Use Of Figurative Language To Present The Imbalance Of Power In Relationships In Lolita And The Phantom Of The Opera

An investigation into how Vladimir Nabokov's "Lolita" and Andrew LLoyd Webber's "The Phantom of the Opera" use figurative language and power of language to present the imbalance of power in relationships

Introduction and Aims:

The imbalance of power is strongly evident in both "The Phantom of the Opera" and "Lolita". As readers experience newly constructed worlds, we explore the relationships between characters through the vivid figurative language in both texts, providing readers a deeper insight into the characters' thoughts. Similarly, the dialogue or narration of different characters allows readers a new perspective of each character's experiences, allowing us to understand more about the world and subsequently, the unconventional relationship between characters.

For instance, in the musical "The Phantom of the Opera", the Phantom lives beneath the Paris Opera House, with his love and protegee Christine Daae. The imbalance of power between the Phantom and Christine is largely depicted through their interactions, where the audience explores the power balance. However, Christine meets her childhood sweetheart, Raoul, and falls in love. The use of figurative language aids in setting each scene as the atmosphere of the play shifts with the plot

In the novel "Lolita", the protagonist, Humbert Humbert, falls in love with a 12-year-old girl, Dolores Haze, who he refers to as Lolita. Following the theme of Humbert's sexual lust for young Dolores results in a shocking, twisted tale of paedophilia. Similarly to "The Phantom of the Opera", Nabokov utilises explicit figurative language to provoke shocking images for the readers. He also uses the power of language to depict Humbert's power over Lolita, further providing a sense of discomfort for the reader.

Review:

Based on a novel by Gaston Leroux, "Le Fantôme de l'Opéra", "The Phantom of the Opera" by Andrew LLoyd Webber is a melodramatic musical, originally performed in London's West End in Her Majesty's Theatre in 1986. The relationship between the Phantom and Christine Daae is unconventional and dynamic; "As the Phantom's manipulation and desire to control Christine become more and more apparent… it's difficult not to feel for her as she is trapped and manipulated by a selfish, jealous man." The Phantom should be to blame for manipulating Christine "by exploiting the worlds of her dead father". By doing this, Christine felt that "she was keeping her father close by". Hence, the audience sees the Phantom as a "horrific-looking outcast and cold-blooded murderer". However, the musical also sheds light upon the Phantom's tragic, miserable "isolation, his musical vision, and the mysterious attraction Christine feels for him". The play allows the audience to share feelings with the main character as it brings to life the concepts of "despair and hope", as well as the betrayal, pain and

consequential power of unrequited love.

Christine is seen by the Phantom as “both his muse and his protégé” - in their synchronous relationship, both characters guide and follow each other, hence the balance of power in their relationship is constantly being altered. After her father’s death, Christine’s life has ultimately been controlled by men; she has become vulnerable and weak and has become the traditional image of women and gender roles. The only moments in which she shows independence is to serve “the interests of the men around her”, describing their relationship as “psychological[ly] manipulated love” on the basis that the Phantom has been exploiting her father’s words. The Phantom himself has also suffered from “rejection… as a disfigured child [making] him an outcast, an outsider… [an] orphan in his own home’. However, his sheer talent allowed him to become a guardian and father figure to Christine. Their relationship became more dynamic when the Phantom began to fall in love with Christine, claiming her with marriage and overwhelming passion. In their love triangle of a relationship, Christine originally feels devoted to the Phantom as he guides and teaches her, but after meeting her childhood sweetheart Raoul, her feelings are directed towards him, creating a conflict between the two men in her life. With the theme of “coming of age”, Christine is forced to be in power to make a final decision by the Phantom, pushing the power dynamic between the three characters even further.

In Vladimir Nabokov’s controversial novel “Lolita”, originally published in 1955, the main protagonist, who goes by the alias Humbert Humbert, recounts his experiences while waiting for trial for murder. The book revolves around the “tragic love affair” between Humbert and his stepdaughter Dolores, whom he refers to as Lolita. Interestingly, the novel allows readers to see Humbert as both a monstrous murderer, as well as a pitiful soul. “More shocking, though, is the reaction the author somehow manages to elicit from his readers: empathy.” While the comedic writing results in “passionate and playful” prose, Humbert’s narrative is “simultaneously lyrical and unsettling and erotic and violent”, all depicted through the rich retelling of his relationship with his Lolita. “It is the horrific rather than the comic aspect of the novel that has captured critical attention.” However, the comedic retelling of the story entices readers to understand and empathise with Humbert’s actions in an attempt to justify his severe wrongdoings.

The character of Lolita is only presented to the readers through Humbert’s perspective, and he pictures her as many different personalities - “as a promiscuous adolescent, as hopelessly vulgar and low-brow in her interests, as a “nymphet” who cruelly manipulates Humbert’s desires in order to get what she can out of him, and then drops him the first chance she gets”. Hence, the narrative of the novel is peculiar as we are only presented Dolores’ character through Humbert’s eyes, automatically giving him the ultimate power in shaping the story. However, Humbert is able to write about Dolores’ power over him as she controls the pace of their unconventional relationship. Humbert is truly a classic “abominable hero, who never deludes or excuses himself, brings into grotesque relief the cant, the vulgarity, and the hypocritical conventions that pervade the human comedy.” Hence, the presentation of power within the relationship between Humbert and Lolita is peculiar and twisted, while Humbert’s unique narrative allows both characters in power to be recognised by readers, as well as allowing Humbert himself to explain the reasons behind his forbidden desires.

Analysis:

I will be exploring semantic fields in the extract from “Lolita” and “The Phantom of the Opera”.

In “Lolita”, the use of the semantic fields of innocence, craftiness, fantasy, romance and intimacy are crucial, especially from Humbert’s perspective, as Nabokov uses this language feature to maintain the twisted imagery of paedophilia in the reader’s thoughts. In “The Phantom of the Opera”, the use of the semantic fields of dominance, fantasy and fear are used to depict the imbalance of power in the relationship between the Phantom and Christine. The Phantom is presented as having power over Christine in this scene, as Christine sees him as a father figure and teacher, yet questions the morals and tangibility of the Phantom. For this investigation, I will be focusing on how Nabokov and Webber have used the semantic fields of fantasy, monster, innocence and fear, dominance and intimacy to depict the power in the relationship between their respective characters.

In “Lolita”, the semantic field of fantasy is evident through the storytelling nature of Humbert’s narrative. He recalls the events through a third person point of view, referring to himself through the proper noun “Humbert” (“I wrapped it in Humbert’s huge engorged heart”, “her beloved Humbert”). He uses a casual, speech-like register to emulate a storytelling voice “So let us get started”, and foregrounds his story “Main character… Time… Place… Props.” He uses the semantic field of fantasy through a series of premodifying adjectives “magic”, “illusional”, “special spell”, “musical and apple-sweet”, which may have been used to show that Humbert finds his relationship with Dolores magical and fantasy-like. From Humbert’s perspective as the main protagonist of the novel, their relationship is hence seen as fantastical and sweet, despite the rather unconventional reality of the relationship. Similarly, in “The Phantom of the Opera”, the semantic field of fantasy is used. However, it is mostly used by Christine to question if the Phantom is real or imaginary. This is evident in the series of abstract nouns “sleep”, “dreams”, “inside my mind”, “fantasies”, “nighttime”, “darkness”, “imagination”, “darkest dreams” in which Christine questions the reality her experiences, as well as her own consciousness, further suggested through the question “and do I dream again?”. The imperative “close your eyes” suggests that the Phantom is guiding Christine to imagine a world of fantasy, and hints at the idea of intangibility and the abstract. The personification “darkness stirs and wakes imagination” may be transferred epithet to show how the Phantom teaches Christine to appreciate or relish the night, further accompanied by the ironic description of day and night. The Phantom describes the day with pejorative adjectives “garish”, “cold”, “unfeeling” and describes the night with laudatory adjectives “splendor”, “tremulous”, “tender” which could link to how the Phantom himself could be a figment of Christine’s imagination, as he is characterised to prefer night over day. The noun phrase “journey to a strange new world” may suggest how Christine is abandoning thereal world to follow the Phantom into a fictional fantasy realm.

Following the idea of fantasy, Nabokov links events from “Lolita” to the idea of “The Beauty and the Beast” - Lolita being innocent and pure and Humbert taking on the role of a monster. Humbert describes himself through the semantic field of an inhuman creature (“my gagged, bursting beast”, “my huge hairy hand massaged and slowly enveloped”, “last throb of ecstasy man or monster had ever known”, “returned to my lair”, “the ferocious pressure of dark male jaws”). This idea of Humbert being a monster link to how he is portrayed in society as a pedophiliac, in which he is abnormal and despised upon. Likewise, Dolores is described as fairytale-like (“little maiden”, “beauty of her dimpled body in its innocent cotton frock”, “her lovely nymphet thigh”, “her innocent mouth”, “my palpitating darling”, as from Humbert’s perspective, she is flawless as if she belonged in a fairytale. In “The Phantom of the Opera”, the Phantom describes himself as a monster through a series of pejorative noun phrases “loathsome gargoyle”, “the man behind the monster”, “repulsive carcass”, ‘seems a beast…

secretly dreams of beauty” and a series of verb phrases “burns in hell”, “secretly yearns for heaven’. The juxtaposition between “beast” and “beauty” as well as “hell” and “heaven” show how the Phantom is seen by Christine as both a monstrous creature and a fond, parental figure. Hence, both characters are depicted as monsters or inhuman, as seen through the similar use of semantic fields.

In “Lolita”, the semantic field of innocence is used to emphasise Dolores being clueless under Humbert’s influence. The use of premodifying adjectives “bare”, “thin”, “knobbly”, “guileless”, “young”, “bashful”, “raw”, “unaware”, “alien”, “tender” all bear connotations of how Dolores is weak, delicate and vulnerable, linking to how she is clueless towards Humbert’s actions. The aspect of vulnerability is vital in showing how Dolores is not responsible for Humbert’s actions and hence shows how she is under the influence of Humbert’s narrative and character. Likewise, the simile “like a flustered fowl” may be transferred epithet, linking to how Dolores is unsure and confused. The premodifying adjective “ivory” bears connotations of purity and innocence, much like how Dolores is depicted in the novel. However, in “The Phantom of the Opera”, Andrew Lloyd Webber uses the semantic field of fear instead to present the sense of confusion and fear in Christine as she follows the Phantom to his lair. The premodifying adjective “strange” in the noun phrase “strange angel” may suggest that Christine finds the Phantom peculiar despite referring to him as holy and pure, hinting at a sense of irony. The ironic nature of the Phantom reflects his character from Christine’s perspective as a monster and a father figure at the same time. The action verb “glance behind” depicts Christine as wary and unnerved, as she is reconsidering following the Phantom. This shows that she is uncertain about trusting the Phantom and is fearful of his intentions. The verb phrase “draw back in fear” further shows how many are frightened of the Phantom and his appearance, hence presenting the Phantom as a fearful, intimidating creature. The imperative “beware” bears connotations of danger and uncertainty, depicting how one should be frightened and wary of the Phantom. The concrete noun “labyrinth” bears connotations of confusion and uncertainty, as Christine feels that she is lost and unable to escape from the Phantom. The semantic field of threat is used through the series of verb phrases to describe music “surround you”, “closing in around you”, “cannot fight”, which is a transferred epithet of the Phantom himself, who himself traps Christine.

The Phantom uses a semantic field of dominance to emphasise his power over Christine, while Humbert uses a semantic field of intimacy as even though he is similarly in power over Dolores, he views their relationship as intimate and romantic rather than seeing himself dominant over Dolores. The semantic field of dominance in “The Phantom of the Opera” is shown through a series of nouns “slave”, “master”, “guide”, “guardian”, “power over you” as well as the active verbs “surrender”, “belong” which show how the Phantom utilises his power over Christine to direct her and guide her. Particularly, the use of the concrete nouns “slave” and “master” further show the imprisonment-like relationship that Christine and the Phantom are in. The Phantom uses the first person possessive pronoun “my” to establish his possession over Christine, and frequently uses imperatives “come to me”, “sing once again”, “grasp it, sense it”, “feel it, hear it” which further suggests his dominance over Christine as he commands and directs her. In “Lolita”, the semantic field of intimacy is shown through the fact that Humbert refers to Dolores as “nymphet” and “Lolita’, in which the literal definition of “Lolita” is based on this book - a young, immaturely seductive girl. The term “nymphet” may also refer to the mythical female spirits from Greek mythology, defined to be fertile, attractive creatures. The semantic field is further explored through the series of verbs and verb phrases “softly crept”, “examine its every detail”, “pleaded”, “caught her”, “mutilating”, “legs twitched”, “stroked”,

“lolled… almost asprawl”, “lost myself”, “set all paradise loose”, “crept”, “wiggled… squirmed… threw her head back”, “overlapping, encasing her”, combined with a series of nouns and noun phrases “whole wine-sweet event”, “impudent child”, “masked lust”, “stealthy movements”, “unspeakable passion”, "sensation”, “shameless innocent shanks”, “infusion of joy”, “glowing tingle”, “deep hot sweetness”, “ultimate convulsion”, “nerves of pleasure”, “phrase of frenzy”, “shadow of decency”, “hot hollow of her groin”, “my moaning mouth”, “glistening underlip”, “euphoria of release”, “sinful dream”, as well as a series of premodifying adjectives “careful”, “chaste”, “ignoble”, “ardent”. The extensive use of this semantic field exhibits the sexual nature of the relationship between Humbert and Dolores, constantly reminding the reader about the lust and desire Humbert feels towards Dolores.

(The semantic field of romance further shows Humbert’s strong feelings towards Dolores (“beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple”, “pretty pink dress… ample in the skirt, tight in the bodice… painted her lips”, “heart expanded with such force”). In particular, Nabokov uses the imagery of the Garden of Eden to further depict the forbidden, unformidable nature of the relationship between Dolores and Humbert. In describing Dolores “holding in her hollowed hands a beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple”, the premodifying adjective “Eden-red” bears connotations of the Garden in which Eve encounters the forbidden fruit, which could suggest how Dolores loses her innocence after the event with Humbert. The proper noun “Venus de Milo” bears resemblance to the Greek goddess Aphrodite, who is the goddess of love and beauty. This could also link to the sexual, explicit nature of the relationship between Humbert and Dolores. The use of the first person possessive pronoun “my” when Humbert addresses Dolores (“My Lolita”, “my sweetheart”) shows how Humbert is possessive and obsessive over Dolores, further emphasising his overreigning power.)