

FILM REVIEW:

SORRY BABY (2025)¹

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Victor, Eva. *Sorry Baby*. A24, 2025.

Eva Victor's directorial debut, *Sorry Baby* (2025), boldly intertwines personal trauma with witty humor and quiet enduring resilience. Written, directed, and starring Victor herself, *Sorry Baby* follows the story of Agnes, an English literature professor at a New England University, grappling with the aftermath of sexual assault. The film avoids sensationalized or romanticized trauma narratives in favor of following Agnes's internal journey of reflection and recovery. Unfolding in a fragmented and non-linear manner, the film mirrors the fractured nature of memory and the complex journey towards healing that often follows a traumatic event. This intimate framework allows Victor to explore how a survivor navigates the "Bad Thing," a euphemism for the assault Agnes experienced at the hands of her former teacher and mentor, Decker (Louis Cancelmi). However, the assault is not regarded as the defining experience of Agnes' life, but instead as an intrusive shadow that permeates her everyday life as she learns to move forward.

In this light, *Sorry Baby* emerges as a feminist reclamation of narrative agency, deliberately echoing and subverting Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), which serves as the focal point of Agnes's PhD research at the time of the assault, as well as a recurring motif throughout the film. The film's central achievement is the inversion of Nabokovian conventions established in the novel, particularly in exploring the dynamics of abuse of power and sexual exploitation. In *Lolita*, the sexual exploitation is explored through the lens of the predatory narrator who employs sardonic humor and linguistic seduction to draw attention away from the gruesomeness of his crime, casting Dolores Haze (*Lolita*)

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as a seductive temptress, while minimizing her victimhood. *Sorry, Baby* directly challenges these tropes: Victor flips the script by centering the survivor's perspective, while retaining the sarcasm and deadpan humor, but reframing them as coping strategies that help Agnes reclaim her agency. At the beginning of the film, flashbacks to her life before the assault reveal Agnes as a bright doctoral student whose quick wit and intellect catch Decker's attention, leading him to invite her to his home, where he assaults her. This setup reflects the same power imbalance that occurs in *Lolita*, where Humbert uses his position of authority as Dolores's stepfather to manipulate and abuse her. Whereas Nabokov filters the abuse account through Humbert's manipulative, self-justifying prose to allow his protagonist to rationalize his crimes and to obscure their dark reality, Victor focuses on Agnes's resilience and enduring sense of humor, demonstrating that she can preserve her personhood even in the fallout of her trauma. Her humor emerges in absurd, offbeat instances, such as during a medical examination following the assault, when her attention is drawn less to the seriousness of the situation than to the fact that she is bare beneath the hospital gown. These moments do not diminish or trivialize her trauma; they emphasize her ability to preserve her individuality and awkward quirks in its wake.

Additionally, the film's treatment of sarcasm and irony as a victim's self-defense mechanism directly mirrors the experience of Dolores, whose occasional sharp remarks suggest a quiet defiance against her abuser, but are consistently drowned out by Humbert's controlling narration. Victor amplifies this sentiment through Agnes, who adopts irony as a strategy for reclaiming control over her narrative. By intertwining Agnes's academic expertise with her personal reckoning, the film demonstrates how literature can reflect real-world trauma. While the novel masterfully exposes an abuser's psyche, it risks romanticization and complicity by letting Humbert be humorous. By giving the comical voice to the victim, *Sorry Baby* counters that, letting Agnes soften the emotional impact by herself, while holding the abuser fully accountable. This results in a narrative that feels empowering, rather than exploitative. Used by the survivor, humor becomes a means of pushing back against the silencing often imposed by abusers on their victims.

The film's non-linear storytelling, shifting between Agnes's life before and after the assault, resembles the intrusive, non-chronological nature of memories that return involuntarily after experiencing trauma. By structuring the narrative in this way, Victor illustrates how the reality of healing such an ordeal is often not linear, but rather

fragmented, with instances of setbacks and brief periods of comfort found in relationships with people around us. Her bond with her best friend Lydie provides a respite from isolation, underscoring the importance of external support and the way interpersonal bonds can help preserve a sense of self in the face of adversity. Agnes and Lydie's witty banter and sarcastic humor further highlight the importance of companionship, offering Agnes reassurance and a sense of solidarity in her healing journey. When Lydie picks up a copy of Nabokov's *Lolita* and exclaims, "Ew," it makes Agnes laugh. In this shared moment of comic relief, a symbol of abuse is transformed into a shared joke that lightens Agnes's burden.

The film's emotional weight rests largely on its performances, with Victor herself delivering a nuanced, standout performance of the movie's protagonist. Her background in comedy is precisely what allows her to achieve a balance between deadpan humor and the emotional depth of trauma. Naomi Ackie, as Lydie, serves as an ideal foil to Agnes, her dry humor enhancing the film's ironic tone and highlighting Agnes's comedic quality. Louis Cancelmi's portrayal of Decker avoids exaggeration and caricature, focusing instead on how abuse often stems from unassuming, everyday authority figures. His restraint is a direct contrast to Humbert's deceptive charm and bigger-than-life persona. Supporting roles, such as Kelly McCormack's Natasha, bring a sense of normalcy to Agnes's life, as her petty one-sided rivalry with Agnes serves as a small anchor of familiarity even when her life is disrupted by the turbulent ordeal. Together, these performances create a layered and resonant world, where each performance reinforces the film's exploration of trauma, survival, resilience, and humor. In addition, they also accentuate how human connections, whether supportive or fraught, shape Agnes's journey.

Sorry, Baby succeeds as a provocative mix of dark comedy and drama, inviting audiences to confront trauma and all its absurdities, while avoiding melodrama or exaggerated sentimentality. With its subtle framing and sound design, the film's technical simplicity amplifies its thematic depth by asking audiences to engage with the material critically, instead of relying on overexposure and explicit storytelling. Through Victor's vision, *Sorry Baby* redefines how we depict trauma on-screen, as well as invites audiences to reflect on how we treat abuse and victims in literature, film, and real life.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

KATARINA KOCIC is a PhD candidate in English Studies at the University of Vigo. Her research focuses on contemporary literature, feminist literary criticism, adaptation studies, and the cultural construction of girlhood. She holds an MA in Advanced English Studies from the University of Alicante and a BA in English language and literature from the University of Nis. Her MA thesis, *Ethics of Fiction: Lolita and the Cultural Legacy of Sexualized Girlhood*, examined the romanticization of abuse and the sexualization of girlhood in relation to Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and its film adaptations through an interdisciplinary framework drawing on feminist theory, trauma studies, and cultural criticism. Her current doctoral research continues to explore questions of gender, representation, ethics, and power in literature and culture.

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