

REVIEW: DECONSTRUCTING LOLITA

Jacqueline Hamrit, *Deconstructing Lolita*

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Abstract:

With *Deconstructing Lolita*, Jacqueline Hamrit offers up not only one of the most succinct, comprehensive and salient readings of the endlessly readable and much writ about novel from the late Vladimir Nabokov, but also lays out a deft demonstration of the *act* of deconstruction, a methodology popularized by late poststructuralist Jacques Derrida. The 254-page book, a compilation of mostly previously published articles or conference papers, is bound and ordered under the new exigency and introduction from Hamrit who intends for her work a pedagogical application. Though the latter word is fraught when syntactically anywhere near the word “deconstruction,” Hamrit proves by example that deconstruction has a place in the pedagogy of literature. She swiftly dispels the popular rhetorical hand-wave under the name of “obscurantism,” that so historically precludes deconstruction in the classroom, by offering up a parallel journey through Derrida and Nabokov, by way of the oft aporetic tale of doomed Humbert Humbert, which is exceedingly readable. Regarding the myriad, divergent interpretations since the novel’s publication, as well as the ensuing resistance of the discerning and paradoxical author, Hamrit finds in the similarly controversial philosopher what is potentially the most compatible—almost *fatedly* so—theoretical frame deserving of the eponymous text.

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Review : *Deconstructing Lolita*

Hamrit, Jacqueline. *Deconstructing Lolita*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022. 254 pp. ISBN 978-1-5275-8178-4. £59.99 (HB), £29.99 (PB).

With *Deconstructing Lolita*, Jacqueline Hamrit presents a significant and intellectually robust exploration, positioning Vladimir Nabokov's controversial novel within the critical framework of Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction. This book assembles previously published articles and conference papers into a deliberate and conceptually coherent investigation of Nabokov's *Lolita* through Derridean perspectives such as undecidability, de-centering, and impurity of genre. Hamrit's effort proves particularly illuminating and readable, successfully challenging the rhetorical dismissal of deconstruction as mere "obscurantism," thereby making a convincing case for its relevance within literary pedagogy. The question that propels Hamrit's inquiry—"How to read literature with Derrida?" and more specifically, "How to teach literature with Derrida?"—frames the central imperative behind her interpretive method. Hamrit engages deeply with several essential Derridean concepts, notably "undecidability," which Derrida uses to describe the permanent tension between competing interpretive possibilities, each valid yet mutually exclusive. For *Lolita*, Hamrit persuasively argues that the novel fundamentally embodies undecidability between ethical indictment and aesthetic celebration, between psychiatric diagnosis and romantic literature, a stance that allows Nabokov's work consistently to resist simplistic critical classification.

The book is composed of ten chapters divided into two parts. The first seven chapters focus exclusively on *Lolita*, while the remaining three extend the discussion to other Nabokov works, including *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Invitation to a Wedding*, and *Invitation to a Feast*. As adapted or translated academic articles, the book doesn't build toward a single overarching thesis but instead offers a series of thematically connected essays unified by Hamrit's use of Derridean concepts. The introduction functions as both a guide to the articles and a unifying retrospective on the dialogue between Nabokov and Derrida; the text includes references and citations at the chapter level. A sizable contribution of the text lies in Hamrit's astute application of Derrida's critique of formalist-structuralist literary methodologies, clearly described in Derrida's seminal essays "Force and Signification" and "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." Drawing upon these foundational works, the author elucidates that Nabokov's *Lolita* exemplifies Derridean notions of structural "play," undermining any stable interpretive center and inviting perpetual hermeneutical mobility. Her careful close readings here confirm Nabokov not merely as an author whose narrative technique anticipates some Derridean insights, but as one whose literary epistemology profoundly resonates with Derrida's philosophical skepticism of fixed, stabilized meanings.

Another theoretical cornerstone of Hamrit's analysis is Derrida's notion of genre impurity outlined in his essay "La Loi du genre." Hamrit effectively harnesses this concept, revealing Nabokov's text as deliberately hybrid, continuously testing and breaking generic constraints. Hamrit demonstrates convincingly that *Lolita* participates in multiple genres—confessional autobiography, legal testimony, psychological case-study—yet firmly inhabits none. She underscores how Nabokov's simultaneous invocation and subversion of genre expectations serve as a literary embodiment of Derrida's dictum concerning the inevitable contamination of genres, adding valuable nuance to both Nabokovian and Derridean scholarship. Hamrit's interpretative approach also pays special attention to character subjectivity, particularly in examining the character Lolita's fragmented identity. She compellingly suggests that Lolita's identity—represented through multiple names (Lolita, Dolly, Dolores, Lo)—cannot be grasped adequately through a conventional psychological or sociological profile. Instead, the Derridean analysis of signature, naming, and subjectivity as fluid and relational provides enhanced insight into Nabokov's aesthetic strategies.

Deconstructing Lolita enters a critical landscape where Nabokov studies have often distanced themselves from high theory, adhering instead to a liberal-humanist aesthetic in keeping with Nabokov's own

sensibilities. Hamrit challenges this trend by staging a dialogue between Nabokov and Derrida, not by imposing a method but by drawing out thematic affinities—particularly those relating to marginality, play, and the resistance to closure. Her approach doesn't claim to systematize Derrida or fix a definitive Deconstructionist reading of *Lolita*; rather, it orbits Nabokov's oeuvre with fragmentary Derridean insights, tracing parallels in style and sensibility more than in philosophical rigor. The effect is a loose but evocative web of connections, which at times risks generalization or rhetorical overreach, but nonetheless gestures toward a shared suspicion of structural centrality and a valorization of textual uncertainty.

The book's most generative moments come when it highlights Nabokov's refusal of summative meaning and his metafictional sensibility as something more than mere postmodern whimsy—something akin to Derrida's refusal of fixed presence. However, the comparative work is often uneven: Hamrit's selective psychoanalytic reading of *Lolita* and her defense of Freud, for example, sits uneasily alongside Derrida's more ambivalent engagement with psychoanalysis. Similarly, provocative parallels—like those between Nabokov's invented worlds and Derrida's reflections on textual invention—remain suggestive but underdeveloped. Hamrit's text is most valuable for readers already steeped in Derrida, who can fill in the gaps she leaves open, but it stops short of offering a compelling case for why Derrida should be essential to Nabokov studies. Still, the book leaves open a space of intellectual play between these two writers that is rich with potential, even if it requires further work to fully articulate.

Yet, explicitly and intentionally pedagogical, Hamrit's book does well in tackling common misconceptions around deconstruction, making visible its practicality and intellectual rigor. The book provides an effective entry point into what has traditionally been perceived as isolating and esoteric. The clear prose and systematic theoretical clarifications speak advantageously for its usefulness in advanced secondary school, undergraduate and graduate teaching contexts, or for those scholars interested in interdisciplinary intersections of literature and philosophy. Hamrit shows that where the tensions in contemporary literary pedagogy between formalism and subjectivism create dissonance in literature and language departments, deconstruction can be more than novel and high-flying theory.

While the text demonstrates lucidity without sacrificing critical nuance, one can't help but think that even in those didactic deconstructive readings for the earlier grades, a foregrounding of the signifier—a parallel deconstruction of the binary of poet-critic—must be a pillar of applied deconstruction. *Deconstructing Lolita*, or any expansions of this system would benefit from a more thorough and “hyperbolic wearing-out” of its own language, as the text it reads. Where the deconstructive project famously inquires on what comes before the question—presuming the validity of no axiom or framework—this must imply necessarily no privileging of the method or Derrida himself either. Nonetheless, the work justifies its compiling and unifying of a body of work spanning several years. Thought provoking without overly dense abstraction and pedagogically grounded without becoming reductive or overly didactic, Hamrit achieves a commendable scholarly balance, living in the “double-bind:” her work is a contribution both to the dormant literary theory and Nabokov studies specifically.

Deconstructing Lolita ultimately fulfills the promises it explicitly makes to its reader: it renders clear the intersections between Nabokovian complexity and Derridean hermeneutics, effectively illuminates *Lolita*'s resistant textual richness, and positions itself deftly within contemporary methodological debates about literature's interpretive multiplicity. Scholars invested in Nabokov's literary aesthetics, Derridean theoretical exploration, or developments in literary pedagogy will find Hamrit's contribution not merely worthwhile, but profoundly necessary. It serves impressively as a vital resource for those committed to exploring and teaching complexity in literary texts. Its clear strengths and pedagogical clarity recommend it broadly, guaranteeing it a valuable place in contemporary Nabokov studies, theoretical literary analysis, and literature classrooms concerned genuinely to grapple with theory's relevance to textual interpretation.