

## THE USE OF HISTORY IN NABOKOV'S LOLITA AND BELLOW'S HERZOG: FANTASY OR REALITY?

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### ABSTRACT

Twentieth-century authors Saul Bellow and Vladimir Nabokov have both made indispensable contributions to American, Jewish, and Russian literature. Bellow's *Herzog* and Nabokov's *Lolita* both feature autobiographical elements, and they draw on history and mythology. However, their historical plots differ from each other on a functional level. Nabokov uses history to realize his fantasies. For instance, Humbert gives examples from the old the US' constitutions to sleep with his "nymphet". For Bellow, history is an organ employed to raise society's—especially Jewish society's—historical awareness. The writer who uses examples from historical and philosophical figures makes models. In doing so, he addresses his writing either directly or indirectly toward his readers. Yet these two prominent authors differ significantly from each other in how they take readers to historical places and distinct periods. Their use of history, reality, and mythology in their novels will be discussed.

*Key Words:* Saul Bellow, *Herzog*, Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, *History*, *Reality*

## NABOKOV'UN LOLİTA VE BELLOW'UN HERZOG ADLI ROMANLARINDA TARİH KULLANIMI: FANTEZİ Mİ YOKSA GERÇEKLİK Mİ?

### ÖZET

Yirminci yüzyılın başlarında yaşamış olan Saul Bellow ve Vladimir Nabokov Amerikan, Yahudi ve Rus edebiyatında vazgeçilemeyecek bir yere sahiptirler. Otobiyografik unsurlar bulunduran Bellow'un *Herzog* ve Nabokov'un *Lolita* adlı önemli romanlarında ayrıca tarih, mitoloji ve gerçeklik unsurları da önemli bir yeri teşkil etmektedir. Ancak tarih kurgusu işlevsel olarak birbirinden ayrılmaktadır. Nabokov tarihi kendi iç dünyasını ve fantezilerini gerçekleştirmek olarak kullanır. Örneğin Humbert su

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perisiyle beraber olabilmek için eski anayasalardan örnekler verir. Bunun yanı sıra Bellow tarihi toplumu –özellikle Yahudi toplumunu-bilinçlendirmek için bir araç olarak kullanır. Gerçek tarih ve geçmişte felsefe dünyasının en önemli şahsiyetlerden örnekler alarak bu olay ve kişileri modelleme yapar. Bunu yaparken okura karşı bazen dolaylı bazen direk olarak yazar. İşte bu yönleriyle birbirlerinden ayrılan bu önemli iki yazar okuyucuları tarihsel olarak çok farklı tarihsel mekânlara ve zamana götürecektir. Bu çalışmada adı geçen romanlarda tarih, gerçeklik ve mitoloji ayrıca bunların kullanımı irdelenecek ve birbirlerinden farklı yönleri ele alınacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Saul Bellow, Herzog, Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita, Tarih, Gerçeklik

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Possessed of Russian heritage and Jewish ethnicity, American authors Vladimir Nabokov and Saul Bellow, made a significant impact on world literature Nabokov has been defined as “undeniably one of the most talented English prose stylists of all time.”<sup>3</sup> His masterpiece, *Lolita*, deals with a middle-aged man, Humbert Humbert, falling in love with a young girl, Dolores/Lolita, and his relationship with her. Bellow’s *Herzog* is concerned with Herzog who divorces his wife and grapples with psychological problems. These two novels discuss the inner world of humankind, its reality. In addition, history is deeply emphasized in both novels and is one of the distinctive elements used by both novelists. While Nabokov uses history to fulfill his protagonist’s fantasy, Bellow endeavors to raise the consciousness of his readers. In the following section, the use of history and reality will be argued, in accordance with Nabokov and Bellow. The conclusion will present a review and summation.

## 2. THE USE OF HISTORY

### 2. 1. Lolita

*Lolita* is narrated by the protagonist Humbert Humbert—known as Humbert—who recounts his life. However, the mixture of memoir and reality is exactly what Nabokov asks readers to envisage in their minds as many critics purports so. One critic, in recounting the novel’s opening, states: “The novel we are reading is called Lolita, and so is the imaginary memoir that makes up most of it. It opens with a famously elaborate

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<sup>3</sup> Rita A Bergenholtz, “Nabokov’s Lolita”, *The Explicator* 1995 p.234

invocation to a girl of that name.”<sup>4</sup> The reader is expected to set foot in a fantastic world created by the narrator.

To a certain extent, the novel has features of autobiography, giving details extending from Humbert's birth to his arrest. However, both history and reality turn into a cover Nabokov obscurely gives to readers. Using reality in his novel, the author either implies or uses history and reality in order to withhold his reality. Wood notes the author uses autobiography as a tool to hide his secrecy:

Autobiography is a device, and to speak in his own voice is a matter of having a model and being a mimic. With Nabokov there is always a mask, and of a self-proclaiming kind. Sincerity is something he achieves not by laying all masks aside but by manipulating them.<sup>5</sup>

However, some critics think that Nabokov's narration is complex and incomprehensible. Anderson harshly criticizes the plot of *Lolita* as “Humbert's mixture of blind and insightful narration.”<sup>6</sup> Yet the complexity and complication add to the novel's pulchritude. Furthermore, the mixing of tenses adds further confusion. Entwining incidences and narration prepares the reader to enter the fantasy world. On the one hand, combining past and present serves as a connection: “Backshadowing may offer a self-serving rereading of the past, but it is an act of rereading nonetheless: it may seek to conflate distinct temporalities, but it cannot ultimately deny them.”<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Nabokov's prose can be said to recall characters from his earlier life, such as young girls in his youth and adulthood:

There is little confusion of past and present tense in Nabokovian prose. To demonstrate these aspects of Nabokov's prose—the active character of memory, the effort of recollection, the narrative insistence on the vantage point of the present, and the reinscription of the past's otherness.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, by borrowing techniques from oral storytelling, Nabokov deepens the intimacy and connection with the reader. The phrase: “Let me remind my reader that in England...”<sup>9</sup> is a good example. In doing so, Nabokov takes his reader along to persuade them to accept Humbert's situation. Another example: “This is all very interesting, and I daresay you

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Wood, “*Lolita Revisited*” *New England Review*. 1995 p. 23

<sup>5</sup> Wood, *Ibid*, 23

<sup>6</sup> Douglas Anderson, “Nabokov's Genocidal and Nuclear Holocausts in *Lolita*” *Mosaic*, 1996 p.78

<sup>7</sup> Harriet Hustis, “Time Will Tell: (Re) reading the Seductive Simulacra of Nabokov's *Lolita*” *Studies in American Fiction*. 2007 p.103

<sup>8</sup> Matt Reed, “Homo Lepidopterist: Nabokov and the Pursuit of Memory” *CLIO* 2000 p. 278

<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, Penguin Books, London, 1995, p. 21

see me already frothing at the mouth in a fit; but no, I am not; I am just winking happy thoughts into a little tiddle cup.”<sup>10</sup> The technique establishes a relationship between narrator and reader, allowing for the creation of a fantasy world and imposing it on the reader:

Knowing me by now, the reader can easily imagine how dusty and hot I got, trying to catch a glimpse of nymphets (alas, always remote) playing in Central Park, and how repulsed I was by the glitter of deodorized career girls that a gay dog in one of the offices kept unloading upon me. Let us skip all that.<sup>11</sup>

This intimacy in accordance with the oral storytelling used in the novel by Nabokov is a kind of addition of history. Anderson notes the composition of history and intimacy is a distinctive theme used by Nabokov: “The interpenetration of personal intimacy with the sickening involutions of history forms the thematic basis of Nabokov’s three great postwar novels”<sup>12</sup>

As mentioned above, not only the oral storytelling technique but also the apprehension of reality is another significant element. The perception of reality is a kind of subjectivity in Nabokov’s fiction, such as the description of “visual memory.” When Nabokov describes the term, it refers to how his protagonist sees his lover, Annabel. The figure of Annabel is reshaped by the writer reminding Poe. On the other hand, Humbert’s subjectivity constitutes his awareness of reality. After Annabel’s description, he declares how he sees her:

There are two kinds of visual memory; one when you skillfully recreate an image in the laboratory of your mind, with your eyes open (and then I see Annabel in such general terms as: “honey-colored skin,” “thin arms,” “brown bobbed hair,” “long lashes,” “big bright mouth”); and the other when you instantly evoke, with shut eyes, on the dark inner side of your eyelids, the objective, absolutely optical replica of a beloved face, a little ghost in natural colors. (and this is how I see Lolita).<sup>13</sup>

The names of places used in the novel accord with their functionality. For example, the motel in which the characters experience their first adulterous meeting is “The Enchanted Hunters,” which is taken from a film: “Josef von Sternberg’s *The Salvation Hunters* (1925). The Enchanted Hunters hotel, where Humbert and Lolita first make love, and Quilty’s play

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<sup>10</sup> Nabokov, *Ibid.*, p. 12

<sup>11</sup> Nabokov, *Ibid.*, p. 21

<sup>12</sup> Anderson, *Ibid.*, p. 80

<sup>13</sup> Nabokov, *Ibid.*, p. 7

The Enchanted Hunters may be allusions to Sternberg's film."<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Humbert, who is ready to have sex with a "nymphet" from the beginning of the novel like a hunter, is also enchanted with Charlotte. Furthermore, Don Quix is the name of the place where he dreams of his "nymphet". The name of the street Quilty lives is Killer Street. "At 10 Killer Street, a tenement house...after the killing was over and nothing mattered any more, and everything was allowed."<sup>15</sup> Nabokov presses reality into service by his creating a fantastic world.

Nabokov is interested not only in the names of places and people but also in the recent past. Historical facts are sometimes given via oral storytelling techniques, adding a realistic element. Even so, no matter what is written, the novel's fantastic characteristics overshadow the realistic ones. In the example below, the writer advises his readers to check the situation. However, the passage is convincing for the reader, whether or not the weather data is accurate. Humbert again takes advantage of reality for his fantasy:

May 30 is a Fast Day by Proclamation in New Hampshire but not in the Carolinas. That day an epidemic of "abdominal flu" (whatever that is) forced Ramsdale to close its schools for the summer. The reader may check the weather data in the Ramsdale Journal for 1947. A few days before that I moved into the Haze house, and the little diary which I now propose to reel off (much as a spy delivers by heart the contents of the note he swallowed) covers most of June.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, this subjectivity is the core constituting his perception of reality and history. The blending of past and present is an ordinary narrative technique Nabokov uses in *Lolita*. In this sense, as an example, the 'nymphets' are characters in every aspect of Humbert's life. "In *Lolita*, the immanence of the present in the past—its figuration as the (literally, prescribed) future—allows Humbert's inscription and interpretation of pre-pubescent girls as 'nymphets' to function as a form of sexual conscription."<sup>17</sup> By pretending, Nabokov blurs this idea in the reader's mind to enable acceptance of his fantasy world. In addition, Nabokov juggles the 'nymphets' birth dates:

Where in time are we to locate Humbert's first, Mediterranean love? "About as many years before *Lolita* was born as my age was that summer." The answer is 1923, when

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<sup>14</sup> Bill Delaney, "Nabokov's *Lolita*" *The Explicator*. 1998 p. 99

<sup>15</sup> Nabokov, *Ibid*, p. 178

<sup>16</sup> Nabokov, *Ibid*, p. 26

<sup>17</sup> Hustis, *Ibid*, p. 105

he was twelve going on thirteen. The riddle has its ornate relevance, since Lolita, who in Humbert's theory is a second version of this first love, is twelve when he meets her. The year 1947 repeats 1923; 1935, the date of Lolita's birth, is poised midway between them. Of course, not everyone likes this kind of game, and it certainly can't be all the rage among murderers.<sup>18</sup>

Still, at times the author misuses historical facts to fulfill his needs. People condemned the facts and Nabokov changes attitudes that are regarded as transgression; he is avid in attempting to assert his rightness in front of his readers. Furthermore, Humbert sometimes uses historical facts or laws to mis-channel his readers who reprobate the immaturity of "nymphets". For instance, a law that a girl must be over eight years old to be considered a child is used in testimony concerning justice for the narrator. The sentences below are repeated twice in the novel:

Let me remind my reader that in England, with the passage of the Children and Young Person Act in 1933, the term "girl-child" is defined as "a girl who is over eight but under fourteen years" (after that, from fourteen to seventeen, the statutory definition is "young person"). ...<sup>19</sup>

In addition, the protagonist Humbert regards history as a fantasy. Humbert recounts mythology mentioning Virgil and Queen Nefertiti. Perhaps most astonishing is Humbert juxtaposing these elements with his sexual fantasy. "Here are some more pictures. Here is Virgil who could the "nymphet" sing in a single tone, but probably preferred a lad's perineum. Here are two of King Akhnaten's and Queen Nefertiti's pre-nubile daughters..."<sup>20</sup> The integration of mythology is exploited by the protagonist. Moreover, the historical personalities can be used to define the characters. "In comparison to her, Valechak was a Schlegel, and Charlotte a Hegel."<sup>21</sup> Hegel and Schlegel become the criteria for Humbert's "nymphets". In this sense, in *Lolita*, historical facts and figures are redefined and transformed into fantasy.

Some see Nabokov as a magician who subverts good and evil (who sees clarify). For example, the pedophilia that would ordinarily be perceived as a disgraceful offence is presented so nicely; thus, many readers perceive Humbert as a sympathetic protagonist. Nabokov "spirits us into a world where the principal character violates fundamental taboos, criminal laws, and

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<sup>18</sup> Wood, *Ibid*, p. 19

<sup>19</sup> Nabokov, *Ibid*, p. 12

<sup>20</sup> Nabokov, *Ibid*, p. 12

<sup>21</sup> Nabokov, *Ibid*, p. 172

social mores with more evident glee than disgust.”<sup>22</sup> The protagonist gains complaisance both from both readers and critics.

The novel's final section is impressive for its use of symbolism. That Humbert goes to jail means he cannot see Dolores/Lolita again, which symbolizes the death of the protagonist. The lack of any possibility of making love with his “nymphet” turns into his death. “When the story ends the journey ends, and, like a proper autobiographer, Humbert dies.”<sup>23</sup>

In sum, reality and history in Nabokov's *Lolita* are indispensable characteristics of the story. The author's blending of history, mythology, and reality allow him to realize his fantasy, which implies a state of actuality. Reed emphasizes that Nabokov's “ability to ‘get’ the past—to squint so hard as to reveal it, and to write so well as to capture it—is accompanied by the worry, the awareness, that this effort might (inadvertently) be cruel to the past, might do the past wrong.” In this sense, history and actuality merge and become the doorway by which to enter his world of the fantastic.

## 2. 2. *Herzog*

*Herzog*, by Saul Bellow, is another of the outstanding novels of American literature. The protagonist, *Herzog*, is experiencing psychological problems related to his divorce and relationships with his girl/friends. We see numerous similarities between *Herzog* and *Lolita*. Both novels display characteristics of autobiography in their treatment of depressed white, middle-aged, male protagonists. In addition, the impression of history is seen in both novels, with the past being crucial for both authors. While Nabokov uses history for either fulfilling his desire or making his reader enter his fantastic world, Bellow wants his readers to have their consciousness raised and see their country's impropriety. While both men share a Jewish heritage, Bellow's writing reflects Jewish characteristics more than Nabokov's does.

Bellow's perspective on history is clearly indicated in *Herzog*. For him, truth and history can be regarded as both devastating and a thing of grace. Giving examples of historical figures to encapsulate his thesis, Bellow regards the truth as a prevaricating, subjecting dilemma. Furthermore, besides giving “everyone a free ride,”<sup>24</sup> history lacks objectivity and impartiality, with the truth playing a similar role. Nabokov and Bellow ethnicity may lead to play these roles. Furthermore, being both shy and impotent, *Herzog* symbolizes a typical example of Jewish individuality. Jews

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<sup>22</sup> James Tweedie, “*Lolita*'s Loose Ends: Nabokov and the Boundless Novel” *Twentieth Century Literature* 2000 p. 150

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer L. Jenkins, “Searching High and Lo: Unholy Quests for *Lolita*” *Twentieth Century Literature* 2005, p. 238

<sup>24</sup> Saul Bellow, *Herzog*. Penguin Readers, Sabon, 1992, p.102

who were killed and forced to constantly migrate from place to place share the characteristic of making himself insignificant, as indicated in Herzog:

And truth is true only as it brings down more disgrace and dreariness upon human beings, so that if it shows anything except evil it is illusion, and not truth. But of course he, Herzog, predictably bucking such trends, had characteristically, obstinately, defiantly, blindly but without sufficient courage or intelligence tried to be a marvelous Herzog, a Herzog who, perhaps clumsily, tried to live out marvelous qualities vaguely comprehended.<sup>25</sup>

Freedman believe the protagonist turns into a historian and a philosopher. To illustrate, as the critic states in his article: “For James Mellard, Bellow makes Herzog a historian.”<sup>26</sup> The protagonist is possessed of a PhD, along with the attendant historical knowledge, especially concerning his ethnicity. The task of education of philosophy leads the protagonist to be conscious about history and reality. Ethnic characteristics are implied, via phrases such as “The Yiddish French”<sup>27</sup> or “like the Jewish ritual bath”<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, characters sometimes resemble Jewish historical figures, which also remind the reader of the author’s ethnicity. As an example: “Moses considered the charge under Gersbach’s intense red-brown gaze. He had the eyes of a prophet, a Shofat, yes, a judge in Israel, a king. A mysterious person, Valentine Gersbach.”<sup>29</sup> These characteristics of Jewish ethnicity orient the reader toward the writer’s point of view on history and reality. A Jewish character like Valentine Gersbach is adored by the protagonist, and memory and history smooth his perception of her: “Through memory, through his encounters with the unmanageable otherness of such as Gersbach, the interpretive itch begins to subside, and he can begin to look beyond it to the world.”<sup>30</sup> Bellow’s intense emphasis on ethnic figures is directly related to his historical perspective.

On the other hand, as mentioned above, the author vaccinates the consciousness of history and reality. The story narrated by the protagonist so many times is a kind of enterprise in the name of recalling Jewish history. In

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<sup>25</sup> Bellow, *Ibid.*, p. 103

<sup>26</sup> William Freedman “Hanging for Pleasure and Profit: Truth as Necessary Illusion in Bellow’s Fiction” *Paper on Language and Literature*. 1993  
<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5001236732> (08.08.2010)

<sup>27</sup> Bellow, *Ibid.*, p. 189

<sup>28</sup> Bellow, *Ibid.*, p. 79

<sup>29</sup> Bellow, *Ibid.*, p. 66

<sup>30</sup> Martin Corner, “Moving Outwards: Consciousness, Discourse and Attention in Saul Bellow’s Fiction” *Studies in the Novel*. 2000 p. 377



addition, his personal experiences and perception of history become prototypical characteristics used throughout the novel. For example, Herzog's remembering his father's suffering in war functions as a bridge between him and his history. Remembrance becomes obligation:

But all these are antiquities—yes, Jewish antiquities originating in the Bible, in a Biblical sense of personal experience and destiny. What happened during the War abolished Father Herzog's claim to exceptional suffering. We are on a more brutal standard now, a new terminal standard, indifferent to persons. Part of the program of destruction into which the human spirit has poured itself with energy, even with joy. These personal histories, old tales from old times that may not be worth remembering. I remember. I must. But who else—to whom can this matter? So many millions—multitudes—go down in terrible pain.<sup>31</sup>

Numerous critics such as Goldman address this issue. For example, with this emphasis his Jewish ethnicity, Goldman states the reader sees the Jewish world from another perspective: "Herzog (a Moses, after all), made American readers see the world through Jewish eyes—not the guttered stare of the death camps but the alert gaze of the sons and daughters whose lucky parents had escaped unscathed."<sup>32</sup> Bellow is typical of a new generation of Jewish authors dealing with his own ethnicity and making his readers—especially Jewish ones—conscious about their own history, memory, and reality.

Apart from his Jewish characteristics, Bellow also is concerned about faultiness in the world. Being aware of the world's problems, the protagonist also undertakes the task of reader enlightenment. Not only does Bellow give the historical facts in his novel via the protagonist, but he also comments on cause-and-effect relations and their consequences. Such interpretations help guide the reader. As an example, Herzog talks about Bulgarians, condemns the dictatorship in Bulgaria, and creates a metaphor for its cannibalizing of humankind via the dictatorial mindset:

Schizophrenia in the eighteenth century. And then this Bulgarian, Banowitch, seeing all power struggles in terms of paranoid mentality come curious, creepy mind, that one, convinced that madness always rules the world. The Dictator must have living crowds and also a crowd of corpses. The vision of mankind as a lot of cannibals, running in packs,

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<sup>31</sup> Bellow, *Ibid.*, p. 162-3

<sup>32</sup> Anne Goldman "In Praise of Saul Bellow" *Michigan Quarterly Review*. 2008  
<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5045024592> (08.08.2010)

gibbering, bewailing its own murders, pressing out the living world as dead excrement.<sup>33</sup>

In fact, Herzog philosophically approaches such contradictions. In many chapters, philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Tocqueville are forced to speak by the protagonist. In this way, their thoughts and comments are brought out. The protagonist uses their words to help him understand the human condition: “For when will we civilized beings become really serious” said Kierkegaard. Only when we have known hell through and through. Without this, hedonism and frivolity will diffuse hell through all our days.”<sup>34</sup> Deductive usage of historical figures is a testimony to make his readers conscious of history. Hence, Bellow aims his words at both Jews and Gentiles to warn about the contradictions encompassing.

Bellow had a similar destiny, such as a migration “from Russia to Canada only two years earlier”<sup>35</sup> and a Jewish ethnicity. The protagonist Herzog is an intellectual lecturing in a famous university, one who also deals with history and memory. As one critic notes: “Herzog’s project is the more classically intellectual; he approaches the world as a historian of ideas.”<sup>36</sup> In this sense, attempts to understand the world more clearly are “the provocation for Bellow to make sense of the cessation of consciousness, the one event we can never know first-hand”<sup>37</sup>

### 3. CONCLUSION

Both Nabokov and Bellow are important twentieth-century writers whose works exerted significant influence over world literature. In their respective novels, *Lolita* and *Herzog*, history, memory, and reality play distinctive roles. While for Nabokov, history turns into an excuse for his fantasy, Bellow instead uses it as a tool for awareness. Two novelists have created fantastic worlds for their readers in accordance with history, mythology, and reality. This difference creates a finite world to readers wishing to understand both authors.

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<sup>33</sup> Bellow, *Ibid*, p. 85

<sup>34</sup> Bellow, *Ibid*, p. 58

<sup>35</sup> Louise Begley “Saul Bellow”, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 2007 p.435

<sup>36</sup> Corner, *Ibid*, p. 372

<sup>37</sup> Goldman, *Ibid*

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