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Lolita

Nick Mount <nick.mount@utoronto.ca>
To: Milan Ilnyckyj <milan@sindark.com>

10 November 2012 at 10:59

Dear Milan,

Many, many thanks for this: for thinking about it, for writing it, for sharing it with me. Your comments are extremely smart and sensitive. I especially appreciate your observations about Lolita herself being sexually curious at her age, and that we should neither blame her nor shame her for that curiosity. I have a 12-yr-old-son. Believe me, I'm fully aware that 12 year olds are curious about sex. :) And so he should be.

I'm sorry your experience of the film was interrupted by the extra narrator, but I'm heartened that you turned the experience into something positive.

Best,
Nick

On 09/11/2012 4:44 PM, Milan Ilnyckyj wrote:

Dr. Mount,

I wrote the passage below in response to something that happened at your lecture this afternoon.

I thought it might be of interest to you.

Best wishes,

Milan

I was just in one of Professor Nick Mount's 'Literature For Our Time' lectures. This was the second lecture on Nabokov's novel Lolita. During the lecture, the professor showed clips from both the 1962 film version, directed by Stanley Kubrick, and the 1997 version, directed by Adrian Lyne.

The scene in which Humbert Humbert and Lolita first have intimate contact is depicted in both films. In both films - and in the novel - Lolita awakes beside Humbert and eventually proposes that they play a game that she had previously played "at camp" with Charlie. In the novel and one film, Lolita kisses Humbert before describing the 'game'.

Sitting beside me in the crowded lecture hall was a young woman who felt that her narration improved both film clips, and thus offered free commentary through both. During both hotel room scenes, the young woman loudly noted that Lolita was a "whore" and suggested that she

had brought upon herself everything Humbert ultimately unleashed.

Slut-shaming Lolita, I thought to myself.

As a general phenomenon, 'slut-shaming' refers to the practice of imposing shame upon people who display their sexuality. In its most insidious form, it refers to when people allege that someone deserved to be raped because of their choice of attire, decision to be in a particular place at a particular time, and so on. Slut-shaming is a form of sexual control, directed by judgmental members of society at individuals who they have chosen to see as degraded.

It's an especially cruel and ironic behaviour to target at the character Lolita - Nabokov's twelve-year old, and Humbert's object of fascination and lust. The whole premise of the book works because she is at the age of sexual curiosity. She has begun experimenting with boys at camp; she shows genuine sexual behaviour toward Humbert, her thirty-seven year old substitute father figure.

In a sense, then, the crude label applied is accurate. If 'sluts' are people who act on their sexual feelings, then perhaps the title is deserved. What is not deserved is the insinuation that feeling or acting on any sexual urge means that any other person can now make whatever sexual use of you they wish, regardless of whether meaningful consent is obtained or whether other appropriate standards of sexual conduct are adhered to, including the prohibition of sexual contact between minors and those in positions of authority over them.

Lolita doesn't deserve to be raped and kidnapped because she is sexually curious, but the choice to apply the label 'whore' to her and then treat her as the author of her fate is one that frees the person doing the labeling from having to address the fundamental ambiguity in the book. Humbert certainly takes advantage of Lolita and harms her life. At the same time, she is never an entirely unwilling participant in what is going on. It is important to remember the genuine abuses perpetuated by Humbert, but it is also important to treat Lolita with respect. To put her on one side of a dividing line - with those who are pure and deserve protection - and then push her over into the territory of the freely abusable because she displayed some curiosity is to punish her excessively for a scanty 'offence'.

The offence is so scanty partly because Lolita's story rings true. There are many people who become intrigued by sex long before reaching full sexual maturity. Anyone who thinks the mental life of a twelve-year-old cannot include sexual thoughts probably does not remember being twelve, and hasn't spent any time around twelve-year-olds recently. There are many people who experiment with sexuality long before adulthood.

By interpreting Lolita's emergent sexuality through an aesthetic that fetishizes purity and which views the appropriate punishment for curiosity as rape, slut-shaming Lolita subjects her to a second abuse. Lolita doesn't deserve punishment for expressing curiosity. The desire to control Lolita's sexuality by forbidding her from engaging in sexual thoughts or experimentation has some of the same characteristics as Humbert's kidnapping of her. In both cases, she is being stripped of agency and of due consideration as a free and independent person. In a sense, Humbert's offence is the abuse of authority to degrade a human being. Dismissing Lolita as a "whore" has a similar character.