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New Critical Unity vs. Resolvability: Nabokov's *Lolita* and Epistemic Persona

For all the attacks levied against it, New Criticism has irrevocably influenced the discipline of English Studies by making literature, treated *as* literature, the primary focus. Since New Criticism's precipitous decline (mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century onward), a growing concern over the epistemology of English Studies has arisen. Scholars fear that the discipline is suffering from an identity crisis, caused in part by the onset of New Criticism and antecedent theoretical reactions. This paper looks at New Critical texts and responses to them in order to locate a potential source of this identity crisis. I argue that the responses to New Criticism focused on refuting the opaque leanings of New Critics (particularly that of a text's "resolvability"), largely ignoring their practice and treatment of texts. I do not seek to justify New Criticism, but I do argue that our retrospective view of it is misconstrued; is useful to view New Criticism as a set of practices rather than a cogent theory.

Much of the trouble stems from the word "unified;" many scholars (correctly) took New Critics to task for averring that a text could reach "harmony" through close readings. I argue that it is not useful to equate "unified" with "resolvability/un-resolvability." To illustrate the difference, I use a text's "persona" as a potential paradigm; Humbert Humbert, the narrator of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, is my example. A close-reading of *Lolita* that focuses on the nature of Humbert's persona extracts many themes: the reliability of the narrator, oral vs. written communication, and cognitive theories of mind. These themes do not necessarily resolve, but this isn't the same as suggesting that the text cannot be viewed as unified. The resultant content of Humbert's persona is paradoxical, but the persona itself can be seen as unified.