

**What Is the Role of Agency In Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark*  
*Vanessa* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*?**

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## Introduction

Agency can be defined as a person's "capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power<sup>1</sup>," referring to a character's ability to make their own choices and control their own lives. The role of agency is a key element in understanding Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* as they both explore a sexual relationship between an adolescent girl and an older man in a position of power.

In *Lolita*, the middle-aged male protagonist under the pseudonym Humbert Humbert kidnaps and sexually abuses 12-year-old Dolores Haze over a two-year time period after her mother dies. Dolores is the subject of Humbert's pedophilic obsession, and he imagines her as the reincarnation of his childhood sweetheart. Humbert simultaneously takes on both the roles of Dolores's father and her lover as he takes her on a road trip across America in the 1950s.

Similar events take place in the novel *My Dark Vanessa*, which depicts the sexually abusive relationship between the main female protagonist Vanessa Wye and her boarding school English teacher Jacob Strane that takes place over seventeen consecutive years set in early 21st century Maine. *My Dark Vanessa* draws heavy inspiration from Nabokov, as the title of the book, as well as the name and appearance of the main protagonist hail from his poetic novel *Pale Fire*: "Come and be worshiped, come and be caressed, / My dark Vanessa, crimson-barred, my blest."<sup>2</sup> Vanessa also idolizes *Lolita*, causing her to desperately try and mimic the relationship she has with Strane to that of Humbert and Dolores, often drawing comparisons to Nabokov's work when speaking of her own situation.

Children are often inexperienced and under the authority of adults, causing them to have a lack of free will and the inability to give consent in sexual relations, rendering them a

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, Definition of *Agency*

<sup>2</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, p. 38, lines 269-270

passive participant in these kinds of relationships. These sexual encounters with adults can be seen as “clearly damaging to children” and as “the source of sexual problems in later life<sup>3</sup>” due to the difference in power between the two parties. In both novels, investigating the role of agency, particularly of the main female characters, is crucial to understanding the damage caused and discovering the destructive nature of sexual relations between an adult and a child as there is an issue of consent constantly present. Consent and the lack thereof is directly linked to the role which agency plays in the novels and will be examined by looking at the behavior and treatment of Vanessa and Dolores, as well as the illusion, loss, and gain of agency which become apparent as their respective relationships progress. All of these factors account to the loss and formation of Vanessa and Dolores’s identities as they undergo major changes as people as a result of the sexual abuse they endure.

### **Illusion of agency through narration**

Both novels are narrated from a first-person perspective, making the narration unreliable. Whereas *My Dark Vanessa* is told from the female protagonist’s, Vanessa’s, point of view and alternates between flashbacks to the early 2000s and the present time in 2017, *Lolita* is a memoir told and written by the male protagonist, Humbert, while awaiting his murder trial in a mental institution in 1952.

The most notable difference between the narrators is their age and their roles in the relationship they are involved in. However, they both still include the same elements of how agency is created for the young female counterpart, mainly through the use of imagery, language, and repetition.

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<sup>3</sup> Finkelhor, David, *What’s wrong with sex between adults and children? Ethics and the problem of sexual abuse*

In *My Dark Vanessa*, Vanessa can be thought of as an unreliable narrator due to her reluctance to see herself as a victim or Strane as a predator. Vanessa refuses to acknowledge that her relationship with Strane is abusive and continuously defends him:

*'He never forced me, ok? ... He was careful. He was good. He loved me.'* I say that over and over, a refrain that turns meaningless so quickly. *He loved me, he loved me.*<sup>4</sup>

The repetition and short declarative sentences give a sense that Vanessa is still stuck in her childhood state, trying to find a way to comfort herself. She refuses to see their relationship as anything other than a love story: "I just really need it to be a love story. I need it to be that."<sup>5</sup>

Vanessa constantly needs to remind herself that her relationship with Strane was consensual to make her feel she was his equal.

This way of thinking offers her a way to escape the reality she has been avoiding confronting for nearly two decades, effectively working at creating an illusion of control and free will. Vanessa's need to see herself as an accomplice rather than as a victim makes the truthfulness of the narration debatable, begging the question of how much power she actually has. Her strong belief in her being in full control of her actions and decisions is used to disguise the truth, which is that all those seventeen years that she has been romantically involved with Strane, she has thought of his reaction to every aspect of her life. Even when he has not been physically present in Vanessa's life, he has had immense control over it.

Similar illusions of power are created in *Lolita*, though this time on the part of the perpetrator. All of the events are based on Humbert's willingness to truthfully tell everything as it happened, therefore making Humbert a completely unreliable narrator blinded by his hubris and self-delusion.

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<sup>4</sup> Russell, *My Dark Vanessa*, p. 318

<sup>5</sup> Russell, *My Dark Vanessa*, p. 319

Humbert excuses his predatory nature by painting 12-year-old Dolores as an “immortal daemon disguised as a female child<sup>6</sup>” fully aware of her seductive powers towards adult men. He insists to the reader that she is the one who holds all the power between them, claiming it was she who initially beguiled him: “[B]y six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers. I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me.<sup>7</sup>” However, as Humbert is a middle-aged man and Dolores’s guardian, he has the upper hand since he controls her freedom, and often reminds the reader that he is all she has: “At the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, ... You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go.<sup>8</sup>” This line has a predatory tone, reflecting Humbert’s delight about how entrapped Dolores has become since now that her mother is dead, he is the only person in her life she can rely on. Humbert juxtaposes two different images of Dolores: that of a lustful succubus and that of a lost, innocent child. This juxtaposition of two polar opposites reveals that all the credit of agency Humbert has granted Dolores is false and she is completely under his control.

Whereas *My Dark Vanessa* gives full control of the narrative to the victim, *Lolita* allows the reader to experience the story from the abuser’s perspective. They both manage to create the same illusion of agency and power for the abused—Vanessa for herself and Humbert for Dolores. In both novels, the narrators need to believe these illusions that they have created to protect themselves. Russell uses Vanessa’s childlike mind to portray her as an accessory to the crime rather than as the victim to make her feel as if Strane really loved her as the person she was and not because of her young age, while Nabokov illustrates Dolores as a succubus in order to decriminalize Humbert.

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<sup>6</sup> Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 139

<sup>7</sup> Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 132

<sup>8</sup> Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 142

## Loss of agency through manipulation

As the female protagonists of both novels are both adolescent children, the male counterparts use different forms of manipulation to spark interest in their relationships and to reward them in exchange for sexual favors. This results in a loss of agency as Vanessa and Dolores's vulnerabilities are taken advantage of. Strane acts as Vanessa's friend as she is without friends of her own age, whereas Humbert takes on the role of Dolores's guardian after her mother's death.

In *My Dark Vanessa*, Strane first establishes a connection with Vanessa when she joins the creative writing club and reveals she likes poetry. He compares her to red-haired women in literature due to their similar appearances, the most notable ones being Sylvia Plath's *Lady Lazarus* and her namesake from Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. Strane gives Vanessa the idea that she has significant power over men through these comparisons. He also makes a comparison between the two of them, an attempt to show Vanessa that they are equals and further emphasize the emotional attachment a child might have to an adult: "I think we're very similar, Nessa. I can tell from the way you write that you're a dark romantic like me."<sup>9</sup> He creates a power dynamic that favors them both by letting Vanessa believe she is in charge, resulting in a loss of agency as she becomes more easily persuaded.

Strane often compliments Vanessa's poetry, saying that she "[writes] like a prodigy."<sup>10</sup> This hyperbolic statement of a 15-year-old's writing ability is meant to appeal to Vanessa emotionally, making her feel special and more likely to confide in Strane. He wants to make it clear to her that he sees her as a person and not only as a student.

This manipulation also appears in the form of physical gifts. Strane gives Vanessa books in which the characters are reminiscent of her, but ones that also have sexual undertones,

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<sup>9</sup> Russell, *My Dark Vanessa*, p. 45

<sup>10</sup> Russell, *My Dark Vanessa*, p. 5

such as *Lolita*. While Strane wants Vanessa to read thematically heavy literature that explores sexuality, he also wants her to stay a child. This becomes apparent the first time Vanessa sneaks out of her boarding school to go spend the night with Strane. Vanessa takes a black silk negligee with her that she has stolen from her mother to wear for their first night together, but once she arrives at Strane's house, he presents her with a pair of children's strawberry pajamas. He insists that she puts them on, refusing her the free will of wearing the lingerie she originally wanted. Similar to the compliments, these gifts also make Vanessa more vulnerable.

Strane takes advantage of Vanessa's loneliness. While the physical response that Strane causes in Vanessa is disgust, she finds him intoxicating because he pleases her craving for attention and makes her feel exceptional.

Like Strane, Humbert also gives Dolores various gifts. He buys her clothes, as well as several other items, including comic books, sweets, jewelry, and a manicure set—all very superficial. While at first Humbert's gifts are to keep Dolores happy and interested in him, the purpose of his gift-giving changes later. After they have settled in Beardsley and Humbert allows Dolores to invite her friends over, he buys her new sports equipment for showing dislike towards boys her age:

*After they had all gone my Lo said ugh, closed her eyes, and dropped into a chair with all four limbs starfished to express the utmost disgust and exhaustion and swore it was the most revolting bunch of boys she had seen. I bought her a new tennis racket for that remark.<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 199

Humbert rewards Dolores for what he sees as good behavior. As Dolores is still a child, Humbert is trying to influence her and teach her that if she continues to reject men other than him, she will be rewarded.

Humbert also uses gifts and pure monetary means to manipulate Dolores into satisfying his needs. He gives her a weekly allowance on the condition that she performs sexual acts to him, as well as whenever she wants “very badly some item of juvenile amusement.<sup>12</sup>” He stops giving Dolores gifts on his own accord and instead starts demanding sexual favors in exchange.

Manipulation is used to create a sense of obligation. While the circumstances of Vanessa and Dolores are different, both are manipulated in similar ways. Strane utilizes this manipulation before he begins his sexual relationship with Vanessa to make her feel as if she owes him; after accepting the gifts and the compliments, she cannot refuse him. Humbert’s manipulative behavior towards Dolores, however, is constant during their relationship. He gives her different kinds of gifts and pays her to please him, treating her more as a prostitute than a child, creating the same feeling of obligation for Dolores as Strane does to Vanessa. This manipulation causes a loss of agency as both Vanessa and Dolores realize they have to please their respective lovers in return.

### **Gain of agency**

Vanessa and Dolores experience certain gains of agency in vastly different ways. It takes Vanessa years of therapy and Strane’s suicide to finally regain sense of herself and control over her life, whereas Dolores slowly starts taking advantage of Humbert’s obsession and is eventually able to escape.

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<sup>12</sup> Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 184

In *My Dark Vanessa*, the #MeToo movement plays a major role in helping Vanessa understand her trauma. Although Vanessa's initial reaction to other victims of Strane coming forward with their stories is disbelief as she claims their experiences are false and they were not abused, these stories help her view her own from another point of view and understand that her relationship with Strane was never the consensual love story she wants to believe it was.

Another fundamental component that contributes to Vanessa's gain of agency is therapy. She begins to open up about her trauma after reading stories of other sexual abuse victims and Strane commits suicide. Vanessa tells her therapist she feels a part of her died with him: "I feel like I've moved from grieving Strane to grieving myself. My own death."<sup>13</sup> She realizes that the part of her that was still dependent on Strane is now gone and she can finally begin to live a life in which she is fully in control.

Contrary to Vanessa, Dolores shows gains of agency throughout her relationship with Humbert. Since she understands that Humbert views the sexual acts he has her perform as "life-wrecking, strange, slow paradisaal philters without which [he] could not live more than a few days in a row,"<sup>14</sup> she does have some agency, which she articulates by speaking her mind freely about Humbert and by making him work for her attention.

Later, Dolores becomes able to say no to Humbert's advances and he listens to her requests. She gradually changes the power dynamic of the relationship around, her coming out on top.

Years after Dolores's escape when Humbert is able to find her again, pregnant and married to another man, he asks her to come live with him. Despite not having any desire for her sexually anymore due to her age, Dolores's negative answer breaks him: "I'll die if you touch

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<sup>13</sup> Russell, *My Dark Vanessa*, p. 360

<sup>14</sup> Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 184

me.<sup>15</sup>” This establishes the power she has over him. Dolores refusing Humbert’s request shows how she has created a life on her own terms, and he is no longer able to control her.

Each novel’s time period is crucial when considering the gain of agency of the female protagonists. As *My Dark Vanessa* is set in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century with the #MeToo movement being involved and mental health becoming less taboo, therapy plays a key role in Vanessa’s healing. She is able to talk through the events with her therapist and is constantly surrounded by other people coming out with similar experiences to hers, helping her realize that what happened in her childhood was a case of sexual abuse. This helps her to take control of her life and make her own decisions as she is able to come to terms with her past. In Dolores’s case, however, the only way out of Humbert’s grasp she sees is escape. As *Lolita* is set in the 1960s, most women were confined to the “physical care and serving of husband, children, and home.<sup>16</sup>” To leave Humbert behind her completely, she gets married to someone else. Her healing process is not shown or talked about, but as Humbert comes to visit her again, it is evident that she now holds all the power between the two of them.

### **Loss and formation of identity**

Figuring out their identities becomes increasingly difficult for both Vanessa and Dolores as Strane and Humbert attempt to shape them into the people they want them to be. They both want Vanessa and Dolores to stay as, or at least look the part of vulnerable children. Both girls have a hard time exploring their own passions and discovering their likes as their lives are controlled by their respective abusers.

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<sup>15</sup> Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 279

<sup>16</sup> Friedan, Betty, *The Feminine Mystique*

In *My Dark Vanessa*, the gifts Strane gives to Vanessa create confusion to her as Strane wants her to be two very different things at once, a sexually mature adult and an innocent child. In the end, she ends up trying to be both at the same time, flirting with older men while being repulsed by the thought of anything sexual.

On multiple occasions, Strane also shows disinterest towards Vanessa's interests. He shows a dismissive attitude whenever she tries to talk about what she likes, particularly when she tries to use the lyrics of one of her favorite songs to better express her anxiety about their relationship: "I thought the lyrics might help him understand how I felt, but he never said anything about it. I wonder if he even read them."<sup>17</sup> As Strane shows no interest in trying to get to know Vanessa as a person on a more deeper level than just her writing, she begins to lose interest in the things she likes and instead opts to revolve everything about herself around Strane. She starts building her entire identity around him, losing the ability to define herself in the process.

After Strane's suicide, Vanessa is slowly able to begin rebuilding her identity as Strane no longer has any power over her. One of the key items that helps Vanessa realize the truth about how abusive her relationship with Strane was is a box of memorabilia he sends to her before his death. The box includes letters he wrote to her, polaroid pictures of Vanessa naked, and the pair of strawberry pajamas. When Vanessa first opens the box, she is horrified: "Ordinary girls have shoe boxes of love letters and dried-out corsages; I get a stack of child porn."<sup>18</sup> The comparison she makes between herself and "ordinary girls" can be considered as the final piece of the puzzle she needs to finally understand that what happened between her and Strane was not a love story. The polaroids help her finally understand that their relationship was wrong.

However, in *Lolita*, while Humbert expects sexual maturity from Dolores, he only wants her to stay as a child and never wishes to see her as an adult. He encourages her to stay naïve

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<sup>17</sup> Russell, *My Dark Vanessa*, p. 152

<sup>18</sup> Russell, *My Dark Vanessa*, p. 191

by buying her “trashy” magazines and enrolling her in a school that focuses on teaching her how to become a good homemaker. She barely gets the opportunity to explore her own interests as Humbert makes all the decisions for her. He has the final say in everything in her life, leaving very little space for Dolores to explore her own interests and express herself as a person.

He takes note of Dolores’s displeasure towards tennis, a sport he forces her to continue, as he describes that Dolores “preferred acting to swimming, and swimming to tennis.<sup>19</sup>” On the contrary to playing tennis, acting and swimming are two hobbies Dolores chooses for herself, naturally making them more enjoyable for her.

While Humbert’s behavior towards Dolores is very controlling and manipulative throughout their venture, she is able to grow as a person and develop an identity of her own despite her situation. Humbert notices how different her mind is from what he has imagined it to be when he overhears her talking about death with her friend:

*[I]t struck me, [...] that I simply did not know a thing about my darling’s mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate—dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me.<sup>20</sup>*

Humbert allows Dolores more freedom as he starts trusting her more, becoming blinded by his obsessive love towards her. This allows her to slither out of his grasp. As their relationship progresses, she stops being afraid of him and starts gaining more control over her life, therefore leading to her being able to build her own identity.

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<sup>19</sup> Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 232

<sup>20</sup> Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 284

Unlike Strane and Vanessa, Humbert and Dolores both acknowledge that the relationship between them was wrong. Though Dolores never directly admits that Humbert ruined her life, she makes remarks to him throughout their relationship of how sick of a man he really is.

At the end of the novel, while Humbert hears the voices of children as they play, making a connection between them and Dolores: “I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lo’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord.<sup>21</sup>” While Humbert prides himself on being an attentive observer throughout the book, only at the very end does he realize all the damage he caused to Dolores and how his lust for her reaped her of being able to enjoy a normal childhood.

The question of Vanessa and Dolores’s identities is dealt very differently in both novels. This directly connects to the role which agency plays in the novels, as the formation of one’s identity plays a major part in the agency of a person. Where *My Dark Vanessa* allows Vanessa room for growth and endless possibilities to let go of her past with Strane, *Lolita* limits the events only to Humbert’s mind and his refusal to view Dolores as anything but a sexually mature child he craves for. Whereas Dolores is able to distinguish herself from Humbert and prevent their relationship from being the defining factor in the formation of her identity, this is where Vanessa faces the most difficulties as she keeps returning to Strane and lets him define the entirety of her young adult life until his death.

## **Conclusion**

Though *My Dark Vanessa* and *Lolita* depict two vastly different cases of child sexual abuse in two very different time periods, they show that not much has changed. In both novels, an adult in a

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<sup>21</sup> Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 308

position of authority is able to take advantage of a child: a teacher of a student, and a stepfather of his stepdaughter. While both novels highlight what years of sexual abuse can do to a person, both the person being abused and the abuser, they also suffer from the lack of measures taken to protect the young female protagonists from it.

Mary Kate Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* provides a text-book example of a sexual abuse case between a child and an adult. Vanessa's unreliable narration set on defending Strane attempts to deny the truth and change the reader's perception of the events. Vanessa is so dependent on Strane and his approval that she takes great measures to keep herself relevant in his life. This mindset greatly affects her as she unconsciously works at denying herself agency.

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* shows a more unique case of the same nature. While Humbert begins the novel by capturing Dolores and hindering her sense of herself and therefore denying her agency, he loses her towards the end as she is able to become her own person, even despite his control over her.

Through examining the depiction of sexual abuse in both novels, it becomes evident that while the two novels can be considered to be mirrors to one another, Nabokov's *Lolita* manages to handle the theme of agency much more subtly and delicately than Russell does in *My Dark Vanessa*. Whereas *Lolita* offers a slow build-up in purple prose, Russell's approach is more straightforward and puts focus on concrete events. Agency is present throughout the entirety of the two novels, either as an illusion created by the narration or as a concrete loss or gain of it through actions. The role of agency becomes the central driving force in forming the female protagonists' identities and overcoming their mental traumas once they can finally consider themselves to be free of their abusers, either through death or incarceration.

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