
What happens to the novel and to us, listeners, when we listen to Lolita? Comparing the printed text with the audiobook.

*Lolita* is not a love story, it is Humbert Humbert’s manuscript, therefore a written testimony. What happens to it when it is listened to rather than read are two very different experiences.


**The audiobook:** An unpopular medium, frowned upon by paper book purists.

ex. Harold Bloom: “Deep reading really demands the inner ear…that part of you which is open to wisdom. You need the text in front of you.” quoted by John Colapinto, “The Pleasures of being read to”, The New Yorker, 14/05/2012

**The tricky issue of abridgment:** Mason’s audiobook is 1 hour long (vs. Irons’s 11 hours.) Foreword exposing Humbert’s “singing violin” is missing -> misinterpretation; may lead listeners astray. Problematic with Kubrick’s movie as well. The audiobook ends with part 1 of the novel “she had nowhere else to go”, almost a cliffhanger. Yet strategical choices are made that reveal Humbert Humbert’s insanity

**A more “human” relationship?**

Narrator to reader vs. Narrator to listener

“audiobooks are predicated upon direct address. We are not overhearing, or eavesdropping; the narrating voice is explicitly addressing the listener. In fact, ‘envoicing’ the narrator creates a sense of connection stronger than reading impersonal printed pages: the communicative paradigm – storyteller to listener – that underlies printed texts has again become flesh.” * Sarah Kozloff, “Audio Books in a Visual Culture”, Journal of American Culture 18, no.4, 1995, p. 92.

Humanized narration, added affect, creating wished for emotional response. More relatable than metaphorical narrator?


Our relationship to sound is primal, we are engaged in a relationship when listening to a voice.

**Link between the actor’s and the narrator’s voice.** In the case of a homodiegetic narrator, the perspective of the narrator becomes authority. HH has absolute control over everyone’s sayings -> unreliability. Lolita never uses direct speech. Therefore hearing only one voice in the audiobook makes sense. This only voice also vocalizes other character, such as when HH proves his innocence by voicing Lolita (“it was she who seduced me”) with an inviting and childish tone or by ridiculing Charlotte Haze, Lolita’s « cow-like mother » and her clumsy French « ne montrez pas vos zhambes ».
“Wanted, wanted: Dolores Haze” poem: stanza 8 is in French (not native for Irons, as opposed to Humbert) -> Strangeeness among characters

Bilingual pun, on Clare Quilty (Qu’il t’y)
Mona Dahl to Lolita:
“As expected, poor Poet stumbled in Scene III when arriving at the bit of French nonsense. Remember? Ne manque pas de dire à ton amant, Chimène, comme le lac est beau car il faut qu’il t’y mène. Lucky beau! Qu’il t’y-What a tong-twister! Well, be good, Lollikins. Best love from your Poet, and best regards to the Governor. Your Mona. P.S. Because of one thing and another, my correspondence happens to be rigidly controlled. So better wait till I write you from Europe.” (Lolita p.223)
Clue lost in remediation, encoded message disappears (stress, italics); in this case the audiobook is more challenging than printed version.

Chapter I, incipit → reflection on pronunciation = fully rendered by the voiceJohn Ray’s “panting maniac” → James Mason. Breathing brings sexual dimension, Dolores pronounced in an almost orgasmic way.

Nabokov as a reader: Aestheticism over acting: a stylist on printed page, but also as reader Robotic English vs. Delicate Russian: denotes attachment to his lost homeland


It is very complex to deal with audiobooks, notably because of the cultural prejudice surrounding them (passive / restricted to blind or children). Much of the data and listeners behavior is complex to collect. Constraints: expensive, not inclusive, needs to be rehabilitated Book historians and reading historians usually overlook this feature.

Retracing its long history:
- Reading aloud in Antiquity: eloquence as only way of transmitting knowledge
- Middle Ages: Bards and troubadours performed their readings (churches, streets, workplaces)
- 17-18th c.: printed book massively produced, started to read silently and solitarily. But reading sessions continued, esp. in literary circles.
- 1910: Edison managed to create the first phonographic book Dickens’s Nicholas Nickleby condensed in 3 minutes
- The phonographic book Came to be linked to accessibility and blindness. The American Foundation for the Blind recorded books in a neutral voice and introduced censorship during the Cold War. Braille readers thought that listening could not be thought of as reading, afraid of being deprived of subsidies for braille books.
- 1950s democratization through invention of the LP: Caedmon records, spoken word on vinyl, authors reading their own works. Return to bardic tradition of Middle Ages (link to orality, with recordings of mythology, folktales…)

- Books on tape: linked to multitasking, increased its visibility.

- 1990s to 2010: increasing hybridity of the generic term audiobook (at least 51% spoken content). Borrowings from mass media ex. Disney audiobooks, noises, songs, full cast.

- Digitalization of the audiobook introduced new practices, download and streaming. From a byproduct of culture to the return of orality.

PhD thesis: Corpus of 4 titles: Beatrix Potter’s Peter Rabbit; A. E. Milne’s Winnie the Pooh; ? ; ?

Particularly suited for “neurodiversive readers” and in classrooms because it teaches basic linguistic competences, words heard in context; phrasing, intonation, phonetic discrimination.

Memory; Narrative empathy -> neurological findings, mirror neurons? The audio can enable to hold listener’s attention, homeostasis (suspense and cliffhangers) + sound specialization, more mental imagery, captivating. A study conducted by Audible in 2017 showed that there were higher emotional responses when listening rather than watching.

Audionarratology: podcasts, audiobooks, storytelling [historical + narratological and cognitive perspective] / phonostylistics

Bibliographie:

Le livre audio est un sujet encore peu étudié, surtout en France. Le premier ouvrage de référence sur la question est celui de Matthew Rubery, Audiobooks, Literature, and Sound Studies, publié chez Routledge (1ère édition 2011, 2ème édition 2014).

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