantly spoken about and described, not speaking for herself, to the reader, makes her seem a lot like a ghost, rather than a real character. Nothing about her is direct, everything goes through a synthesis of Humbert's mind and mouth. Her nymphic nature, thus, seems more accurate because just as a nymph she often seems as if she was not really there, having a standpoint and her own voice. In addition, Lana Del Rey's Lolita is depicted as t a child yet also an adult, or an innocent one versus the evil one, as can be seen from the following stanza

My old man is, a tough man
But he got a soul as sweet as blood red jam
And he shows me, he knows me, every inch of my tar black soul
He doesn't mind I have a flat broke down life
In fact he says he thinks it's what he might like about me, admires me
The way I roll like a rolling stone
(Rey, 2011).

Further, the stemming from the rhetoric that the myth of nymphet and its portrayal in the novel present, the male counterpart of the nymphet represents both an active hunter who makes the nymphet exist because he is the one that sees her as a nymphet, and a passive victim who then is obsessed by the nymphet and cannot escape. The designation of roles within this paradigm then directly influences the distribution of power within the two participants. When the male counterparts are mentioned, they are always seen through the perception of Del Rey's embodiment of Lolita. Thus give her the power and the voice to tell a story, and describe people and situations from her perception. Such roles distribution thus offers the opposition to the way the story is told in Nabokov's novel, where Lolita is the submissive one, the one that is talked about.

Then, in the last stanza, when the speaker address that [her] old man is a thief (Rey, 2011), it implies the alteration of the relationship between Lolita and Humbert in the hypogram of the text, Nabokov's *Lolita*. In Del Rey's "Off to the Races, throughout the whole story, the unnamed male lover of Lolita does not treat her well. Yet, later on she continues with saying that despite him treating her the way he does, she is "[going to] stay and pray with him till the end" (Rey, 2011). The conflict of feeling the mistreatment from the side of a dominant male character, and at the same time having no other choice than staying with him. It represents an allusion to the conflicted feelings Lolita has within herself until she decides to run away from Humbert. The theft described earlier may serve as a reference to different experiences of Nabokov's *Lolita*, such as Humbert deflowering Lolita and depraving her of all including her innocence, personal time and space, and above all her childhood. As shown by the lines

I'm gonna stay and pray with him till the end
But I trust in the decision of the law
To watch over us
Take him when he may, if he may
I'm not afraid to say
That I'd die without him
Who else is gonna put up with me this way?
I need you, I breathe you, I'll never leave you
They would rue the day, I was alone without you

Given this premise, these line directly points at the kind of relationship between Lolita and Humbert, particularly when Lolita realizes that she has been manipulated by Humbert to fulfil his perverse desire. It is more than apparent that she, deliberately or not, is the man's little girl, obeying his orders and apologizing in case of not doing so, the submissive one that feels incomplete without the man. This song thus may leave its audience puzzled, since the woman's position in the story it narrates is very much undermined by the male character's position and is thus controlled and entrapped by him.

Conclusion

According to the discussion aforementioned, the exploration of various spheres of cultural and artistic representations of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* is found within Lana Del Rey's "Off to the Races" song lyrics. The primary allusions of Lana Del Rey's Lolita lies within the adaptation of the original hypogram, that is Nabokov's *Lolita*, to the rather lustful Lolita in the pastiche text, or Lana Del Rey's "Off to the Races". However, Del Rey alludes these adaptations and reversed the relationship between Lolita and Humbert, so that the meaning of the song is altered from the original text in the novel. While Nabokov's Lolita is depicted as passive, gullible, and exploited, Del Rey's version of Lolita is the one who is more active, cunning, and manipulating. By doing so, the main idea of intertextuality becomes rather well embodied in Lana Del Rey's "Off to the Races".

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