

Note: this is a reproduction of one entry in the online reading journal of a student in CPLS V3235: Imagining the Self (Spring semester, 2010), hosted on Livejournal.com. It includes my feedback and the student's responses to my feedback (in the comments section at the end).

Imagining the Self

Lolita

• 2nd May, 2010 at 12:49 PM

 db [STUDENT] wrote:

We talked in class about the writing failure on p.109 ("Don't think I can go on. Heart, head— everything. Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita... Repeat till the page is full, printer"), which reminded me a lot of what I had just been writing about re: Dante's failure of poetry. Just as in Dante, the failure of words here is especially powerful, because *Lolita* is all about language and the power of words and the joys of playing with them. When there are no other words than "Lolita," he makes her into filler: her name is the negation, or failure of writing. In that sense, she is the antithesis of HH, but it also makes her into nothingness and really cheapens her. Also, by making her name the one thing he CAN grasp when the entirety of both the English and French languages fails him, HH appropriates her and asserts his "ownership" over her even more.

Marginally related to the text but really I just want to talk about stuff relating to what I've been thinking about anyways:

We also talked about how the "perfect childhood" justification recalls Rousseau (R: "if only you have a perfect childhood, you'll be fine" HH: "well, I did have a perfect childhood, so I must be fine!"). You could definitely argue that this book is an attempt to prove Rousseau wrong, but I think it's more a demonstration of what happens if you take him seriously. For me, *Emile* is really frustrating to read because it declares that you have nothing to learn from other people. Rousseau tells us that you don't need to learn to understand and empathize with others, and in fact SHOULD'N'T be swayed by any other people: "Our first duties are to ourselves; our first feelings are centered on self; all our instincts are at first directed to our own preservation and our own welfare. Thus the first notion of justice springs not from what we owe to others but from what is due to us." This valorization of individualism drives me *crazy* both because it leads to the kind of solipsism we see in HH, but also because it arguably became the foundation of individualism in Western society. I wonder (in a dreaming-of-utopia-sort-of-way) how the world would be different without such an emphasis on the self, the whole self and nothing but the self. Could the West learn to listen to those less powerful?

Rousseau had such a great effect on the Rights of Man, which in turn was the foundation of the UDHR - and individualism in that document has led to all sorts of issues: the prioritization of civil political rights over economic, social and cultural rights, the failure to provide effectively for refugees (Hannah Arendt argues that the real loss of human rights comes not from the loss of specific rights, but rather from the loss of a political community - a perspective which the HR regime does not take into consideration) to name a couple examples. But I wonder about this imaginary world in which the West didn't get so wrapped up in itself... would we have seen colonialism? The extermination of Native American populations? The extreme poverty gap? Etc...

(I realize this seems really unrelated to the text, BUT I probably wouldn't have been so frustrated with *Emile* if it weren't for this class, and our discussions earlier in this journal about understanding other people, so... thanks.)

My world was split → Humbert Humbert

Talking about himself in the third person: sets up another person/narrator who is sympathetic - a way to distance himself from the first person narrative

Humbert the Terrible debating with Humbert the Small - as though he is not in control of the various Humberts that make up his self

ETA:

I think the last line "And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita" is really, creepily

prescient in a Pechorin-esque "you are going to die" sort of way. It *is* the ONLY immortality she will have, because she *won't* have the family immortality that he is supposedly allowing her to enjoy ("live long, my love") - in writing this line he is depriving her of that chance. She must die to fulfill this statement/HH's story, in exactly the same way that the dude at the end of *Hero of our Time* has to die. Creepy.

Also, I was talking to Marin about creator/creation relationships and I think it would be SO COOL in so many ways to compare *Lolita* with *Frankenstein* and I really wish that this semester was longer and/or that I didn't have to write a paper right now so I could think about this more and say something insightful about the comparison, but alas.

P.S. I meant to ask, but do you by any chance know of any good autobiographies by refugees or slum-dwellers? I'm thinking particularly post-WWII, and the more recent the better... am looking for summer reading that will relate to my summer plans and for ways of incorporating some literature into my senior thesis.

Comments

 [rjs19](#) [INSTRUCTOR]

9th May, 2010 22:17 (UTC)

Randomly responding, out of order, to a couple of things that caught my eye here as the page was loading:

-- Will think about the autobiographies of refugees/slum-dwellers question. Two rather different categories, of course.

-- I think that bit about "the only immortality you and I my share, my Lolita" is totally a rip-off of Lermontov, the rip-off not of a plagiarist but of an observant reader, one who has thought through all the implications that Lermontov leaves, well, implicit, and is determined to write a novel exploring them in more detail.

-- Think you are probably right about Rousseau underwriting post-Enlightenment individualism (in political thought). The thing is that I think this really does come naturally. Augustine is lamenting it all through the early parts of HIS *Confessions*: "I look at other babies and realize what a self-centered so-and-so I myself must have been at that age!" (not an actual quote). And yes, it leads to the Humbert kind of thinking where one's own emotions and intentions are all that count and, in any given relationship, it's the other person who's doing it wrong if things don't go well (be it in love or a business venture or an attempt at charity or whatever). Even the best of us are susceptible to this: it expresses itself in the locution "I'm sorry if..." (instead of "I'm sorry *that*..."); other people's perceptions never seem quite as authoritative as our own.

Yes, a "world in which the West didn't get so wrapped up in itself" is much to be desired. I do think Rousseau's individualism doesn't have to be a bad thing, if it is taken in the way he means it to be taken, that other people are individuals too, and you can't force them to be the same kind of individual you are. That is, it can be (as he argues) a path to empathy. But it does rather overlook community (to be sure, a concept not enormously influential in Rousseau's own life, since no one liked him). And it leads to the kind of blind spot you point out: that when other people aren't expressing their individuality in a way that is intelligible to Rousseau (i.e. through the unique set of privileges available to the literate European male) it doesn't look like individuality and thus doesn't get the same same respect or protections.

 [db](#) [STUDENT]

2nd May, 2010 17:15 (UTC)

I feel like I need to add a note about the first point, namely that it assumes that we can take HH seriously at that moment, and that he's not just using a rhetorical device here. And probably the fact that he writes "repeat till the page is full, printer" is a sign that he *is* just writing it rhetorically, because there would be some added authenticity to the idea that he literally can't think of anything but the name over and over again if he actually wrote it out more than nine times. It's like Nabokov is showing us where HH is trying to manipulate us.


But, HH understands this rhetorical device (the only thing that can communicate my feelings is her name) as proving his continuing love and pining for Lolita - it still fits the "I can't speak" model that we've seen in

Dante, etc - so whether he is doing it consciously or not, he still substitutes Lolita's name for the failure of language/communication, so maybe it doesn't really matter whether or not it's just rhetorical?

 rjs19 [INSTRUCTOR]

9th May, 2010 22:28 (UTC)

I totally agree that it follows Dante's "untellability" model. But the big problem here and everywhere is that "Lolita" is not the name of anyone who exists outside Humbert's head; to utter this name is to efface the real girl, so that at the moment HH is asserting the failure of language he's also using language to obliterate reality, rather than, as in Dante's case, using language (or the absence of language; or rather, language *about* the absence of language) to convey the magnitude of the (supposed) reality, to assert the primacy of experience over poetry. Incidentally, it's interesting to contemplate why the printer does not comply with Humbert's instruction here.

 db [STUDENT]

19th May, 2010 03:14 (UTC)

The printer's decision not to comply w/ HH would be JRJr's decision, right? Since he reads HH's narrative as the story of someone who is psychologically unstable and scientifically, rather than artistically, interesting, [completely random question, but I've never gotten a definitive answer: is the comma after "artistically" correct?] we know that he doesn't buy into HH's artistic world. He clearly sees that HH is trying to craft this story as a love story and the relationship as a work of art, because there's that part where he says that HH's invented mask has to remain because that's what HH wanted. This seems to contradict his not complying with the instructions to the printer, but my feeling is that JRJr *does* want to take the mask away, or at least to make sure that the reader sees the mask. Regardless of whether or not he says he wants to keep the mask in place, I still think JRJr reads this much more as an autobiography than HH had intended it to be read, and therefore cares about showing us HH without the artistic flourishes with which HH would hide himself.

Re: slum-dwellers and refugees - the fascinating thing about it is that they *aren't* really different categories, in a lot of respects, and I'm hypothesizing that I would see a lot of similarities in their narratives: aside from very similar living conditions and day-to-day challenges, both are typically silenced by the state and aid discourse. I know refugees are generally afforded very little (if any) personal/collective agency, and, while I think slum-dwellers tend to have more agency (especially on a day-to-day, personal level), they may not have much on an economic or long-term scale. Plus, given that many of today's slum-dwellers are economic migrants or trafficking victims, there may be similar tropes of exile/romanticized homes. Or at least, that's what I think I'll find... But it's frustrating because those are some of the factors that contribute to the lack of literature available in the voices of refugees/slum-dwellers themselves—which leads to the comical phenomenon of scholars complaining about how other scholars don't incorporate those voices into their arguments while simultaneously also not doing so.

And yes, I think I mostly meant the rant about Rousseau on a broader/society-wide scale. I just still think there's a big difference between seeing someone else (or a different culture) as an individual (or as a culture) who can't be forced to be the same kind of individual as you are and seeing someone else as an individual from whom you could learn something. Also, reconciling yourself to the fact that no one likes you by claiming that everyone should try not to be liked by other people is not too different from imposing certain ways of life on other people because a certain lifestyle worked for you.

Do you think that authors are responsible for how their works are misread? (I don't just mean that in regards to Rousseau, but in general) How does one draw the line between the author's responsibility to make sure the reader understands him/her and the reader's responsibility to be a "good" reader? Does it depend on the genre of writing?

This is a much longer response than I meant to write, but I'm on a long, boring, traffic-stalled bus ride sans internet, and I guess I used up my napping quota when I fell asleep on my neighbor on the 1 train today (who conveniently shrugged me off with disgust at exactly my stop!).