



## The unreliability of Dr. Sheppard and Humbert Humbert

A study of the unreliable narrators in Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and Nabokov's *Lolita*

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## **Abstract**

The concept of the unreliable narrator has been studied in academic circles for the last fifty years. When an author decides to create unreliable narration, there is a reason for it. This essay compares the unreliability in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, using theories formulated by Tamar Yacobi, Bruno Zerweck, Therese Heyd, James Phelan and Amit Marcus. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* the technique of other-deceptive narration is used by Christie. In *Lolita* the unreliability is complex. Using both other-deception and self-deception to create discrepancies between descriptions of the same event and phenomenon, Nabokov succeeds in creating an intricate unreliability. The effects of the unreliability in both novels, however, create an emotional bond between the reader and the narrator. The reader can be emotionally cathected to the narrator, even if the narrator is clearly a criminal.

## **Keywords**

English Literature, Unreliable narrator, *Lolita*, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Nabokov, Christie

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## **Introduction**

The unreliable narrator, overtly distorting the truth, or covertly omitting relevant information has been an important part of Western literature for the last hundred years. Not knowing if you can trust a narrator's tale is not simply a matter of trust, it also brings something extra to the narration you are taking part in. Whether it is the narrator in *Fight Club*, Kevin Spacey's con man in *The Usual Suspects* or Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, the effect is the same. Their methods vary, and their intentions are not always clear to the reader. In his article "Historicizing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative Fiction" (2001), Bruno Zerweck points out that "it is only against the background of the realist norm of a narrative that unreliability can be detected, because the unreliable narrator depends on the existence of a counterpart, the reliable narrator, who is supposed to give a 'true' account of fictional events" (159).

Dealing with works of fiction the question about reliability is of course relative since fiction is by definition something that an author has made up in one way or another. Convincing the reader of the narrator's reliability is dependent on the fictional context of that novel. In order to be able to use unreliable narrators they have to break with the tradition of reliable narrators. They are in that way dependent on the reader's expectations on a narrator's reliability. Humbert Humbert in Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) and Dr. Sheppard in Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) are both unreliable narrators.

In this essay I will analyze the narration in Nabokov's *Lolita* and Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and compare what the authors accomplish by using different techniques of unreliable narration. The aim is to demonstrate that both novels' unreliability has the effect of creating an emotional bond between the reader and the narrator.

The definition of the unreliable narrator has been discussed in academic circles for the last fifty years, ever since Wayne C. Booth coined the term in the seminal *The Rhetoric of Fiction* in 1961. This essay will use the cognitive definitions by Tamar Yacobi, Bruno Zerweck, James Phelan and Amit Marcus, all of which will be introduced in the Theory section.

## **Background**

Agatha Christie was born in Devon, England in 1890. The authors of *Agatha Christie – a Reader's Companion* (2004) explain that she is one of the most widely published authors in the world and is known as the Queen of Crime (Wagstaff and Poole 8). Inspired by the

detective novels of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Christie began to write detective novels of her own. In 1926 she published her sixth novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. This novel was to be a breakthrough for Christie as it established her as a bestseller of the popular detective genre (Wagstaff and Poole 44). She died in 1976.

*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is the third novel with the retired French detective Hercule Poirot. It is narrated by Dr. James Sheppard, who is a practicing doctor in the small village of King's Abbott. The plot of the novel is built around Mrs. Ferrars' suicide and the murder of Roger Ackroyd. Dr. Sheppard assists Poirot who is asked to investigate the murder. The whole household of Roger Ackroyd is suspected of the murder, and the novel deals with the clues and secrets surrounding these persons. At the same time Dr. Sheppard documents what Poirot finds out. The clues seem to be pointing in one direction, but as Poirot concludes his investigation he accuses Dr. Sheppard, the novel's narrator, of the murder. It turns out that it was Dr. Sheppard who was blackmailing Mrs. Ferrars for poisoning her husband, and that Dr. Sheppard is the one who murdered Roger Ackroyd. The novel ends with Dr. Sheppard committing suicide in order to keep his sister from shame and himself from being sent to prison.

Vladimir Nabokov was born in Russia in 1899. Alfred Appel, the author of *The Annotated Lolita* (1991), writes how Nabokov was born into a wealthy family and would later describe his childhood as perfect and happy. When the October Revolution came in Russia his family was forced to flee to Western Europe (17). In Berlin he met his future wife, Vera, a Jewish-Russian woman. Because of the growing anti-Semitism movement in Germany the family moved to Paris. When the German army closed in on Paris during the Second World War, the family fled to America. *Lolita* was written when Nabokov was travelling across America on butterfly-collection trips. He used locations he visited and people he met in the novel. Nabokov later expressed that he often felt doubt and wanted to burn the unfinished manuscript, but his wife stopped him. He finished *Lolita* in 1953 and after a few years of hesitant reception, the success of the novel was a fact. Nabokov died in 1977 (Appel 18).

*Lolita* is about the obsession that the novel's narrator Humbert Humbert has for a twelve year-old girl, Dolores. The reader becomes acquainted with Humbert through his sophisticated language as he narrates the events of a few years during his relations with Dolores. He first meets her when he moves into her mother's house. His obsession with Dolores is instantaneous and the novel soon develops into a description of his feelings and plotting to snare Dolores. Humbert marries Dolores mother Charlotte in order to be closer to Dolores. When Dolores mother Charlotte suddenly dies, Humbert takes care of Dolores and

sets out on a journey across America in order to hide his paedophilic intentions. After a few years, Dolores elopes from Humbert who tries to find her and broods on revenge against the man he believes kidnapped her. A few years later, Humbert receives a letter from Dolores asking for money. She is married and pregnant. Humbert travels to meet her and learns the identity of the man with whom she eloped. Humbert then traces him down and kills him. Awaiting trial for murder, Humbert writes the manuscript, which is later to be published as this novel.

### **Initial reception of the novels**

The early reviews of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* when it was published in June 1926 ranged from celebrations to disappointment. According to Laura Thompson, author of the biography *Agatha – an English Mystery* (2009) the novel was celebrated as a great success by several reviewers (164). Wagstaff and Poole explain that “the *New Chronicle* dismissed it as a tasteless and unfortunate let-down by a writer we had grown to admire” (48). In the detective fiction genre to which this novel belongs the solution should be accessible to the reader. The authors of *Agatha Christie: A Reader’s Companion*, explain that there was an organization of crime authors known as The Detection Club. They had formulated rules for the genre to maintain high standards and believed that Christie had broken them with this novel by hiding the murderer too well and in an unconventional way (Wagstaff and Poole 44). However several renowned authors came to Christie’s defence and claimed that her novel was brilliant (45). Thompson defends Christie’s opinion, that she had done nothing wrong by explaining: “Agatha was not deceiving them. Her words simply convey exactly what is needed” (165). Thompson shows the ingenious design of the language with which Dr. Sheppard’s deception is created.

*Lolita* is Vladimir Nabokov’s most famous work. After being rejected by several publishers it was published in France in 1955. Some early reviews describe *Lolita* as pornography; and there was a moral outcry. Articles such as “*Lolita: Literature or Pornography*” published by the *Sunday Review* and written by George Baker in 1957, demonstrate this reception. The book was consequently banned in several countries. According to Julian Connolly, author of the book, *A Readers Guide to Nabokov’s Lolita* (2009), the early interpretation and reading of this book resulted in a discussion about “if this book should even have been published” (141). The early reviewers’ opinion was that the perspective of the protagonist in the novel was not defensible at all. The growing success of *Lolita* came in small steps. After being published in France the novel gained popularity and

received a few good reviews. According to Appel one especially important review was in the British newspaper *Sunday Express* early in 1956, where the columnist Graham Greene named *Lolita* as one of the best books of 1955 (34). Because it was named one of the best books by Graham Greene, *The New York Times Book Review* published a lengthy column on the novel in 1956. The banning of the novel in several countries as well as the accusation of pornography did inspire the public interest in the novel and the few copies that were available quickly sold out. Connolly explains that Nabokov defended his work in two letters in which he stated that *Lolita* was not a pornographic novel but rather a work of art (6). The demand for the novel resulted in the ban being lifted and it was published in America in 1959 (7). The great demand for the controversial novel has contributed to its success ever since.

### **Literature review: *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd***

Searching the MLA database for “Agatha Christie AND The Murder of Roger Ackroyd” returns 13 hits. While the search term “Agatha Christie” returns 221 hits. This shows that not much has been written in academic circles about *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, while Christie has received more attention.

The entries date from 1972 up until 2011. That there are no entries between the date of publication in 1926 and 1972 is interesting because it shows that there was little academic interest in the novel during this period. This is probably due to the mainstream popularity of the detective genre. As part of popular culture the novel was simply not viewed as something worthy of academic study.

The titles of the earliest entries such as and Mary Lewis Chapman’s “A Crisis in the Private Life of Dame Agatha and The Murder of Roger Ackroyd” (1976), suggests that there was not much focus on the novel itself, but rather on Christie. It is not until 1990 with the publication of “Controlling Discourse in Detective Fiction: Or, Caring Very Much Who Killed Roger Ackroyd”, that Carl R. Lovitt took another approach to the novel, namely a study of the language. Here the focus is on how Christie is able to hide the murder in plain sight through her use of language. Using a semiotic approach, Sara Gesuato also studies the language in the novel in her article “Textually Interesting Aspects of Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*” (1990). A majority of the academic studies done on the novel focus on the text. Studying the language is also the approach used by Theresa Heyd in her article “Understanding and Handling Unreliable Narratives: A Pragmatic Model and Method” (2006). In this article Heyd uses a pragmatic approach to the text in the novel. By applying the maxims of the Cooperative Principle formulated by the British language philosopher Paul

Grice, Heyd is able to classify what kind of unreliability the narrator in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, represents.

Based on these articles it is safe to conclude that the language in the novel has been subject to several studies. The pragmatic approach to unreliable narrators is however outside the scope of this essay. I will be using the cognitive approach where the reader is in focus instead of the language. There are no articles with this focus in the MLA result list for this novel. However, there are several articles using cognitive theory that use *Lolita* as a primary source, these will be presented in the next section and the theory they present will also be used to analyse Christie's novel in comparison with *Lolita*.

### **Literature review: *Lolita***

A search in the MLA database for "Nabokov AND Lolita" returns 679 hits. Comparing this to the 13 hits of the previous novel shows that there has been and is a great deal more academic interest in *Lolita*.

The titles of the early publications demonstrate the moral perspective of Nabokov's novel. Titles such as "*Lolita: Literature or Pornography*" by George Baker (1957) and "The morality of *Lolita*" by Joseph Gold (1966) bear witness to this perspective. The other main perspective that can be identified are attempts to place Nabokov's novel in relation to other authors. F W Dupee's article "*Lolita* in America" (1959), "Doctor Zhivago and *Lolita*" by Mark Slonim (1959) and Arthur DuBois "Poe and *Lolita*" (1964) are a few of the titles that express the attempts in this direction. Comparing *Lolita* with other works is thus a common theme which is present in more recent publications as well. One further example of such an article is "Lewis Carroll and *Lolita*: A New reading" written by Jeffrey Meyers (2011).

Another theme that starts to appear after 1980 is a comparison between the film adaptation by Stanley Kubrick and the original novel. Titles such as "Pistols and Cherry Pies: *Lolita* from Page to Screen" by Dan Burns (1984) and Sarah Miles Watts' "*Lolita*: Fiction into Films without Fantasy" (2001) bear witness to this perspective being explored.

In recent articles the conflict between contemporary moral values and *Lolita* is evident for example in Kim Idol's article "Rape and Regret: Construction and Reconstruction of the Molested Girl in Popular Culture" (2011), and in "Framing *Lolita*: Is There a Woman in the Text?" by Linda Kaufmann (1989). They both explore how the image of a *femme-fatale* is created in literature and how it relates to contemporary society.

Bruno Zerweck's article "Historicizing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative Fiction" (2001) uses the narrator in *Lolita* to exemplify



unintentional self-incrimination (157). Zerweck presents the history of unreliable narration and remarks on how there has been a shift towards more reader-centred perspectives: “Instead of relying on the device of the implied author and a text-centred analysis of unreliable narration, narrative unreliability can be reconceptualized in the context of frame theory and of readers’ cognitive strategies” (151). Moving away from the study of the text as a self-contained element to studying the text as a part of contemporary cultural values will bring new perspectives to the concept of the unreliable narrator, such as the cognitive approach. Zerweck concludes that there are two different perspectives on *Lolita*. Zerweck references “Fictional Reliability as a Communicative Problem” (1981) by Tamar Yacobi and uses her definition of reader centred unreliability to argue that if *Lolita* is read with a real-world perspective or with a fictional perspective the outcome and interpretation of the unreliability of the novel’s narrator will vary (165). The reader will have to decide to which they prefer to adhere. Yacobi’s theory on the unreliable narrator will be presented in the next chapter.

Two articles are central to this essay. Both have focused on the different interpretations that Zerweck defined. The first is Amit Marcus’s article “The Self-Deceptive and the Other-Deceptive Narrating Character: The Case of *Lolita*” (2005). Marcus argues that Humbert in *Lolita* can be seen as both Self-deceptive, that he is not sane, or Other-deceptive, that he is lying. Marcus concludes that Humbert’s narration is motivated by “self-justification, on the one hand, and confession of his faults, on the other” (201). The narrator of *Lolita* is in that way both, and as Zerweck explains, it depends on the reader’s interpretation of the narration which one will dominate.

The second article that is central to this essay is James Phelan and his article “Estranging Unreliability, Bonding Unreliability, and the Ethics of *Lolita*” (2007) which further explores the implication of the two different forms of unreliability that is described by Zerweck. Phelan concludes as do Zerweck and Marcus, that the narrator in *Lolita* can be both. Even if Phelan does not include any references to Marcus’s article it is clear that they are both on the same track. Marcus’s article describes the form of unreliability while Phelan’s describes the effect of that unreliability. The effect of bonding unreliability is, according to Phelan, “reducing the interpretive, affective, or ethical distance between the narrator and the authorial audience” (225), while estranging unreliability does the opposite. Through combining these effects it is possible for Nabokov to trap the readers. Using contrasting narrations to create a conflict that the reader will have to interpret, creates possible conflicting interpretations. According to Phelan, Nabokov is responsible for the readers who fall into that trap since he was the one that set them (236).

## Previous research on the unreliable narrator

The concept of the unreliable narrator was first defined in 1961 by Wayne C. Booth in the seminal work *The Rhetoric of Fiction*: “I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), unreliable when he does not” (158). According to Booth the reliability of a narrator is dependent on the framework that is created in the context of the text. Booth remarks that the “implied author carries the reader with him in judging the narrator” (158). He argues that the implied author is not the same as the narrator. When the narrator is unreliable the distance between the reader and the narrator naturally grows, and thereby the distance between the implied author and the reader closes. It is by relating to the implied author that the reader can spot the unreliability in Booth’s view. In this Booth chooses to relate the reliability of the narrator to the norms of the implied author (158). In his definition of the types of narrator he explains that “In any reading there is an implied dialogue among author, narrator, other characters, and the reader” (155). It is in this dialogue that the general norms of a text are created. That is the implied author’s norms. When they are broken by a narrator, that narrator can be viewed in relation to the implied author as unreliable. According to Booth’s definition the reader will get to know this unreliability through the views of the implied author that are expressed in the text (158). The point is that in Booth’s definition the unreliability is within the text and is created by the author. This traditional definition of the unreliable narrator has since been discussed and challenged.

In more recent studies the relationship between the reader and the unreliable narrator has been explored. In articles by Bruno Zerweck, James Phelan, Amit Marcus and Tamar Yacobi the reader is in focus rather than the implied author. Zerweck references to Yacobi’s article explaining that it is the foundation for his development of the two possible interpretations of *Lolita* which in turn both Marcus and Phelan build upon. Therefore this article is central to the analysis of this essay.

Unreliability is approached in a different perspective by Yacobi. Her aim is to show how readers understand and interpret textual inconsistencies<sup>1</sup>. If a text is inconsistent it does not match a reader’s previous knowledge. Such knowledge can be either based in real life, or in the fictional reality created by the author. This is also dependent on earlier knowledge of the genre and similar works. Inconsistencies are for example very common in *Lolita*, where

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<sup>1</sup> Yacobi uses five mechanisms to show how readers interpret textual incongruities. These five are outside the scope of this essay, instead the conclusions that Yacobi reaches are used as a base for the analysis in this essay instead of analysing which kind of interpretation that the unreliability is based on. This would however be an interesting approach for future research.

the narrator first describes an event and later comments on it with conflicting information. Attributing the inconsistencies to the narrator's unreliability, the readers conclude that it is the unreliability that causes the peculiarities of the text (124). Yacobi explains that:

The technique of unreliability, whose perspectival basis enables us to define it as an inference that explains and eliminates tensions, incongruities, contradictions and other infelicities the work may show by attributing them to a source of transmission (119)

Such a source of transmission should in this case be the unreliable narrator, who is creating those tensions and incongruities. Yacobi therefore concludes, however, that it is the reader's interpretation which causes the unreliability which makes it different from Booth's definition.

Zerweck points out that from the cognitive perspective "these implications rest on the recognition that unreliability cannot be understood as a purely textual feature but is the effect of interpretive strategies based on textual signals" (155). The reader's process of interpretation creates the unreliability, not as in Booth's definition the conflict between the implied author and the narrator given in the text itself. The unreliability therefore lies within the interpretation of the text, and is not inherently in the text. Yacobi further defines this: "The narrator and his narration are not only perceived by the nominal addressee but at the same time unwittingly exposed again to the contemplation of a covert addressee, the reader" (124). The interpretation of the narration causes an author-reader relationship that is based on what the reader believes that the author wants to express. This makes the reader able to detect unreliable narration without causing the trust between the author and the reader to be harmed.

There are however two types of narrators, defined by Yacobi, the self-conscious and the unsuspecting: "The self-conscious narrator wields rhetorical tools, takes care to cover his tracks, and shows some concern about his image: this may (and usually does) make his unreliability harder to detect than the unsuspecting monologist's" (124). This perspective on the unreliable narrator is important in my analysis as it is incorporated in both the novels that this essay focuses on. Both Phelan and Marcus have developed and built upon this perspective in their articles. They both claim that in *Lolita* both types of narrators are present in different parts of the novels. Compared to *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* where only one type of narrator as defined by Yacobi is present, both novels can still work against the same goal, namely creating an emotional bond with the reader. I would like to point out that neither of the mentioned articles have used *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* as example or source,

therefore I cannot state what the authors of the articles would have concluded about that novel, or position my views in relation to theirs. However, in this essay I will apply their theories to *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and see what effects they create with the reader. Alongside this result I will apply my views of *Lolita* and compare the effects of both novels.

## **Analysis**

In this section I will use several textual examples to show both narrators' unreliability and also discuss how their unreliability is constructed in their narration. I will argue in both cases that unreliability has a bonding emotional effect between the reader and the narrator.

### **Presentation of the narrator in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd***

The narrator of Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is Doctor James Sheppard. There is no introduction of Sheppard in the beginning of the novel but the reader finds out more about him as the story develops. He has a sister named Caroline Sheppard, who is really good at tapping into the gossip and finding out what happens in the little village where they live (10). The reader also learn that Dr. Sheppard's hobby is gardening (32), tinkering with small technical devices (291) and playing Mah Jong (233). During the major part of the narrative, except in the last two chapters, Dr. Sheppard is a very respectable character. The other characters in the novel describe and treat him with respect. He enjoys a high degree of trust from all the other characters, and a good social standing in the community.

### **The Unreliability of Dr. Sheppard**

*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* belongs to the detective genre, which brings with it certain preconceived assumptions by the reader. Yacobi points out that such preconceived perceptions will influence a reader's interpretation of the novel: "The work's aesthetic, thematic and persuasive goals invariably operate as a major guideline to making sense of its peculiarities as well as its more regular features" (117). This description of the reader's previous knowledge and its influence over the interpretation is further developed by Zerweck. He argues that historical and cultural awareness has a role to play in the reader's interpretation of a novel (155). In the case of this novel I argue that using the narrator as the murderer is something that was uncommon at the time the novel was written, but has since become more commonly used, especially in the postmodern novel. This leads to today's reader being better equipped with analytical tools to handle an unreliable narrator. Meaning that a contemporary

reader might be more suspicious of Dr. Sheppard's narrative and thereby able to identify him as the murderer before he is revealed by Poirot. It is nevertheless interesting to examine how the novel is narrated in order to determine what strategies are used by the author to hide Dr. Sheppard from the reader's suspicions.

Dr. Sheppard narrates the story in first person meaning that the information about the events and investigation are focalized through him. Readers with some knowledge of literature theory will know that a first person narrator raises issues of trustworthiness. The two following scenes exemplify Dr. Sheppard's deception. They are from the second and first chapter in the novel. The reader could not be expected to have any knowledge of the characters in the novel. In the following scene, Dr. Sheppard shares some of his thoughts about the death of Mrs. Ferrars (the widow who Dr. Sheppard has been blackmailing, which is not revealed to the reader until the end), before Roger Ackroyd is murdered:

I went mechanically on my round. I had no cases of special interest to attend, which was, perhaps as well, for my thoughts returned again and again to the mystery of Mrs. Ferrars' death. Had she taken her own life? Surely, if she had done so, she would have left some word behind to say what she contemplated doing? (21)

The attentive reader might notice that it is the notion of whether Mrs. Ferrars' left some word behind that really worries Dr. Sheppard and not whether she committed suicide or not. Why this is, is not clear to the reader at this point in the narrative. Prior to the scene quoted above, Dr. Sheppard explains:

As a professional man, I naturally aim at discretion. Therefore I have got into the habit of continually withholding all information possible from my sister. She usually finds out just the same, but I have the moral satisfaction of knowing that I am in no way to blame. (10).

Dr. Sheppard has therefore claimed that Mrs. Ferrars' death was an accident, not a suicide, thus avoiding an inquest. It is suggested to the reader that it was a suicide but the reason for it is not given. The reason is, however, clear to Dr. Sheppard, but omitted from the narration. For the purpose of this analysis, it is important to first establish how he gets away with it in order to be able to discuss this feature of unreliability. Yacobi states that: "As soon as [the reader is] confronted by the tensions or contradictory elements within the fictive world, we bring into play an interpretive procedure that is both inclusive and specific, well-

defined and flexible” (121). The reader is required to interpret the text and draw conclusions. The deceptive nature of the narrative might not be evident to a first-time reader, but it is present in these early scenes. If the reader knew that Dr. Sheppard is the one who has been blackmailing Mrs. Ferrars because she poisoned her husband the scenes would read in a different way. Namely that he is worried that Mrs. Ferrars would tell someone that he was the one who has been blackmailing her. This conforms with what Yacobi defines as the self-conscious narrator that “takes care to cover his tracks, and shows some concern about his image” (124) Seen in the perspective of Yacobi’s definition the narrator has omitted important information already in the first chapter of the novel. Dr. Sheppard’s personal narration becomes the truth as it is the only narration given to the reader.

Dr. Sheppard’s voice dominates the whole narrative, but sometimes in a very discreet way. The domination of the narrative is of course an active choice from the author, which in turn enables the self-conscious narrator to deceive the reader. Some parts of the narration take place through Dr. Sheppard’s description of his thoughts and ideas. In other parts he merely documents conversations that take place between other characters, without commenting on them. He also describes events that he takes part in. His own character is very subtle and he does not openly express strong ideas or opinions about others. He is in fact so subtle that it, at some points, is easy to forget that the story is really told in first-person. One such example is when Dr. Sheppard and Poirot take a walk in the park close to the home of Roger Ackroyd (Fernly Park) and happen to overhear a conversation between Hector Blunt (a friend of Roger Ackroyd), and Flora (Mrs. Ackroyd’s daughter), who are secretly in love. This scene takes place in the novel after the investigation has started and Fernly Park is examined by the police and Poirot.

Blunt said nothing for a minute or two. Then he looked away from Flora into the middle distance and observed to an adjacent tree trunk that it was about time he got back to Africa.

‘Are you going on another expedition – shooting things?’

‘Expect so. Usually do, you know – shoot things, I mean’ (136)

For several pages of reported conversation there is nothing that reminds the reader of the first-person narration. In the conversation there is no mention of what Dr. Sheppard hears or Poirot, even if they are listening. Direct speech is used with the personal pronoun “I” several times, but referring to the speaker, instead of the narrator. This further enhances the seeming omniscience. This is not the only time it happens in the novel but probably the

longest. As such it is easy for a reader to forget who is really narrating the story, and Dr. Sheppard is hidden from the reader's critical eye. The next scene takes place the night before the meeting that Poirot calls all suspects into where he asks the murderer to come forward or he will go to the police in the morning. Poirot is with Dr. Sheppard in his workshop when Dr. Sheppard's journal describing Poirot's investigation is presented to Poirot, who comments on it:

‘Not so did Hastings write’, continued my friend.

‘On every page, many, many times was the word “I”. What *he* thought – what *he* did. But you – you have kept your personality in the background; only once or twice does it obtrude – in scenes of home life, shall we say?’ (329)

The author points out through Poirot that it is almost as if the narration is omniscient. Yacobi argues that “the semantic feature of plus-reliability automatically goes together with omniscience” (120). This deceptive omniscience of the narration contributes to the reliability of Dr. Sheppard since he can be unreliable without it being spotted by the reader.

In Yacobi's description of the self-conscious narrator the two parts that are emphasized, are the narrative strategies that have already been discussed and the concern of image. In the following paragraph the focus will be on the concern of image and how it works to disguise Dr. Sheppard. The reason behind Dr. Sheppard's ability to narrate so subtly and without the reader really noticing him in large parts of the novel is the use of different forms of disguise, mainly his occupation as a doctor. Doctors are supposed to be able to be trusted. Zerweck argues that each text is interpreted using “culturally determined frameworks” (155), which determine how the reader interprets a text. In this case the occupation of Dr. Sheppard creates an illusion of trustworthiness. He is a part of society, has done nothing wrong but helps people out. As a doctor, he naturally enjoys some trust, one part of it through the expertise in certain areas such as poisons and knowledge of the body. His medical knowledge is not easily questioned, nor are his diagnoses. The profession is associated with discretion and confidence. As a doctor he also protects the identity of his patients and he is expected to respect confidentiality. This gives him access to confidential information, such as personal secrets which people confide in him.

In the following excerpt Dr. Sheppard has been called upon by Mrs. Ackroyd for his medical expertise but the real reason is another. She wants to talk to him in confidence about why she was in Roger's study and she believes he will be able to protect the name of the family. “After all, you don't repeat every little detail to the police, do you?” (210). This shows

how Mrs. Ackroyd places confidence in Dr. Sheppard based on his occupation. This in turn contributes to the trust the reader can put in Dr. Sheppard. If the characters in the novel trust him, why should not the reader? The passage with Mrs. Ackroyd ends as follows: “Fortunately words, ingeniously used, will serve to mask the ugliness of naked facts” (210). The most likely interpretation in the context of Mrs. Ackroyd’s confession should be that Dr. Sheppard will put the facts to the police in a nice way, so that they do not harm the family’s name. It can however also be read as Dr. Sheppard using words to hide his true intentions, a clear reference to how Dr. Sheppard is self-consciously taking care to cover his tracks.

It is interesting to note that Christie’s choice of occupation for Dr. Sheppard coincides with the level of attention to detail and precision that it would take to create the concealment in the narration. A doctor is usually associated with attention to detail and a certain capacity of the mind. This is required when omitting so much information in such a clever way, which Dr. Sheppard is doing. Having established and shown textual support for the argument that Dr. Sheppard is a self-consciously unreliable narrator as Yacobi defined it, it is important to remember that this is a conscious choice from the author. The next paragraph will show that such an active construction brings with it some challenges, and further discuss the method and implications of the use of the self-conscious unreliable narrator.

Christie’s choice of writing the novel in the first person presents some challenges. Everything that is to be documented in the novel requires Dr. Sheppard to be present, or the events have to be reported to Dr. Sheppard by someone else. At some times this leads to awkward motivations to include Sheppard. One example of this is when Poirot wants to go to Cranchester to interview Ursula Bourne’s previous employer. He invites Dr. Sheppard to come along, for no particular reason (165). Sheppard also admits to this problem when he later says: “As I say, up till the Monday evening, my narrative might have been that of Poirot himself” (203). Now my point in bringing this up is in that single quote. By comparing his narrative to what Poirot himself would have documented, Dr. Sheppard is able to assure the reader of the quality and objective truth of the documentation. If the novel was narrated by Poirot, the murderer could not benefit from the advantages of being the narrator. Since it is really Dr. Sheppard who decides what is included or not, the author needs to provide some kind of assurance for the reader that Dr. Sheppard is reliable. He claims that his report would have been the same as the detective’s, but of course there is no way for the reader to verify this. In this claim lies the unreliability, well hidden, but still present.



The statement in the quote could therefore qualify as unreliable and could be seen as a way for Dr. Sheppard to close the gap between himself and the reader. James Phelan's definition of this kind of unreliability is *bonding unreliability*; the purpose of it is to make the reader bond with the narrator. Bonding is in this case a description that Phelan defines as an effect "of the unreliability for the relations between the narrator and the authorial audience" (225). This is a feature of unreliability that is frequently used in this novel. The reason for using this kind of unreliability is to create a level of trust between Dr. Sheppard and the reader. It is one of the mechanisms employed by Christie in order to steer suspicion away from Dr. Sheppard. Phelan explains that bonding unreliability reduces "the interpretive, affective, or ethical distance between the narrator and the authorial audience" (225). In this case the effect of the unreliability is that Dr. Sheppard can seem like a normal and helpful person even though he is not. To further strengthen my argument about how bonding unreliability is used the next example is from the scene where Poirot asks Dr. Sheppard about the man he met when he left Fernly Park on the night of the murder. This scene takes place in the novel after the investigation has started and Fernly Park is examined by the police and Poirot. The police clearly suspect Ralph Paton of the murder; there is no suspicion directed at Dr. Sheppard and there have been no direct clues for the reader to suspect Dr. Sheppard either. Poirot and Dr. Sheppard are standing in the place where Dr. Sheppard met the man on the night of the murder:

'You say it was nine o'clock, Dr. Sheppard, when you met this stranger outside the gate?'

'Yes,' I replied. 'I heard the church clock chime the hour.'

'How long would it take him to reach the house – to reach this window for instance?'

'Five minutes at the outside. Two or three minutes only if he took the path at the right of the drive and came straight here.' (118)

This scene on its own does not show what is at stake. Here Dr. Sheppard is actually telling the truth and is not omitting any information. He believes that he is talking about the stranger he met outside Fernly park right after he murdered Roger Ackroyd, and not about his own role in the murder. What might not be obvious to the reader is that the reason Poirot is asking, is that he has discovered a gap in Dr. Sheppard's alibi. Moving on to the next scene the deception from Dr. Sheppard will be more obvious. In this passage Dr. Sheppard is at Poirot's house and they are talking things over. This is in the middle of the novel so the

investigation is still ongoing. Sheppard asks Poirot what he thinks about the case and Poirot talks about how he tries to find the truth in everything:

- Dr. Sheppard leaves the house at ten minutes to nine.

How do I know that?’

‘Because I told you so.’

‘But you might not be telling the truth – or the watch you went by might be wrong. But Parker also says that you left the house at ten minutes to nine. So we accept that statement and pass on. At nine o’clock you run into a man. (196)

Comparing these two scenes that in the novel are separated by several other events makes the deception in Dr. Sheppard’s statement more apparent. It should only have taken Sheppard a maximum of five minutes to reach the place where he met the man, but it has taken him ten. What Poirot has detected is that there is at least five minutes missing. Poirot’s comment “‘But you might not be telling the truth” is also significant. It hints that Dr. Sheppard is being treated as a suspect as well, and that he might not be reliable. This is an important clue for the reader, and one that could actually help the reader solve the mystery. From a narrative perspective the interesting point is how spreading out the information in the way that Christie does here makes it possible to have the truth present and still undetected by the reader. I argue that this in itself is a part of the bonding unreliability, because the unreliability is hidden and only gradually revealed. The fact that Dr. Sheppard is helpful masks his unreliability from the reader. It is bonding, because the reader would expect the doctor to be helpful, and in that way he acts as the reader expects him to act. Since the unreliability is not directly visible it is even more effective than the example where Dr. Sheppard tries to compare his narrative with Poirot’s. This is based on the fact that it is easier to counter the previous statement, than it is to detect the deception in two separate statements in which Dr. Sheppard is actually being helpful and honest with Poirot. Dr. Sheppard’s helpfulness signals his reliability to the reader. If Dr. Sheppard would refuse to help Poirot, it would seem like he has something to hide, which would in turn make him seem like a suspicious character. The helpfulness is therefore bonding unreliability. I base this argument on the fact that Dr. Sheppard is a self-conscious narrator as defined by Yacobi, and therefore will be trying to cover his tracks. The helpfulness in that way masks his true intentions. This means that the discrepancy that would expose him as an unreliable narrator and murderer is hidden from the reader.

The problem that the character of Dr. Sheppard poses when examining whether his unreliability is detectable is that his deception is so subtle and designed to be undetected until the last two chapters of the novel. This is a narrative strategy that is designed by Christie; the purpose is to surprise the unsuspecting reader. When Dr. Sheppard presents his documentation to Poirot at the end of the novel, Poirot comments:

‘A very meticulous and accurate account,’ he said kindly. ‘You have recorded all the facts faithfully and exactly – though you have shown yourself becomingly reticent as to your own share in them.’ (329)

This has partly to do with the deceptive omniscience of his narrative, as discussed before, but here the word “reticent” stands out. It means to be silent or uncommunicative, and can be interpreted as if Dr. Sheppard has left things out when it comes to his share in the events, which is exactly what he has done. Poirot’s comment could be seen as a clue not to trust Dr. Sheppard.

Omitting important information is the most central part of Dr. Sheppard’s unreliability and also the most employed technique of unreliability in this novel. In her article on unreliability Yacobi points out that “the self-conscious narrator already wields rhetorical tools, takes care to cover his tracks, and shows some concern about his image: this may (and usually does) make his unreliability harder to detect than the unsuspecting monologist’s” (124). A description that fits Dr. Sheppard’s narrative well, taking action to hide his true intentions is a deliberate form of deception. Comparing this description with Marcus’s definition of the other-deceptive narrator we find that, as Marcus points out, his definition derives from Yacobi’s description. The use of omission turns Dr. Sheppard into an *other-deceptive* narrator as defined by Marcus. In his article Marcus explains that a narrator is other-deceptive when s/he is lying with the intention of deceiving the reader (194). I would like to point out that Marcus uses *Lolita* to exemplify his arguments on the other-deceptive and self-deceptive narrator, but applying his theories towards Dr. Sheppard is a construction based on my thesis and not one of Marcus. The conclusion of Marcus’s article that “it is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to decide according to rhetoric alone whether the narrating character is self-deceptive or tries to deceive the other” (201) also holds true for the narrator in this novel. Marcus points out that an other-deceptive character sometimes starts to believe their own lies. This could be true for Dr. Sheppard, even if there is no textual support for this argument there is a feeling of carelessness about how Dr. Sheppard aids Poirot so willingly. This is of course completely dependent on the reader’s interpretation of the narration.

The two main arguments that Marcus brings forward in his article for other-deceptiveness is style of language and the fact that the narrator lies to other characters in the novel (193-194). Compared to the narration of Dr. Sheppard, I argue that both arguments fit this narration too. Dr. Sheppard's style is not as polished as in *Lolita* in this text, it is rather what is not said and what is implied between the words that fit the other-deceptive description. As has already been textually supported several times, depending on how a passage is read it can mean different things, and in that double nature of the language is the other-deception. The second argument, that the narrator is other-deceptive because he is lying to other characters in the novel is true.

The fact that Dr. Sheppard omits important facts has been mentioned several times in this analysis already because it is so central. For the sake of arguing for how the omission functions it is helpful to have established what it is in the novel that makes the reader trust the narrator, and what makes him get away with these omissions even as a first person narrator, and as such should be naturally questioned by the reader. There are many places in the novel where Dr. Sheppard omits information. Below, I will discuss what I see as the novel's most important example, as well as another significant example, which represents a different type of omission. The first one is essential and key to the whole novel. Here Dr. Sheppard has been called to a meeting with Roger Ackroyd and the letters have just been brought in by Parker. Earlier in the novel Dr. Sheppard has subtly expressed some concern about whether Mrs. Ferrars (who committed suicide) left a letter about who was blackmailing her. Roger has started to read the letter from Mrs. Ferrars, which is as Dr. Sheppard feared about the man who was blackmailing her, but refuses to read the name on the back of the letter:

The letter had been brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone. (63)

The omission of information takes place right between the first and the second sentence of the quote. As such it is not visible to the first time reader. It is even hard to find when you know that Dr. Sheppard is the murderer. Since Parker brought in the letters, Roger opened the letter and read the first page. That could not have taken ten minutes, so what more took place? This is important information that the narrator Dr. Sheppard chooses not to share with the reader. The reason I argue that this single quote is central and key to the whole novel is that this is where it really happens. In the space between those two sentences is where Dr.

Sheppard kills Roger Ackroyd. This is actually pointed out by the narrator in his confession (367). Dr. Sheppard is not lying to the reader in this case, he is simply not telling the whole truth. Knowing that he is not telling the whole truth, the last sentence in the quote is conspicuous. Knowing that Dr. Sheppard has just committed a murder and that he is trying to conceal this fact, he is looking back to make sure he has not forgotten any details that would give him away. Not knowing that Dr. Sheppard has just committed a murder the interpretation would be that he is looking back out of concern for Roger Ackroyd who is stubbornly refusing to read the name in the letter.

To further exemplify the omission of important information as a technique of unreliability this next passage is taken from the episode after Poirot and Dr. Sheppard have interviewed Parker and Dr. Sheppard invites Poirot to his house. This scene is towards the end of the novel where each of the suspects is being investigated by Poirot. Poirot explains what he thinks about the reason for the murder and what kind of man the murderer is:

‘Let us take a man – a very ordinary man. A man with no idea of murder in his heart. There is in him a strain of weakness – deep down. It has so far never been called into play. Perhaps it never will be – and if so he will go to his grave honoured and respected by everyone. But let us suppose that something occurs. He is in difficulties – or perhaps not that even. He may stumble by accident on a secret – a secret involving life or death to someone. And his first impulse will be to speak out – to do his duty as an honest citizen. And then the strain of weakness tells. Here is a chance of money – a great amount of money. . . . But that is not the end. Exposure faced the man of whom we are speaking. And he is not the same man he was – say, a year ago. His moral fibre is blunted. He is desperate. He is fighting a losing battle, and he is prepared to take any means that come to his hand, for exposure means ruin to him. And so – the dagger strikes!’ (261-263)

Poirot has just completed a rather lengthy but very accurate description of Dr. Sheppard’s motives for the murder of Roger Ackroyd and blackmailing of Mrs. Ferrars. The description ends: “He was silent for a moment. It was as though he had laid a spell upon the room. I cannot try to describe the impression his words produced” (263). In this quote the omission lies in the last sentence. What is omitted is simply what Dr. Sheppard feels about this, because if he were to describe what he felt, he would give himself away. The other way this sentence can be read, is that Dr. Sheppard is horrified about the idea that someone would

murder Roger Ackroyd just to avoid exposure, and be so cold-hearted as to extort money from an old widow. This omission is different from the first quote because here the omission is open. Dr. Sheppard is openly admitting an omission, and he is actually saying so. "I cannot try to describe" Indicates that Dr. Sheppard is omitting something, just not what. In this way omission of important information makes the reader more likely to trust Dr. Sheppard and not identify him as a criminal. Since if he had explained how this description made him feel, he could easily be identified as the person Poirot is describing. Omission adds to Dr. Sheppard's reliability, but the fact the he is omitting important facts turns him into an unreliable narrator.

To further exemplify how the reader's interpretation is important for the argument of Dr. Sheppard's other-deceptiveness this scene is from the situation when Poirot and Dr. Sheppard meet with Mrs. Ackroyd and her lawyer Mr Hammond in Fernly Park. It is still rather early in the investigation and Poirot explains that he is investigating the murder and wants the cooperation of Mr Hammond. While in the house Poirot asks Dr. Sheppard to talk in private and says:

'Do you really wish to aid me? To take part in this investigation?'

'Yes, indeed,' I said eagerly. 'There's nothing I should like better. You don't know what a dull old fogey's life I lead. Never anything out of the ordinary.'

(150)

There are two examples of deception in this quote, but they are different from each other. The first is that when Dr. Sheppard says "eagerly", the motive behind this word is what is deceptive. Dr. Sheppard's real motivation here is curiosity, but not just for curiosity's sake, he also wants to know how the investigation is going, since it is his life that is at stake here. This is other-deceptive but not explicitly so. The second deception in the quote is more direct. The last sentence, it is a lie. Now, even if this is an outright lie, the reader will have trouble detecting it since Dr. Sheppard never openly admits to lying. The reader has to interpret and decide if this is a lie or not. When the reader knows that he extorted money out of Mrs. Ferrars and murdered Roger Ackroyd, and still he claims nothing out of the ordinary has happened, it can be identified as a lie. Without knowing this, a life as a doctor playing Mah Jong and gardening can seem quite uneventful. Whether this is interpreted as a lie or not it is still a clear case of other-deceptiveness as Marcus defines it. Dr. Sheppard is actively deceiving the reader in order to seem innocent.

The effect of the bonding unreliability and the other-deceptiveness creates an emotional bond between the reader and Dr. Sheppard. Following Dr. Sheppard through the

investigation and learning about his person is created by Christie and is aimed at creating a bond of trust that is ruined in the last part. The following scene is from the very end of the novel, after the meeting that Poirot has called where he tells the suspects gathered that he knows who murdered Roger Ackroyd and that he will give the information to the police in the morning. He then asks Dr. Sheppard to stay behind to talk with him:

‘Well my friend,’ he said quietly, ‘and what do you think of it all?’

‘I don’t know what to think,’ I said frankly. ‘What was the point? Why not go straight to Inspector Raglan with the truth instead of giving the guilty person this elaborate warning? (350)

The relationship that Christie has built up between Poirot and Dr. Sheppard during the novel reveals that Poirot is not willing to hand Dr. Sheppard to the police, but to offer him another way out. The murderer has not yet been revealed by Poirot but this signals to the reader that the murderer is in fact worthy of compassion. When Poirot has revealed his proof against Dr. Sheppard a few pages later he gives the following reason for his earlier warning: “But, for the sake of your good sister, I am willing to give you the chance of another way out. There might be for instance, and overdose of sleeping draught.” (362). I would argue that the reader, who has been deceived by a seemingly reliable narrator, would feel betrayed. Yacobi points out that: “the coherent organization of the narrative is made possible once the reader recognizes the character’s interference with the facts or their significance” (118). This is true for Dr. Sheppard’s narrative. Which is a good example of what Yacobi describes since it is not until the last few pages in the novel that the truth is revealed. It forces the reader to re-evaluate the entire novel. Still, the emotional bond which has been built during the novel would cause the reader to feel sorry for Dr. Sheppard as it is now suggested that he should commit suicide.

To sum up the unreliability of Dr. Sheppard I can conclude that Christie has used omission and lies in order to maintain his reliability. He is other-deceptive in order to seem reliable. His occupation as a doctor disguises him, just as the role as narrator and sole focalizer helps him to hide his unreliability from the reader. This unreliability is bonding in the way that it is used to close the gap between the reader and the narrator. The bonding unreliability draws the reader into the narrator’s world and could even make the reader feel like an accomplice to Dr. Sheppard. When in the last few pages Dr. Sheppard chooses to take his own life the reader might even feel sorry for him, that it has to end in that way (368). This is an effect of the bonding-unreliability.

### **Presentation of the narrator in *Lolita***

The narrator in Nabokov's *Lolita* is Humbert Humbert. He is a middle-aged European intellectual who is on trial for murder, with an unhealthy obsession for girls between the ages of nine and fourteen, or as he calls them; nymphets. Such an obsession would be judged in our contemporary society as paedophilia.

The first information the readers register about Humbert is through a foreword written by the fictional John Ray Jr, who has earlier edited works on psychology. In this foreword the reader learns that Humbert Humbert is dead, he died in captivity a few days before his trial was to start (1). The manuscript that the reader is about to read is therefore edited by John Ray and the information he gives on the original author is: "had our demented diarist gone, in the fatal summer of 1947, to a competent psychopathologist, there would have been no disaster; but then neither would there have been this book" (3). In this way Nabokov, as the author, is able to prepare the reader for what is about to come using a frame narrative. Phelan argues that using the foreword, "Nabokov has made both the flesh and blood and the authorial audience more susceptible to the rhetoric of Humbert Humbert" (234) His assumption is that, stating that Humbert is in jail and already dead would somehow lessen the impact of the paedophilia that could upset a reader.

### **The Unreliability of Humbert Humbert**

In this essay I will be using the name Lolita to refer to Humbert's fantasy representation of Dolores. Humbert even describes her as his fantasy:

What I madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another fanciful Lolita – perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness – indeed, no life of her own. (68)

This shows that he is able to see the difference between the two. Consequently, I will use Dolores to refer to the actual character. Using these two names for the same character, I believe will help the reader of this essay to distinguish between the two instances. It is also important for the further arguments in this essay to establish that Humbert understands the difference between Dolores and Lolita.

The narration in this novel is characterized by its contradictory statements. On several occasions the description of a certain phenomenon differs between the first and the



second time they are described. Zerweck's reader-centred approach to unreliable narrations means focusing on the reader's interpretation of the text, in order to understand the type of unreliability involved. When the reader is confronted with the conflicts in the narration it is the interpretation of these that results in a discrepancy. It is this discrepancy that, according to Zerweck's approach, reveals Humbert Humbert as an unreliable narrator.

Zerweck points out that "on a surface level, he attempts to convince the reader that his liking of nymphets is not perverse and criminal" (157). The next quote is taken right from the first chapter of the novel; it is part of this defence for his emotions for minors, and part of how the narrator motivates his feelings and actions to himself. Therefore this serves as a good example of how the unreliability is visible in the discrepancy between the descriptions. Nymphets are defined by the narrator early in the novel as:

Now I wish to introduce the following idea. Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as "nymphets". (15)

Presenting the concept of nymphet as a suggested term from the narrator makes it hard for the reader to contradict him. New concepts often have to be introduced, especially in academic writing, in order for them to be able to be discussed. Marcus argues that the presentation of the concept is part of the deception. He points out that it seems as if Humbert does not believe in the concept himself, but that it is part of a construction that can justify his behaviour (198). I agree with Marcus but would also like to add that the narrator poses as an intellectual writer and it is not out of the ordinary to expect suggestions of terms such as the one in this scene.

Phelan similarly observes that "we have no trouble recognizing that Humbert is literally unreliable" (235), thus agreeing with Marcus. Moreover, Phelan concludes that the context that the definition is given in is estranging, that it increases the distance between the reader and the narrator, because it is a "rationalization of pederasty" (235). Phelan's argument can be textually supported by using the contrast with how Humbert reacts when he discovers the nymphet who is to be the main subject of *Lolita*. In contrast to the dry academic tone in which he introduces the concept of "nymphets" The next scene is taken from the episode when Humbert is visiting the Haze house for the first time. Mrs. Haze is showing him the

house and Humbert is not very impressed and is thinking about leaving when he is taken out into the garden and sees Dolores Haze for the first time:

And then, without the least warning, a blue sea-wave swelled under my heart and, from a mat in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses.

It was the same child – the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair. A polka-dotted black kerchief tied around her chest hid from my aging ape eyes, but not from the gaze of young memory, the juvenile breasts I had fondled one immortal day. (42)

Gone is the dry academic tone from the definition of the nymphet, instead this part is graphic and emotional, revealing our narrator's true feelings for girls between the ages of nine and fourteen. The inconsistencies between his definition and emotional response are what give him away as an unreliable narrator. The "young memory" to which he refers, is from Annabel, a girl of the same age as him that he met in his youth, but who later died. Humbert admits that he has had problems releasing the memory of her and is transferring his feeling of her towards his idea of Lolita (12).

The effect of the unreliable narrator is what Phelan describes as either bonding or estranging. The interpretations of the unreliability in *Lolita* are used by Phelan to describe two possible reactions of the reader towards the text. In Phelan's definition of bonding and estranging unreliability he uses *Lolita* as an example to illustrate the difference between the two types: "The first group is the one . . . who are taken in by Humbert's artful narration. The second group is a group that . . . is determined not to be taken in by Humbert and this group resist all of his rhetorical appeals" (223). Those taken in by Humbert represent the bonding unreliability, and those who resist his appeals represent the estranging unreliability. I argue that the bonding effect is what causes the emotional closeness between the narrator and the reader. Even if a reader decides that Humbert's actions are abominable they cannot completely resist the bonding in either case. This view is supported by Phelan who claims that readers who are not affected by the bonding effect of Humbert's narration are simply misreading the novel (236).

Nabokov as the author of *Lolita* uses bonding unreliability to bring the reader closer to the narrator in order to later re-examine the same situation but with estranging unreliability. The points in the narration when Dolores' opinions are aired, of course through our narrator, show these discrepancies in the narration.

One such critical point in the narration is when Humbert takes advantage sexually of Dolores for the first time at the motel, The Enchanted Hunters. His explanation of how this happens includes the following excuse: “I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me” (150). This is an excellent example of how the narrator uses words for Dolores’ behaviour that alleviate himself of guilt. Humbert describes his passive role in the sexual act, which creates an effect of bonding unreliability. However, this is not Dolores expressing how she sees the event. Humbert’s narration of the event shows how he motivates the event by describing his role as passive:

While eager to impress me with the world of tough kids, she was not quite prepared for certain discrepancies between a kid’s life and mine. Pride alone prevented her from giving up; for, in my strange predicament, I feigned supreme stupidity and had her have her way – at least while I could still bear it. But really these are irrelevant matters; I am not concerned with so-called “sex” at all. (151)

The passive role of the narrator is evident in the description of Dolores as the active part. Humbert even goes so far as to explain that he is not “concerned with so-called “sex” at all”, and that it is “irrelevant matters”. Humbert presents himself as distanced and unconcerned about the attraction he is feeling for Lolita. Marcus examines this in his article and argues that Humbert is self-deceptive because he is mainly attracted to the aesthetics of Lolita (190). I agree with Marcus that there is an aesthetic perspective in many of the descriptions of Lolita in this novel, but I would also like to add that in this case it is intellectualization that is used. I believe that Nabokov uses the defence mechanism of intellectualization as is defined in psychoanalysis. The term describes how a person takes an event that is emotional and describes it with academic words in order to remove the emotions from it. In psychology it is part of a defence against things that are too hard to deal with.

In connection to the episode when Humbert is admitted to a sanatorium, Marcus points out that “it seems that Humbert is especially interested in fooling the adherents of psychoanalysis” (196). It shows that Nabokov is acquainted with the terms of psychoanalysis and that he would incorporate such terms against the reader to create Humbert’s self-deception. As such I am surprised that Marcus did not use the term of intellectualization but instead discusses aesthetics as the main method of deception. This intellectualization of the event works as bonding unreliability. He presents Dolores as more sexually active than he is and in that way he is able to transfer the guilt to her. Later in the novel the narrator comes back to the events of that morning and describes them: “This was a lone child, an absolute

waif, with whom a heavy-limbed, foul-smelling adult had strenuous intercourse three times that very morning” (158). The quote shows clearly what has really happened, though the narrator will not call it rape. I argue that if this description of the events had been left out, it would have been harder for the reader to understand what had really happened and as such would have judged Humbert as more reliable. This strengthens the argument of both Marcus and Phelan, that Humbert’s narration cannot be easily defined but falls into both self- and other-deception and at the same time has both an estranging and bonding effect on the reader. I would also argue that the reason for Humbert to add this second description is his conscience; he wants us to find out what really happened. Remember that the reader knows, right from the foreword that Humbert is in jail for his crimes. His conscience is in that way constructed by Nabokov in order to be able to tell the reader the truth.

The description of Dolores’ experience and the passages in the paragraph above is not only an example of how the discrepancies show the form of the narrator’s unreliability; they can also be divided and interpreted as both bonding and estranging in effect. The description “I am not concerned with so-called ‘sex’ at all.” (151) can be classified as bonding unreliability, since it gives the picture of a man who does not really want to have sex with a minor. While the excerpt where he explains that he had “strenuous intercourse three times that very morning” (158) is an example of estranging unreliability since it distances the reader from the narrating character. According to Phelan, the discrepancies in the narration of the same event, is not done in order for the reader to be able to identify Humbert as unreliable, but in order for the reader to question which of the statements are true (232). In that way the reader has to become active and decide which one to trust. When activating the reader in this way, I argue that it functions as bonding, since it forces the reader to make up her mind about Humbert. The reader will have to decide how to relate to Humbert, and in that way feel closer to Humbert than if he could have been dismissed entirely as an unreliable narrator.

Zerweck explains that: “discrepancies between the narrator’s presentation of events and his or her commentary on these events” (155) disclose the narrator’s unreliability. The difference in style and description between the “strenuous intercourse three times that very morning” (158) and “I am not concerned with so-called ‘sex’ at all” (151) is striking and in line with what Zerweck describes. In the latter, the narrator admits to having had intercourse with an exposed child three times. The description of him as “heavy-limbed” and “foul-smelling” gives an image of the guilt the narrator feels about what he did to Dolores. Or, it could be interpreted as Humbert being aware of what other people would think of it, and is in that way a description of what he thinks others would describe it as.

The discrepancies reveal another possible interpretation of *Lolita*. If the discrepancies are intentional the reader is dealing with what Marcus defines as an other-deceptive narrator. If the intentions with the discrepancies are unintentional the narrator is to be regarded as self-deceptive. From Marcus' perspective on *Lolita* he describes how some readers identify Humbert as a self-deceptive narrator while others interpret him as other-deceptive (197). Marcus asks a central question that defines how the narration is done:

Can textual signs guide us in determining whether the inconsistency and incoherence of the narrating character's account are a consequence of a distorted (motivational) perception of fictional reality, or an attempt to persuade the narrator's (fictional and real) narratees to believe in his fabrications, which he knows are lies? (188)

The two different perspectives on the narration that the question defines are both valid in the reading of *Lolita*. Humbert can be interpreted as either self-deceptive or other-deceptive. The argument for other-deceptiveness is that he is aware of how his actions would be perceived, and that he is trying to hide it. The self-deceptive interpretation is based on the fact that Humbert might not be aware that what he is doing is actually wrong. As the passive role he assigns to himself in the earlier quote "I feigned supreme stupidity and had her have her way" (151) shows. Before Humbert had intercourse with Dolores, he explains: "I am not, and never was, and never could have been, a brutal scoundrel" (149). Again the contrast between the descriptions shows the unreliability in the narration and is also an example of both self-deceptive and other-deceptive unreliability. The shifting between these two forms of unreliability in the narration show how the narrator sometimes is in control, manipulating the narrative for his own purposes, at other times less in charge and less aware.

Depending on what parts of the narration are focused on, both perspectives can be motivated. If Humbert as a narrator is self-deceptive his inconsistent narration with slip-ups and conflicting statements are really proof of his own mental state, which he admits to. As can be seen in the following excerpt: "The reader will regret to learn that soon after my return to civilization I had another bout with insanity" (36). Humbert explains that he was admitted to a sanatorium, even if he does not give the reason. It proves that he has had problems with his sanity earlier. I argue that it strengthens the reason for viewing Humbert as self-deceptive.

Humbert's self-deceptive narration is sometimes aimed at reflecting himself as a victim: "I am not a criminal sexual psychopath taking indecent liberties with a child" (168). Still his narration shows very clearly that he is "taking indecent liberties with a child". As has

been concluded earlier the narration can be interpreted as self-deceptive, and in that case this excerpt would read as Humbert does not know that he is a “criminal sexual psychopath” and from that perspective Humbert is here trying to explain to himself and the reader that he is innocent. The quote can also be read from an other-deceptive perspective, as Humbert is lying to the reader when he claims that he is innocent, and a victim of society’s and the reader’s judgement. From this perspective the inconsistencies are mainly present in the narration to deceive the reader, but then why, if Humbert is in control of the narration, does he admit to having sex with a minor? I would argue that it is because he is not in control of his narration all the time.

In Part 2 of *Lolita* Humbert starts to worry about how to take care of Dolores, admitting her to school and settling down. He is raising Dolores at the same time as he is nurturing his fantasy image of Lolita. Phelan remarks on the difference between the two parts: “From the end of Part One on, Humbert’s own engagement with the task of narrating his experiences with Dolores leads him to see more clearly the irreparable harm he has done to her” (236). Humbert admits: “I was a ridiculous failure. I did my best; I read and reread a book with the unintentional biblical title *Know Your Own Daughter*<sup>2</sup>” (197). This excerpt shows how Humbert starts to reveal his thoughts about how to raise Dolores like a young woman. The focus has shifted from Humbert’s image of Lolita to the actual needs of Dolores. Expressions of these thoughts become more common in Part 2 as he is struggling to keep control over Lolita. I argue that the effect is bonding, because it shows the effort that Humbert is making to justify his actions to himself. He doubts his own morals and sanity. I argue that the expression of doubt makes Humbert seem more human. It shows that he actually cares about Dolores and in that way makes him more likeable. Phelan also argues this and claims that readers that continue to regard Humbert’s narration as estranging in part two “seem to me to be misreading the novel” (236). Phelan’s argument is based on the fact that the bonding unreliability is even more evident in part 2 of the novel.

In another statement Humbert reflects on their travels across America and concludes in a very sincere voice: “her sobs in the night – every night, every night – the moment I feigned sleep” (199). Humbert here reveals that he knows that he is doing damage to Dolores, still he is not ready to let Dolores’ needs take priority over his own needs for Lolita. Instead he continues to take advantage of her. Showing that he might not have the ability to understand that what he is doing is wrong, despite the expressions of guilt and thoughts of

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<sup>2</sup> According to Appel this has been impossible to document, however there are many similar titles.

compassion and caring for Dolores. Again this shows the varying expressions of self- and other-deceptiveness in Humbert's contradictory narrative. Either he is deceiving the reader, as he is aware of what he is doing, but trying to hide the evidence of the damage he is doing to Dolores through blaming her. Alternately, he is deceiving himself as he refuses to see the damage he is doing, and is not able to change. The different interpretations of *Lolita* has, as has been emphasized earlier, been discussed in academic circles for many years. Zerweck points out, that *Lolita* "has been the focus of a fiercely controversial discussion that can be attributed to the ambiguity of its curious mixing of cultural, social and moral taboos" (165). Opposing interpretations is part of the novel's narration, which is also what contributes to its great success. One such mechanism of creating these conflicts of narration which has not been addressed so far is the direct addresses to the reader.

In the novel Humbert addresses the narratees thirty-six different times. *The Dictionary of Narratology* (2003) defines narratee as when a narrator addresses a certain and named group (57). Sometimes it is done by asking the reader to check some kind of fact (43) or stating that the reader should keep an open mind for certain events or opinions (325). The most common address is simply to the "reader", this is mostly done when Humbert wants the reader to consider something, or to encourage the reader to take a certain action. By naming the actual reader as "reader" Humbert creates a narratee. Marcus discusses the use of direct addresses and concludes: "Humbert imagines that the fictional reader he appeals to and the jury are willing to listen and reexamine their positions" (198) He is in that way appealing directly to the narratee to create a rhetorical effect. One example of this is when Humbert is about to describe what happened that night at The Enchanted Huntress: "Please, reader: no matter your exasperation with the tenderhearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect hero of my book, do not skip these essential pages" (146)

This is a way of writing that engages the reader in the story and is an example of bonding unreliability. The narratee is also addressed as "learned readers" at three points in the narration. In the first occurrence Humbert wants his "learned readers" to examine and determine for themselves whether he is right (62). The second time it is used he refers to "learned readers" in order to not have to "bore" the readers with a detailed account of Dolores' feelings (151), information that should have been interesting out of a reliability perspective. It is simply left out by Nabokov, either to show that Humbert does not care about the impression he is making or to prove that he is self-deceptive. By doing this Nabokov also creates another dimension of the author – reader relationship. It introduces the relationship between the implied author and implied reader. The actual reader could conclude that the

implied author does not agree with Humbert. At the same time, by leaving out Dolores' feelings, the implied author introduces an implied reader, which is not the same as the narratee that Humbert is addressing.

The reference to "learned readers" is in that way used once to engage the narratee in the story, by asking the narratee to do certain things. Twice in order to hide something, as when he asks the reader to disregard Dolores' feelings, and when he asks the "learned readers" not to be sad that Lolita is not like Annabel. What can be concluded is that the use of direct address to the narratee is not done accidentally; Nabokov has put thought and strategy behind its' use. It shows that the narratee is not a consistent person, but varies with the different forms of addresses used. I argue that Nabokov has created several implied readers in order to use this technique for a bonding purpose. It allows Humbert to stay out of a compromising disclosure about Dolores' feelings, and by asking the reader to examine and determine for themselves he increases the reliability of his narration. It shows that he is certain enough that he is right, that he can ask the reader to check for himself.

There are furthermore other narratees in the narration that are created when Humbert addresses them directly. They are all in some way parts of addresses to a jury. Yacobi concludes that "since the speaker's tricks and dissimulations are directed toward his own audience . . . the uninvited reader still finds it easier to spot incongruity, improbability, self-contradiction etc." (124). Unreliability is therefore easier to spot when the narration is directed towards another audience. When Humbert's narration is directed to the jury, it is easier for the reader, in Yacobi's perspective, to interpret him as unreliable.

To sum up the unreliability of Humbert Humbert it can be concluded that the use of contradictory statements and descriptions identifies Humbert as an unreliable narrator. The use of two different types of unreliable narration, namely self-deceptive and other-deceptive, affects the interpretation of the character Humbert Humbert. The effect of the unreliability is both estranging, as when Humbert describes his interest in young girls, and bonding, when he describes his feelings and helplessness in his overwhelming emotions towards Dolores. At the same time Humbert does his best to alleviate himself of guilt by blaming Dolores' innate sexuality, and in an intellectual and academic language describing how his behaviour is accepted in other cultures and parts of the world. The self-deceptive unreliability causes the reader to question Humbert's guilt, if he is not sane enough to take responsibility for his feelings; he evokes sympathy from the reader. As he doubts his feelings towards Dolores and questions his own sanity, it furthers the argument that he is not able to be responsible for his



crimes, but that he is deceiving himself. Expressing how he takes care of Dolores, and is raising her as his daughter also contributes to the sympathy for him.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, if we compare the narrators of *Lolita* and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* the similarity is that they both are murderers who narrate in first-person; this enables them to be unreliable. The approach to the murder itself is however very different, Dr. Sheppard makes every effort to hide the fact that he is a murderer until the last few pages. He is presented (by himself) as a very dependable, conventional professional man. While Humbert willingly admits to murder on the first page of the novel in the famous quote “You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style” (7). Using this significant difference between the novels to understand how the narrative is constructed reveals the authors’ intentions. As has been shown in this analysis both authors use forms of unreliability to create a bonding effect, but in different ways.

Starting with Christie’s Dr. Sheppard I have concluded that his narrative presence is very subtle, created to be perceived as omniscient. At certain points in the narration, it is easy for the reader to forget that the narration is focalized through the narrator. Dr. Sheppard’s occupation as a doctor disguises him, since the profession is associated with discretion and confidence. Furthermore, his enthusiasm for helping the detective in solving the murder furthers his seemingly reliable role in the novel. The method of unreliability is in Dr. Sheppard’s case mainly in the omission of relevant facts. He is what Marcus defines as other-deceptive. Christie motivates Dr. Sheppard’s unreliability in two ways, greed and pride. He wants to get away with the extortion of Mrs. Ferrars and he wants to outsmart Poirot.

Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert is also unreliable. His unreliability is, as I have argued and shown, more complex. Humbert is very communicative and often comes back to the same events several times but from different perspectives. It is the discrepancies between these descriptions that are the main method of creating unreliability in Humbert’s narration. His narrative is both estranging and bonding as Phelan defines it. When Humbert describes his feelings for young girls, the effect is estranging. It increases the distance between the reader and the narrator. The bonding effect of the unreliability is present when Humbert explains how he takes care of Dolores, and uses intellectualization to alleviate himself of guilt. Humbert also addresses his reader directly to engage the reader in the story by asking the reader to do certain things, which I have argued has a bonding effect. As has earlier been

argued Humbert is both other-deceptive and self-deceptive according to Marcus' definition of the terms. However, I argue that he is mainly self-deceptive, and that this is what makes the reader able to emotionally bond with him. The reason Humbert admits to being a murderer is because he believes that the fact that he is judged to be a paedophile by the readers is worse than being a murderer.

Using the concept of self-deception and other-deception, I have concluded that Dr. Sheppard is only other-deceptive. He intentionally hides his true motives from the reader in order to get away with murder and stay out of jail for extortion. Dr. Sheppard's other-deceptiveness consists of the omission of vital information. Humbert's narration on the other hand, falls into both categories. His other-deception is based on the fact that he is a murderer, kidnapper and sexual offender, which he both admits to and distances himself from in his narration. His self-deception is based on his description of himself as a victim, who has no active part in what is happening to him. From this perspective Dr. Sheppard is very much aware of what he is doing, and is actively pursuing his goals. If Humbert is interpreted, as I have argued, as mainly a self-deceptive narrator he cannot be viewed as actively pursuing his goals, but more as a victim of mental illness. This does not mean that there are parts of Humbert's narration that are not obviously other-deceptive.

The use of other-deception and self-deception has another implication. When using Phelan's definition of bonding and estranging unreliability, there is a connection between the other-deceptive narration and bonding unreliability. By actively lying and deceiving not only the other characters in the novels but also the reader, Dr. Sheppard is able to make the reader feel empathy and closeness to him. However this is dependent on the reader being taken in by the deception. It works particularly well for Dr. Sheppard as he is not revealed as unreliable until the end. Following Dr. Sheppard through the investigation and learning about his person naturally creates a bond of trust that is ruined in the last chapter, but it enhances the reader's emotional response.

Estranging narration is never used by Dr. Sheppard, not even when he is revealed as the murderer and confesses. Humbert, on the other hand, uses estranging narration when confessing his interest in young girls, and in very graphic words describing how he had intercourse with Dolores. The combination of Humbert's explanation of his mental status and self-deceptiveness enables an interpretation of the estranging examples in the novel because Humbert is feeling guilt. The interpretation would be that he is trying to write an other-deceptive narration that would clear him of all suspicions, but that he is not able to do so. That he is not able to do so, would call an emotional response from the reader, even

sympathy. Thus Dr. Sheppard is able to create an emotional bond between him and the reader by being other-deceptive, while Humbert attains the emotional response with self-deceptiveness.

A similarity between the two novels is the way the reader is drawn into the mind of the narrator. Both narrators make good use of the bonding effect of unreliable narration as they close the natural gap between reader and narrator. In the case of *Lolita* the reader is estranged and distanced at first, but then taken in by Humbert's efforts and self-deception as he might not be aware that what he is doing is actually wrong. His expressions of doubt show that he cares about Dolores, and in that way it makes him seem more human, and likable. In Dr. Sheppard's narration he shares his life with the reader, which makes it feel like the reader is together with Dr. Sheppard in uncovering the criminal behind a gruesome murder. When it is revealed that it is Dr. Sheppard who is the murderer, the reader might feel like an accomplice to Dr. Sheppard for having followed his investigation and believing in his words. Both narrators therefore succeed in emotionally bonding with the reader, even if they are criminals.

Nonetheless, when dealing with the cognitive approach it is important to remember that not two readers interpret the same text in the same way, the conclusions in this essay will hold true for most readers but not for all. Each reader must be free to form their own opinion of the effect of the unreliability.

Understanding how unreliability works and is constructed is a key to understanding contemporary literature. The unreliable narrator has become a common element in literature during the last century, not least in the postmodern genre. Therefore comparing two first person narrators that are both murderers affirms that the use of unreliability can be constructed in many different ways even with similar goals. I believe that this essay shows that the bonding effect of unreliability can be achieved in such different ways as Humbert and Dr. Sheppard narrative. To the best of my knowledge this comparison has not been done before. However, it would be interesting to use the pragmatic research that has been done on both *Lolita* and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* to compare how the unreliability is created in language to further understand how the differences and similarities that I have pointed to in this essay is constructed textually by the authors.

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