



**THE SECRET DIARY OF DOLORES HAZE:  
LOLITA AS RE(A)D**

**SHARI L. SAVAGE**

**Abstract**

In this article, I explore the narrative structure of *Little Red Riding Hood* to re-imagine Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1958) using Vladimir Propp's analyses of folk and fairy tales. In producing *The Secret Diary of Dolores Haze*, a critical feminist response to the novel in the form of a fictive autoethnographic diary, I argue that through arts-based inquiry I discovered/uncovered Dolores (Lolita) as Red. I wrote this fictive diary to loosen the myth of blameworthiness attached to Dolores's story by giving her a voice. Equally important, arts-based inquiry offers the researcher new ways of understanding data through creative production.

**The Secret Diary of Dolores Haze: *Lolita* as Re(a)d**

*The Secret Diary of Dolores Haze* came about when two seemingly disparate writing projects merged during a workshop on ads and semiotic theory and intersected with my current research, a self-reflective autoethnographic examination of Lolita myths in popular visual culture. This paper is the result of this confluence, using Vladimir Propp's (1990) analyses of folktales and narrative structure, the classic fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood* and my own rewriting of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1958).

I had been working for some time on understanding Nabokov's *Lolita* (1958), but it was when I encountered the Structuralist, Vladimir Propp that I realized this supposedly unique story was really one of the oldest narratives in the world—that of naivety, deception, and seduction, and that it could be understood through a morphology similar to Propp's. Propp identifies several<sup>1</sup> character types in his analyses of folktales and fairytales. These include the villain, the donor, the (sometimes magical) helper, the princess and her father, the dispatcher, the hero or victim/seeker hero and the false hero. These roles can shift and often are embodied by more than one character; a princess can be a prince, and a journey or quest often serves as foundation to the plot (Wardetsky, 1990, p. 162). With this in mind, I reread Nabokov's narrative structure of *Lolita* with an eye toward functioning roles that relate to many of Propp's identified character types, and discovered that *Lolita* as read shifted to *Lolita* is *Red*.

***Lolita* (1958) Synopsis**

The story of 12-year-old Dolores Haze, better known as Lolita<sup>2</sup>, is complex, layered with literary obstacles, and told by her stepfather

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1. Propp's character types vary in number depending on whether or not the princess and the father are seen as one or two characters.

2. Lolita is the name of the novel, the intimate (secret) name used by Humbert in place of the name Dolores, and the popular culture label for a type of girl who is tacitly understood to be sexually precocious.

Humbert Humbert, a self-professed pedophile. Using ambitious vocabulary, Humbert paints himself as a misunderstood but brilliant scholar, whose incestuous relationship with Dolores is couched as an obsessive love, rather than the sexual abuse of a minor. Summarizing *Lolita* would be lengthy; therefore, a brief and decidedly feminist interpretation follows:

A fictive foreword, written by equally fictive psychologist John Ray, Jr., Ph.D., introduces the confessional narrative. *Lolita* is a journal written by Humbert Humbert, European émigré, who has taken a room at widow Charlotte Haze's Ramsdale, New Hampshire home. Already admittedly sexually drawn to "nymphets" between the ages of 9 and 14, Humbert is smitten with the widow's daughter, Dolores. So much so, he marries the widow Haze to maintain contact with Dolores, who he calls Lolita in his longingly written journal entries. The magical (albeit evil) helper in this story is the car that strikes Charlotte dead, allowing Humbert custodial power over Dolores.

Humbert picks Dolores up from summer camp, deceitfully explaining that her mother is ill and he will be taking her home. He plans to drug Dolores and have sex with her anesthetized body at the hotel that night. Humbert's plan is not completely successful (she remains drowsy, but not asleep), and he tells the reader that Dolores seduces him. He takes Dolores on a cross-country journey, and when she begs to go home, he admits that her mother is dead. Humbert informs his new stepdaughter that he is all she has, it's him or a wayward girls boarding school. Similar threats keep her compliant. They spend their days moving from town to town, staying in motels across the United States while Humbert continues to use Dolores sexually. Humbert believes a man is trailing them when he sees a familiar car in several locations. Dolores disappears during a short stay at a hospital for influenza, one of the few times she is left alone, and a despondent Humbert devotes himself to locating her and the man he suspects took her. He is unsuccessful in his quest to find Dolores or the elusive man.

Years later, Dolores, age seventeen, married and very pregnant, contacts Humbert asking for money. He rushes to see her and is shocked by the woman she has become — a shadow of the nymphet he once possessed. He plans to kill Dolores's husband until she reveals that the man

who lured her away from him was not her husband, but the playwright Clare Quilty, a man they knew back in Ramsdale. Quilty, she explains, tried to force her to have sex with other children on film so she escaped from him too, and subsequently met her future husband, a young man named Richard Schiller.

After hearing of Dolores's sordid time with Quilty, Humbert asks her to come with him, but she refuses (The homecoming found in Propp's morphology is not to be in *Lolita*'s story). In an act of atonement, Humbert gives her money, the remains of her mother's estate, and goes in search of Clare Quilty. When he locates Quilty, Humbert enacts his rage over the loss of his Lolita, shooting and killing the playwright. While awaiting his trial for murder, Humbert has a heart attack and dies. Humbert's journal, *Lolita, or confession of a White, widowed male* is found in his jail cell. The foreword mentions, that "Mrs. Richard F. Schiller died in the childbed, giving birth to a stillborn daughter" (Nabokov, 1958, p. 4). There is no "happily ever after" (Nabokov, 1958, p. 274), as Humbert once promised Dolores—no fairytale ending—everyone dies.

### Lolita as Red

The narrative structure of Nabokov's *Lolita* contains many of the character-types Propp identifies, including a (step)father; a magical helper that takes the form of a car; a quest to possess the princess (Dolores); a cross-country journey; and a false hero (Quilty), who the victim/seeker (also Dolores) mistakenly believes is trying to save her. The main villain is Humbert. While Nabokov evokes other literary precedents, including Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, the fairytale is a major thematic thread in *Lolita*. *The Little Mermaid*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Emperor's New Clothes*, are all referenced in Nabokov's novel (Appel, 1991). The use of the words "fairy," "enchantment," "fairytale," "wolf," and "princess" appear throughout *Lolita*. Humbert writes of trying to keep Dolores on "an enchanted island" as he falls deeply into and under her "nymphet spell" (Nabokov, 1958, pp. 16-17). Nabokov himself called *Lolita* a fairytale, and his nymph Dolores a "fairy princess" (Appel, 1991, p. 339). Alfred

Appel directly situates this novel in the genre:

The simplicity of Lolita's "story," such as it is—"plot," in the conventional sense, may be paraphrased in three sentences—and the themes of deception, enchantment, and metamorphosis are akin to the fairytale, while the recurrence of places and motifs and the presence of three principal characters recall the formalistic design and symmetry of those archetypal tales. (Appel, 1991, p. 346)

Appel, a former student of then Cornell professor Nabokov, recalls that Nabokov would begin the first day of class by saying, "Great novels are above all great fairytales . . . Literature does not tell the truth but makes it up" (Appel, 1991, p. 347). In Nabokov's *Lolita*, Humbert does the telling; artfully making up his version of their story, while Dolores's side of the tale gets left out. My mission, and the mission of other critical feminist writers (Bordo, 1999; Kauffman, 1989; Morrissey, 1992; Patnoe, 1995), is to tell another version of *Lolita* in order for her voice to be heard.

### Dolores Speaks

One of the more important things I wanted to do in my earlier research project (Savage, 2009) was to give Dolores a voice, something she does not have in the novel. Voicing Dolores, thus far, consisted of critical literary research and my own textual analysis, which centered on locating Dolores between the lines. Because Humbert's telling is purposefully vague on details that humanize Dolores, critical feminist readings focus on drawing her feelings and reactions from the shadows of Nabokov's text. This approach was never enough for me in that I worried too much about factual data. Letting go of convention, I decided to explore arts-based inquiry, bringing Dolores to the forefront, which also allowed a major shift in my analyses of the novel and Lolita-like representations in popular culture. Arts-based inquiry honors the "what if's" I wished to address.

Juxtaposing the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* with the desire to voice Dolores pushed me to new and uncomfortable depths, as I tried to channel 12-year-old Dolores and imagine her side of the story. Her experiences, even filtered through Humbert's self-serving narrative, are difficult to reside in—as a former girl, as a woman, and especially as the mother of a teen-aged daughter. Inserting myself into the story, even fictively, was disturbing but purposeful. As Dolores, I wrote a new version of the story, one that progresses from innocence to anger and ultimately, disillusionment. In my version, the story ends after she escapes Quilty, thereby opening the possibility of a happier ending.

I contend the silencing of Dolores Haze is one of the main reasons the novel is considered by many<sup>3</sup> to be about an erotic entanglement rather than the ritualized rape of a stepdaughter. Speaking through Dolores, I try to illuminate the shadowed vestiges of her experiences, as if she, too, had been writing about her life after Humbert took residence in her home, and as he took ownership of her body. Once committed to the idea of creating a literary and aesthetic production, seeing *Lolita* as Red came easily; however, the words are never easy for me to read.

### Arts-based Inquiry

Arts-based, arts-informed, or as Liora Bresler (2006) calls it, aesthetically based research—all describe the processes I engaged in when creating Dolores's diary. Each label applies to the processes in which I engaged, and each carries the underlying work of creative inquiry (Bresler, 2006; Sullivan, 2006). An explanation that supports my own understandings of how the *Little Red Riding Hood* project added to my research comes from Graeme Sullivan (2006), who states:

Rather than seeing inquiry as a linear procedure or an enclosing process, research acts can also be interactive and reflexive where by imaginative insight is constructed from a creative and critical

3. Early book reviews of *Lolita* declare Dolores "utterly depraved," "already corrupt," and describe Humbert as helpless to her charms (as cited in Bayma & Fine, 1996).

practice. Oftentimes what is known can limit the possibility of what is not and this requires a creative act to see things from a new view. An inquiry process involving interpretive and critical acts is then possible as new insights confirm, challenge or change our understanding. (Sullivan, 2006, p. 20)

For many of the same reasons Sullivan (2006) lists above, *The Secret Diary of Dolores Haze* became transformational to my thinking. Creating the fictional diary is ethnographic drama, which Laurel Richardson (2000) defines as “a blending of realist, fictional, and poetic techniques,” which can then, “reconstruct the sense of an event through multiple ‘as lived’ perspectives,” thereby allowing, “conflicting voices to be heard” (Richardson, 2000, p. 934). In fictively voicing Dolores, I critically challenge the “blameworthiness” prevalent in tacit understandings of Lolita as seducer, and offer an alternative version to Humbert’s telling, in that *he said* becomes *she said*. Using the pre-teen vernacular Humbert mimics when speaking for or about Dolores, I wrote as she might have.

While I cannot draw on personal experience to fully understand the kind of abuse Dolores endured, I can relate to issues of betrayal and misplaced blame. When I was a seventh grader, my parents intercepted several letters describing sexually graphic fantasies about me, which were later attributed to my school bus driver. Questions posed to me at the time concerned my involvement—what had I done, said, or worn—that might have enticed this otherwise normal family man to act in such an inappropriate manner. My interpretation, at the time, was that I possessed some kind of unusual affectation that caused him to react abnormally. Two years later I was date raped and believed that, once again, something about me was to blame.

Ashamed, I remained silent. Through multiple readings of *Lolita* and by developing the arts-based research it inspired, I am healing in many ways. In retrospect, I was always trying to voice Dolores, to shut out Humbert, to argue with critical literary interpretations that lay blame at Dolores’s feet (Girodias, 1957; Hicks, 1958; Hollander, 1956; Trilling, 1958), and along with other feminist writers, shed light on the invisible girl. In writing her story, my story becomes visible, too.

Richardson (2000) argues for writing as a method of inquiry,

stating, “Writing is also a way of ‘knowing’—a method of discovery and analysis . . . form and content are inseparable” (p. 923). Instead of “writing up the research,” the traditional way to approach data, she suggests that the act of writing opens the research to new knowledge formations. Furthermore, Richardson claims writing as inquiry allows qualitative researchers to “understand ourselves reflexively as persons writing from particular positions at specific times . . . it frees us from trying to write a single text in which we say everything at once to everyone” (p. 929). CAP ethnography (creative analytic practices), a concept she developed, constructs a framework for using writing as inquiry, which privileges the researcher’s voice, while loosening the bonds of traditional research formats.

CAP ethnography asserts that the writing process and product are inseparable (Richardson, 2000). Autoethnographies, an evocative form of writing research, are “highly personalized, revealing texts in which authors tell stories . . . relating the personal to the cultural” (p. 931). “Writing-stories,” a narrative strategy born out of autoethnography, concerns situating the author’s writing into other contexts, including academia, home life, political and social life, community, and personal history, much like Richardson’s 1997 book, *Fields of Play*. I see self-reflective autoethnography, CAP ethnography, and writing-stories as all connecting through writing as a method of inquiry. Likewise, CAP ethnography is arts-based in that artfully written texts, whether fictive or poetically delivered non-fiction, serve to promote deeper awareness of a topic or issue.

Text is one way to describe and report research, but as an art educator, creating or making and producing things, is another crucial method for understanding information (Barone, 2006; Eisner, 2006; Sullivan, 2006). My fictive diary is visual, textual, and poetic. It is multifaceted arts-based inquiry, in that it acknowledges a broad definition of what research can be and what it can look like. During my research, I engaged in many hands-on activities, including the creation of the diary, that helped me extend, explore, and critically challenge the representations my research considers. In doing creative work, whether it is fictional writing or visual art making, multiple thought processes re-develop, helping new and/or different connections surface.

Sara Worth (2005) draws from Noël Carroll, Donald Polkinghorne,

and Jerome Bruner when proposing the idea that “narrative knowledge is a special form of reasoning,” one that moves past “knowing how” and “knowing that,” into a third realm—knowing what something is like (cited in Goodall, 2008, pp. 13-14). Storytelling allows for the third realm to produce a “distinctive form of knowledge that is rooted in empathy for other human beings and an enhanced capacity for both imagination and moral reasoning” (p. 14). Goodall (2008) explains that through writing and telling, new ways of knowing and understanding are created, and in this sense is akin to epistemology. He argues for what he calls a new ethnography, or “creative narratives shaped out of a writer’s personal experiences within a culture and addressed to academic and public audiences” (p. 22). Reflexivity, according to Goodall, is a “powerful authoring tool” that assists the reader in understanding how the writer develops his or her “unique point of view” (p. 41).

In planning how I might approach my arts-based inquiry of *Lolita as Red*, I conjured 12-year-old Dolores, imagined her “unique point of view” as she traveled from motel to motel, saving bits and pieces to put into a handmade diary (motel stationary fashioned into a small booklet). I layered the diary with period-specific artifacts, including matchbox covers, movie ticket stubs, candy wrappers, and postcards. As does the original *Lolita*, Dolores Haze’s diary contains a foreword (Figure 1) written by the same fictional psychologist, John Ray, Jr., Ph.D., who contextualizes the recently discovered diary.

For the text of the diary, I explore the intertextuality of Nabokov’s plot and *Little Red Riding Hood’s* narrative. Following a shortened trajectory of the timeframe covered in the novel, pivotal events are highlighted, and due to the complexity of the original book, liberties are taken. Structurally, major story developments mirrored Propp’s morphology and assisted in helping Dolores’s diary take shape. I drew upon extensive literature reviews regarding critical feminist interpretations of Nabokov’s *Lolita* (Bordo, 1999; Kauffman, 1989; Shelton, 1999), including Elizabeth Patnoe (1995) and Kim Morrissey (1992), who both write about girls who have been involved in kidnapping, incest and abusive relationships, to help me speak as Dolores.

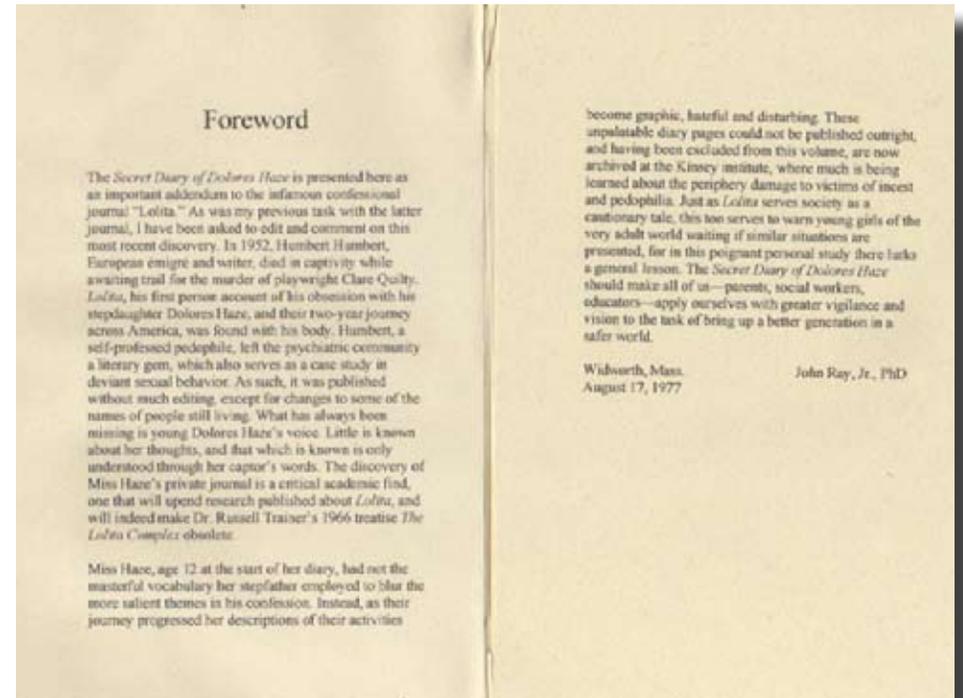


Figure 1 “Foreword”

In speaking as/for Dolores, I began to write Humbert as predatory, and the hunted/prey metaphor emerged in a more concentrated manner. My version of the story allows Dolores to acknowledge how her stepfather’s actions affected her and her feelings were validated, two things notably absent from Humbert’s telling. Retelling *Lolita’s* narrative as *Red* refocused my interpretations of the structural framework of the novel, thereby allowing me to loosen Dolores’s ties to blameworthiness. Dolores’s telling is emancipatory and repositions her, not as an object for male lust or as a Lolitaesque predator, but rather as a victim who does have a voice, personality, and inherent humanity, as well as her own name.

The collected memorabilia decorating the diary, document Dolores’s cross-country enslavement. Items that reflect her payment for “good” behavior (candy, movie magazines, movie ticket stubs or post-

cards of motels or nearby attractions), attest to her youthful interests. Despite the adult situations in which she finds herself, these collected items serve as touchstones for the life she once had . . . when candy was a treat, not a payment for time served. Some of the images tell deeper stories. For example, when Dolores writes of their stay at the Enchanted Hunter motel, where Humbert plans to drug and rape her while she sleeps, the images (Figure 2) she includes refer to the hunter in disguise and loss (mother/virginity<sup>4</sup>). The creation of these pages proved to be illuminating, specifically in highlighting the duality of roles Dolores occupies as they shift and alter in one life-changing day. From stepdaughter to sexual abuse victim, from girl to woman, from mothered to motherless, from free to enslaved, the diary allows Dolores a place to remain visible.

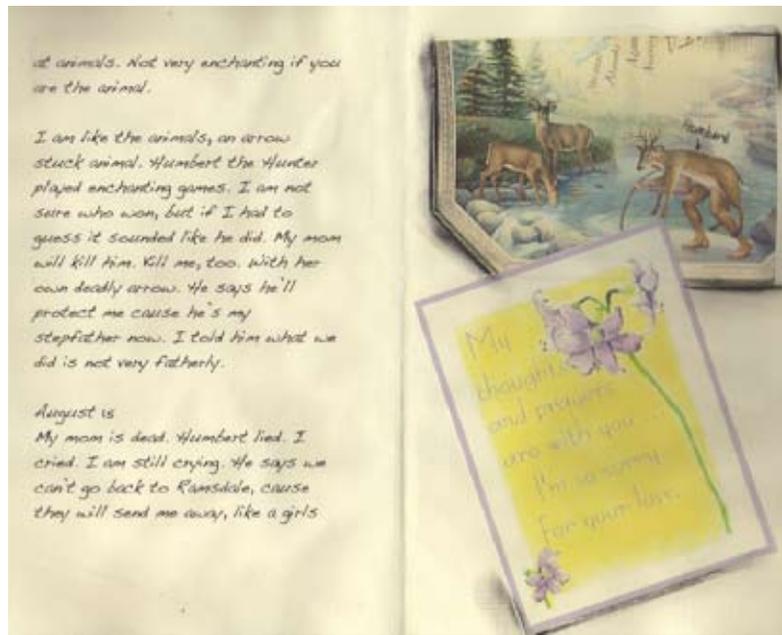


Figure 2 “Enchanted Hunter”

4. Dolores’s virginity is a contested area in the novel. While Humbert implies she was no innocent, critical feminist interpretations argue otherwise, specifically pointing out the way Dolores describes her body’s aches and pains the next day (Kauffman, 1989; Patnoe, 1995; Shelton, 1999).

In the decision-making process of composing each page of text and images, I found myself thinking about the daily grind of Dolores’s existence. I often wondered if she would find writing and creating as healing as I do, or if she had time to reflect on what she’d written and made, where she hid her diary, or what she might feel if Humbert found out about it. I talk about her as if she is real. Dolores is very real to me, especially because she lives on in numerous visual representations that continue to tell lies about her. Even now, two years past the diary’s creation, as I re-engage with the pages and images, I am rediscovering her tragic situation. In reliving my connection to her, I see myself. I recognize that like Dolores, I am prone to talk around the edges, to soften, to use passive voice to tell what is hurtful to admit. Dolores’s diary provided me with a place to examine my own issues with blame/shame and through her voice say what I needed to say, too.

In the book *At Twelve*, photographer Sally Mann (1988) quotes Lewis Carroll, who once wrote that “a girl of twelve is one on whom no shadow of sin has fallen, but one who has been touched by the ‘outermost fringe of the shadow of sorrow’ ” (p. 52). Dolores Haze, in the sociocultural sense, has been cast in the shadow of sin and her legacy lives on in the guise of Lolita. Through the words and images created for Dolores’s fictional diary, my intention is to reposition her to the “outermost fringe of the shadow of sorrow,” and disrupt notions of blameworthiness our culture associates with her story. Through arts-based inquiry, I rediscover/uncover Dolores and continue to question why her story has become so strongly entrenched in myth.

Likewise, I begin to question the myths we tell ourselves about our own histories, making the discovery that research and personal healing become part of a larger narrative inspired by arts-based production. The creation of the diary became catalyst to using art-based inquiry in my subsequent research, adding a significant layer through critical engagements<sup>5</sup> with Lolita representations in popular visual culture (Savage, 2009). In addition, using multiple voices (girl, daughter, mother, artist, educator) continues to be part of how I write about and understand

5. Lolita artifacts, critical collages used in a subsequent research, were inspired by the diary project (Savage, 2009).

self-reflective autoethnographic research. By voicing Dolores in this arts-based inquiry project, I developed a stronger, more confident research voice. The most compelling aftereffect of the diary project comes in the form of empathy. To imagine her life, to craft the words and create the images was difficult, but it fueled my passion to dispel Dolores's undeserved reputation. Dolores's diary resonates with the same storytelling power as the iconic *Little Red Riding Hood* morphology, in that "Once upon a time" marks an instructive mythic journey. *The Secret Diary of Dolores Haze* is a modern fairy tale dedicated to Dolores and Red, and all girls trying to escape their own big, bad wolf. (Figure 3)

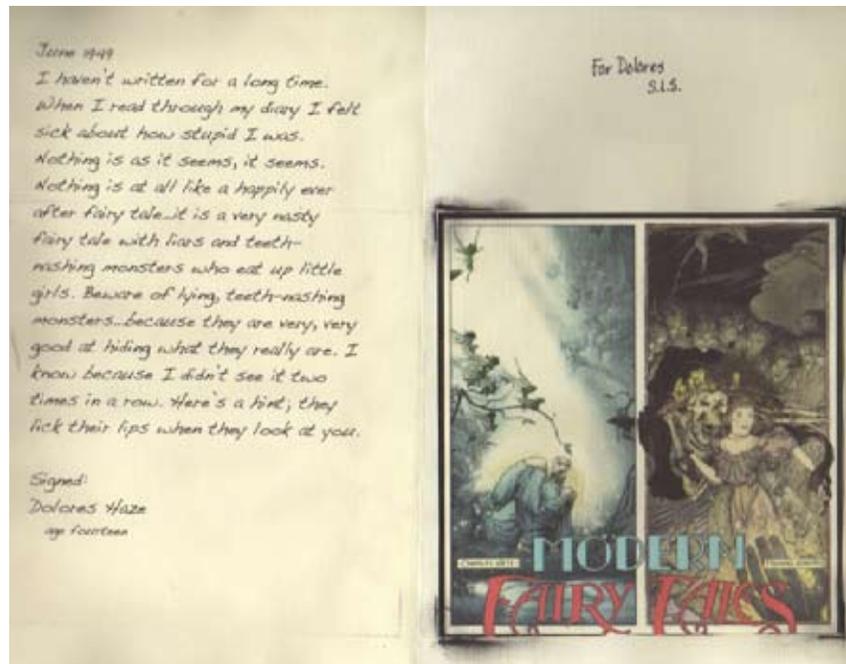


Figure 3 "Modern Fairy Tale"

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### About the Author

Shari L. Savage is a visiting assistant professor in art education at The Ohio State University. Her research interests include gender issues in media, arts-based inquiry, and pre-service teacher training.

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to the author at [savage.12@osu.edu](mailto:savage.12@osu.edu)