Pale Fire Study Guide

Pale Fire by Vladimir Nabokov

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Plot Summary

To initial appearances, Pale Fire is the final, unfinished poem by renowned poet John Shade, with a forward and commentary by fellow university instructor Charles Kinbote. However, through the commentary, this novel becomes the story Charles Kinbote longs to tell, the story of Charles X, the exiled, beloved king of Zembla. Kinbote proves himself an unreliable narrator, and the reader must attempt to discern the layers of illusive truth behind the tale.

In the fictitious forward, Kinbote introduces the poet John Shade and the 999-line unfinished poem called "Pale Fire" that he wrote in the last month of his life. Kinbote proves himself to be at odds with other critics of Shade and introduces himself as a neighbor and friend of the late poet.

The poem itself includes imagery of reflection and focuses on themes of death. An autobiographical work, it details Shade's relationship with his wife and daughter and the unattractive daughter's suicide after being rejected by a date. In the following commentary, instead of examining the poem, Kinbote uses the poem as an opportunity to tell his own tale.

Kinbote hints that he is, in fact, the exiled King Charles X (known as Charles the Beloved) of Zembla. He tells the complex story of King Charles, filled with details that no outsider could possibly know. The king is scholarly and well-loved. His father, whose hobby is aircraft, dies in a plane crash, and Charles is not close to his mother. After her death, he is pressured to generate an heir, but he is gay and cannot consummate a relationship with a woman to produce an heir. He does marry a queen, but she eventually leaves Zembla to live on the Riviera.

Revolutionaries take over the government of Zembla, and they hold King Charles captive in the castle. Charles finds an old secret passage that leads him out of the castle, and he escapes through the mountains. Loyal subjects aid his flight by disguising themselves as the king, so that they confuse the police. The king visits his wife on the Riviera and then leaves for America to teach at a university while he's in exile.

Meanwhile, Kinbote mixes with this tale information about his relationship with his neighbor, John Shade, and the reader begins to realize that although Shade was kindly and tolerant toward Kinbote, they were not the great friends Kinbote claims. Shade and other members of the university see Kinbote as delusional.

Kinbote details (again, giving information he cannot possibly know) the journey of an assassin on his way to kill the exiled king. In Kinbote's story, the assassin shoots wildly and accidentally kills Shade instead of his real target, Kinbote, the exiled King Charles. The reader can gather, though, that in truth the killer is an escaped lunatic who mistakes Shade for the judge who sent him to an asylum for the criminally insane.

Forward

Forward Summary

To initial appearances, Pale Fire is the final, unfinished poem by renowned poet John Shade, with a forward and commentary by fellow university instructor Charles Kinbote. However, through the commentary, this novel becomes the story Charles Kinbote longs to tell, the story of Charles X, the exiled, beloved king of Zembla. Kinbote proves himself an unreliable narrator, and the reader must attempt to discern the layers of illusive truth behind the tale.

Charles Kinbote begins the forward in a straightforward manner, introducing the poem to follow, "Pale Fire," written in the last month of poet John Shade's life. The original of the poem is written on a collection of 80 index cards in the poet's small, precise handwriting.

The poem is divided into four cantos and is symmetrical in design. The first canto is 166 lines (about one sixth of the total length of the poem). The second canto is 334 lines (about one third of the total length of the poem). The third canto is the same length as the second, and the last canto is 166 lines, including the last, unwritten, one-thousandth line. Abruptly interrupting his description of the poet's work habits, Kinbote comments that there is a loud amusement park outside distracting him. Kinbote goes immediately back to commenting on the timeline of "Pale Fire," written over the last month of Shade's life.

Kinbote begins criticizing "Shadeans," literary critics of John Shade's work, who contend that the poem is unfinished and that readers can't know Shade's intentions for his final work. Kinbote is positive the work is a complete draft, except for the last line. Shade destroyed most of his initial notes and drafts, except for twelve note cards of draft material.

Kinbote reveals that he got permission from Shade's wife, immediately after Shade's death, to edit and publish the poem, a deal that has been widely criticized. Kinbote also explains that he fled New Wye, the college town where he and Shade lived, after talking with Shade's murderer in jail.

When Kinbote first found a publisher, that publisher wanted to bring on a professor as co-editor, and Kinbote dropped the publisher immediately. His current publisher has insisted that Kinbote note that only he, Charles Kinbote, is responsible for any errors in the commentary. This note is followed by an obvious misprint.

Since Shade's death, his wife Sybil has broken off contact with Kinbote except to beg him to work with two other professors on editing the poem. Kinbote characterizes Shade as a close friend, whom Kinbote met when he rented the house next door to Shade's six months before Shade's death.

Kinbote tells about his introduction to New Wye. He portrays himself as a well-liked, humorous fellow. He is both a vegetarian and repulsed by eating food prepared by others, and he has two ping-pong tables in his basement. During the months before Shade's death, Kinbote takes long walks with his neighbor and watches the Shades through his window. He reports jealousy among the other professors at his friendship with Shade. One of the professors, whom Kinbote calls by the pseudonym Gerald Emerald, calls Kinbote "the Great Beaver" behind his back, a reference, Kinbote supposes, to his full, brown beard.

One morning, Dr. Nattochdag, head of Kinbote's department, reprimands him for calling one of the literature courses and its professor "ridiculous." Kinbote wonders if Nattochdag, who is always courteous to him, suspects the secret that only three university executives know.

In a college skit, Kinbote is parodied as an arrogant German misogynist, and he does not get along with most people in the college town. One woman calls him insane. However, Kinbote is enthusiastic about John Shade and counts him as a valued friend. Kinbote appreciates Shade's artistic abilities and exceptional genius, and his appreciation lifts him up above other, mundane people. He recalls feeling a similar way about a magician he saw "in my uncle's castle" when he was a boy.

Kinbote turns back to the poem to follow. He suggests that the reader read the comments first, to better appreciate the poem, then refer to the comments while reading the poem, and then read the comments again. He even recommends that the reader should buy two copies of the book, to read the poem and comments side by side. Kinbote mentions that Shade's poem has no real meaning without the commentary and that, as commentator in Shade's absence, Kinbote has the last word.

Forward Analysis

The novel's forward is a fictional forward by a fictional professor, Charles Kinbote, writing about a fictional poet, John Shade. By creating an ostensible non-fiction book about a poem, Navokov creates a feeling of artificial reality that will pervade the novel, creating a self-reflexive sense of truths existing underneath fictions.

The forward sets up the main problems of the novel. It begins straightforwardly discussing John Shade's final poem, including its structure, which is mirror-like, with the last two cantos reflecting the first two. The idea of the mirror or reflection will become an important motif throughout the novel. The title "Pale Fire" is a quote from Shakespeare, and Shakespeare's "pale fire" is the moon's reflection of the sun. The moon has no light of its own, but only gives off reflected light, a pale fire.

When Kinbote suddenly interjects into his discussion that there's an amusement park outside his abode, the illusion of a real commentary is broken. Why would the commentator interject himself in this way? Kinbote will go on to interject himself completely into his comments, so that his own story overshadows Shade's poem. As

Kinbote goes on to tell the story of his friendship with Shade, the reader becomes aware that Kinbote is using the commentary to make himself important and tell about himself. Essentially, he wants to ride Shade's coattails, and in this sense, Kinbote is the "pale fire," reflected off the light of John Shade.

Although Kinbote tries to make himself appear humorous and friendly, he comes across as odd and socially awkward. The students and professors make fun of him. The nickname "Great Beaver" is probably a crude allusion to Kinbote's homosexuality as well as his beard. Kinbote is widely rejected as an appropriate critic for Shade's work. Most people seem to think he forced the agreement on Shade's wife. One woman calls him "insane." Though Kinbote objects, the reader is left feeling that Kinbote is an unreliable narrator. The reader can't believe anything Kinbote says, yet Kinbote is left in charge of the meaning of Shade's poem.

Nabokov also introduces important elements of the upcoming commentary here, when Kinbote talks about his uncle's castle and an unknown secret. What is the mysterious secret?

Pale Fire, Canto One

Pale Fire, Canto One Summary

The poem "Pale Fire" begins with a metaphor of Shade as a bird crashing into the reflection in a window pane, but then flying on into the illusory sky. The poem describes images of reflections in a window on a winter night, and the natural winter scene outside. Shade describes a favorite tree from his youth and how it's changed and grown over time.

Shade's house has not changed much, but now the TV antenna rises off the top. The mockingbird used to perch on the weather vane, but now it sits atop the antenna. Shade's parents died when he was a baby, and both studied birds. He is left with only memories, which degrade over time. His old bedroom is a guest room now, where he would pray for his family before going to bed, as he heard the adults still talking downstairs.

Young Shade is raised by Aunt Maud, a painter and poet whose room is still the same. He rejects religion and God at a young age, but he feels bound by nature. He loves the natural world, both its images and sounds, but it surrounds him and cages him. Shade describes himself as awkward, fat, and unathletic, a lonely adolescent without a social life.

When he's eleven, playing with a clockwork toy, Shade has an episode where he loses consciousness and feels himself spread out in time and space. These episodes continue, occurring daily during one winter. Then, they stop, and the doctor says he's cured, giving no real information.

Pale Fire, Canto One Analysis

The first Canto relates Shade's childhood and youth. He has a deep connection to nature, and natural images play an important role in the poem. The poem is also about death, and when Shade says that nature is a cage, he is talking of being bound to his mortal body. When the bird crashes into the window pane, the reflected world, at the beginning of the poem, it flies on, perhaps into an afterlife, seen only as a dim reflection. Although Shade rejects religion, he seems to long for something spiritual and beyond the natural world.

In the poem, the past is contrasted to the present. Subtly, everything changes over time, and memories dim. The past itself is held only as a reflection in the minds of those who remember it, yet another dimension of the mirror and reflection imagery in the poem and book.

Shade's blackout episodes as a youth are a connection between the young boy and death. He loses his relationship with this world for brief periods of time. The world he

passes into is vaguely remembered and vaguely described, but it extends through all space and all time.

Pale Fire, Canto Two

Pale Fire, Canto Two Summary

As a youth, Shade finds it hard to believe that no one really knows what comes after death. He vows to investigate the depths of human consciousness. Now, he's sixty-one. Shade stands before the window, cutting his fingernails. He remembers his aunt, Maud Shade.

Maud has a stroke when she is eighty and moves to a sanitarium. She is incapable of much, but she can still talk, struggling to find words in her failing mind. Shade wonders what point in life the soul regains after death. How is it determined, and by whom? Life must seem bizarre from the point of view of the afterlife, so why does anyone leave the pleasures of an afterlife to be born? Life appears meaningless and random.

Shade hears his wife Sybil upstairs and comes out of his reverie. He's known her since high school and fell in love with her his senior year. Her face has not changed for him. He wonders at her loving him. They've been married for forty years, and he fondly thinks of her, standing on the lawn or humming a tune.

Then, Shade thinks of his wife finding some memento of their daughter, and he mourns that their daughter resembled only John and not his wife, making her distinctly unattractive. The daughter is intelligent but ugly, forced to portray a hunched maid in the school play. Time passes, and she doesn't grow out of her physical awkwardness, despite her parents' hopes. Sybil objects that her looks shouldn't matter so much and that it doesn't matter that she won't find a mate. Still, both parents worry over the daughter and pity her.

After a trip to France, the Shades' daughter returns, having experienced unnamed rejections. She spends her time alone or with a few socially outcast friends. She investigates strange sounds in the barn and plays word games. She is unhappy, spending her time in reading and intellectual pursuits only, but loved by her father.

Then, Shade's typist offers to set Shade's daughter up with a cousin of hers. They leave for a bar miles away, but when the cousin arrives, he suddenly says that he's forgotten an appointment and leaves. Shade's daughter leaves, not wanting to be a third wheel. She says she'll take the bus home.

Meanwhile, Shade and his wife turn on the TV, not knowing that the boy's rejection is a death sentence for their daughter. They expect their daughter home, but she doesn't arrive. The daughter gets off her bus in Lochanhead, still far from her home. The parents turn off the TV at eleven. Miles away, an old man is walking along a lake shore, but he will be too late.

Finally, after midnight, a police car comes to the house. Their daughter has drowned in a lake. Perhaps she tried to cut across the icy lake and drowned accidentally, or got lost, or killed herself. Her parents know she killed herself.

Pale Fire, Canto Two Analysis

The second Canto tells the story of John Shade's daughter, without ever naming her. She looks like her father and has also inherited his intelligence. In this way, she is a reflection of her father, another occurrence of the reflection motif. However, the attributes that make John Shade a great man make his daughter a social pariah. As a woman, she needs looks to find happiness. Her parents both seem to assume this, although they try to convince themselves otherwise. Perhaps their attitudes contribute to their daughter's gloominess and self-image.

Shade appears to sincerely love and need his wife. He describes her lovingly through several stanzas at the beginning of the canto. The two, married now for four decades, share together their deep grief over their daughter's death, adding a tinge of sorrow to their affection.

The end of this canto details the death of the Shades' daughter. She goes out on a blind double-date, and when her date arrives, he makes an excuse and then leaves. The poem cuts back and forth between the unknowing parents sitting at home, watching the TV and waiting for their daughter to call or arrive. They become increasingly worried as the night wears on. The poet foreshadows the daughter's death, and the reader's knowledge of what is happening on the date creates dramatic irony and suspense that is finally fulfilled at the arrival of the police car.

Pale Fire, Canto Three

Pale Fire, Canto Three Summary

Shade is asked to give a lecture about death to an organization with the acronym I.P.H., the Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter, which he refers to as If. His daughter is just a small child, and the family goes north to a town called Yewshade to work with the organization. I.P.H. wonders about the problems of a newly arrived soul in the afterlife and tries to prepare for the possibilities.

What if a man dies, and both his first and second wife are in the afterlife? Who does he go to? How do they get along? Experts and people from many faiths come together to discuss the unknowable: What happens after death?

Over time, I.P.H. becomes more Buddhist. A spiritual medium performs a fraudulent séance. Freudians join the group. Shade takes away from the experience a knowledge of how much nonsense there is surrounding beliefs about death. The scene changes: Shade and his wife hear noises in the house. They can't sleep. They get up to play chess and here more noises.

After the Shades' daughter's death, they slowly think of her less. They go to Italy to get away, and then return. Shade goes back to teaching, and his wife translates poetry into French. Then, one night, Shade is giving a lecture on poetry when he has a heart attack. He experiences the afterlife, where he sees a white fountain. Then, he finds himself back in life. The doctor denies that Shade was dead or could have had such a vision.

Shade is convinced that his vision of the hereafter was real. Then, he reads a story in a magazine about a woman who had a near-death experience in the hospital. She mentions a white fountain like the one Shade saw. He sees this as proof of his vision and contacts the author of the article, Jim Coates, to get the woman's address. When he meets with her, she wants to talk about his poetry, not her near-death experience. Then, he goes to see Coates, who tells him that all the information he has is in the article. The part about the fountain was a misprint, though. It was supposed to say "mountain."

As Shade is heading home, he has a revelation that the odd coincidence, the misprint itself, is some part of a grand scheme in life. Life appears, to him, a game played by some mystical agents with power over life and death. He has hope of life in the hereafter.

Pale Fire, Canto Three Analysis

The acronym I.P.H., or If, represents the unknown, the unanswerable question of what's beyond the veil of death. In the poem, Shade details the diverse philosophies from

around the world. Some of them are strange, and some are clearly fraudulent, like the spiritualist. Shade realizes that if there is a truth, it's not to be found in the masses of myth and speculation he finds at I.P.H.

Shade's experience with the heart attack hearkens back to his blackouts as a child, and his vision of the other side is a personal mirror, a reflection of this world into the next. Despite his skepticism about religion, God, and the afterlife, Shade wants to believe. His daughter's death adds to this desire. He wants to see her living on beyond her unhappy life.

When Shade finds the "proof" of his vision in the magazine article, his hopes are quickly dashed. The woman saw no fountain. It was all a mistake, yet Shade takes heart in the very coincidence of the error, as if it were a message, specifically to him, from some unknown agent. Shade imprints his own personal experience and interpretation on the accidental misprint, much as a reader or critic of his poetry will imprint his own experience on the poetry he reads. The relationship of the reader and the text has already been broached in the forward, and here it is brought up more subtly. There is a disconnect between the intention of the writing and the experience of the reader. In the comments, this disconnect will be exaggerated to the point of absurdity.

Pale Fire, Canto Four

Pale Fire, Canto Four Summary

Shade begins discussing poetry. There are two ways to write. The first is only in the mind, and the second is by writing while composing. The first is more difficult, as thoughts will fly away while the poet writes. Shade writes best in the mornings, in the middle of summer. He describes moving out of his body one morning and then seeing himself on the lawn, while both the spirit and the Shade on the lawn were really asleep in bed.

Shade shaves himself in the bathtub, with a shaving mirror affixed to the wall. His skin is becoming thin, and his beard is thick. He makes himself a bloody mess. When he gets a sudden poetic idea, his hairs stand on end, and suddenly the razor can race through them.

Shade gives a list of his pet peeves, including jazz, abstract art, primitive art, progressive schools, supermarket music, swimming pools, and fake intellectuals. The poem returns to the image of the poet shaving himself, and then there is a note about life as the comments on a difficult, incomplete poem.

The poet dresses and later goes to the library. In the evening, the Shades have dinner. Throughout the day, Shade's poetic muse is with him, and his wife also is always with him. He understands himself and his life through his poetry, his private world. He believes that souls survive after death and that tomorrow he will wake up at six. As the day begins to end, he looks out at the surrounding garden.

Pale Fire, Canto Four Analysis

In the last canto, Shade reflection on the writing process. Throughout the day, his mind is working on his poetry. Poetry and his wife are the two most important things in his life. The mundane picture of shaving in the bathtub, getting dressed, going to the library, and having dinner is the outer world, accessible to everyone, while in Shade's inner world, a personal journey of poetry is going on. Shade believes that there is life after death, perhaps because his sense of inner self is so strong. He already lives in a world within his mind that parallels and exists together with the everyday world of shaving and eating. The continuation of that very separate world of his mind after his body ceases seems natural and even necessary.

However, just because Shade believes in this continuation doesn't make it true. The difference between belief and reality, the inner world and the outer world, is an important on in Nabokov's book. Shade also believes that he will wake up the next morning at six, but the reader knows from the foreword that this is not true (unless, perhaps, he wakes up in the afterlife.)

Commentary, Lines 1-4: I was the shadow of the waxwing slain, etc. through Line 70: the new TV

Commentary, Lines 1-4: I was the shadow of the waxwing slain, etc. through Line 70: the new TV Summary

Kinbote begins his commentary by explaining that the bird in the opening line apparently crashes into a window and then describes his vision of Shade as a young boy discovering such a fallen bird. The subject of birds leads him to discuss how his gardener helped him identify the different birds of New Wye when he moved there.

A bird in Zembla similar to the waxwing of the poem is on the coat of arms of Zemblan King Charles the Beloved. Back to the poem, Shade began writing it on July 1. Kinbote wants the timing to correlate to the departure of Gradus, the attempted assassin of the king, but Gradus actually left Zembla on July 5.

Kinbote speculates that "that crystal land" in line 12 refers to Zembla, and he believes that two of the draft lines mention a king. Kinbote believes that Shade's wife stopped him from writing what Kinbote told him about Zembla and its king. The king's reign was one of great happiness and progress, says Kinbote, and the king was also a great scholar. His uncle's last wish was for King Charles to teach. King Charles wore a beard when he taught and dressed and lived like an average person. In fact, he looked a lot Charles Kinbote.

Kinbote also takes the words "gradual" and "gray" in the poem to relate to Kinbote's murderer, Jakob Gradus, who has used the pseudonyms Jack Degree, Jacques de Grey, James de Gray, Ravus, Ravenstone, and d'Argus. Kinbote gives a history of Gradus as a pharmacology student, a wine taster, a communist sympathizer, and a glass maker. Kinbote correlates Gradus's trip from Zembla to the U.S. to kill King Charles the Beloved to Shade's poem and sees Gradus hidden throughout the poem.

The poem alludes to Sherlock Holmes, who Kinbote notes is a fictional detective, but the commentator doesn't know what story is alluded to. Then, he wonders about the images of winter in a poem written in summer. Perhaps it is because Shade met Kinbote in winter. Kinbote relates a draft of one of the lines to a quote from Shakespeare's Timon of Athens, but he only has an edition of the book in Zemblan. He gives a translation from Zemblan to English.

Kinbote relates how he pressed on Shade the story of Zembla and its king, and how he was sure Shade was writing this story. Now, he's certain the story is the muse behind Shade's poem, although the surface subject matter seems much different.

Kinbote explains that a section of the poem refers to Shade's house being between Wordsmith University, where they both teach, and the Goldsworth house, where Kinbote lives, although Shade's house is much closer to the Goldsworth house than it is to the university. Kinbote discusses Goldsworth, his wife, and four daughters and their house.

When Kinbote rents the house, the Goldsworths leave him all kinds of notes and instructions on what to do or not do. He turns their cat over to the cleaning woman to care for and ignores their detailed instructions about adjusting the blinds to prevent sun damage to the furniture. From the house, he can see into the Shades' house through the windows.

On July 3, after not seeing Shade for several days, Kinbote learns from Sybil that Shade has started a poem. Sybil tells Kinbote that Shade never shows anyone unfinished work. Desperate to find out about the poem, Kinbote finds locations from which he can look into the Shades' house. He sees Shade writing, with a look of almost religious ecstasy on his face. Kinbote even resorts to binoculars to see Shade writing.

On July 11, the Shade house is dark. Kinbote goes through the garden to peep through the windows. He sees Shade reading what Kinbote later realizes is Shade's poem to his wife. Both are in tears. Kinbote accidentally makes a noise, and Sybil closes the window blind. A few days later, Kinbote is supposed to go for a stroll with Shade, but Shade does not show up. When Kinbote goes to the house, he finds Sybil and Shade in the kitchen. He walks in on them without knocking and realizes that the index cards Shade is reading contain the poem. Looking back, Kinbote blames Sybil for removing references to Zembla during these readings.

Kinbote explains that a "shagbark" referred to in the poem is a hickory and relates a short poem of Shade's called "The Sacred Tree." There is a copse of those trees in New Wye. Kinbote also reprints a draft of a stanza about Shade's house and the locks on its inner doors and a short poem, which Kinbote doubts was written shortly below "Pale Fire" because its themes are similar. The poem, "The Swing," describes his daughter's empty swing in the yard.

From the single word "often," Kinbote begins talking about his fears during the previous Spring. He mentions that regicide, the assassination of a king, is common in the history of Zembla. Kinbote takes in a boarder, but he is usually out late. He considers suicide to end his terror. Eventually, he evicts his roomer. He finds locked doors unlocked and once a ribbon tied around the cat's neck. He calls the police, but they thing he's hallucinating. He takes in another boarder around Easter who goes to bed early and alleviates Kinbote's fears.

Kinbote relates an alternate draft of a stanza, talking about a northern king who escapes because his loyal subjects impersonate him. Kinbote expands on the story of the king, whose followers throw of the police by disguising themselves as the king.

Commentary, Lines 1-4: I was the shadow of the waxwing slain, etc. through Line 70: the new TV Analysis

Kinbote's commentary on Shade's poem appears rambling and random. Kinbote begins by talking about the poem but quickly finds himself discussing his own experiences: how his gardener taught him the names of the birds of New Wye and what the similar birds are in his native Zembla. The poem's wintery setting is clearly related to Kinbote's daughter's death in an icy winter lake, but Kinbote insists on relating this to himself. Perhaps, he hints, the poet is recalling the winter when they met. Kinbote's interpretation of the poem is entirely centered upon himself. When it's filtered through the reader, Kinbote, the meaning of the poem is changed by a translation to a new person's reality and experience.

Translation is also an important motif in Nabokov's book. Kinbote cites a few lines from Timon of Athens: "The sun is a thief: she lures the sea / and robs it. The moon is a thief: / he steals his silvery light from the sun. / The sea is a thief: it dissolves the moon." This is a translation back to English from the Zemblan translation of Shakespeare's original. Ironically, this passage is where the quotation "pale fire" comes from—the moon's pale fire is but a reflection of the sun. However, the words "pale fire" are completely lost in the translation of a translation. This is another example of reflection and how meaning is lost in replication, making true and complete communication impossible. Later, Kinbote admits that, though he knows the title comes from Shakespeare, he doesn't know which work, not having a library. He's ironically certain, however, that it doesn't come from Timon of Athens, the only work of Shakespeare's that he has with him.

In the commentary, Kinbote begins to tell the story he really wants the reader to hear: the story of King Charles Xavier the Beloved of Zembla and his escape from Zembla. Attached to this story is the story of Gradus, the assassin who is after the king. The reader can discern that Kinbote is really (or really thinks he is) King Charles and that Gradus is the murderer of John Shade. The reader does not know yet the full story and how the reality of John Shade's death fits in with Kinbote's tale of King Charles. Is Kinbote perhaps really a king in disguise? What is the reality behind Kinbote's interpretation? Curiosity leads the reader forward in the story.

Kinbote is a self-centered person who seems to have little understanding of other people's perspectives. He believes he is Shade's close friend, but Shade's behavior gives no indication that this is true. He spies on the Shades, creeping up to look in their windows and walking in unannounced to find out what they're doing. He doesn't seem to see anything wrong in this behavior because he's more concerned with his own desire

to know about the poem than with the Shades' desire for privacy. This tendency to self-absorption also explains Kinbote's tendency to read Shade's poem as relating directly to his, Kinbote's, life.

Commentary, Line 71: parents through Line 101: No free man needs a God

Commentary, Line 71: parents through Line 101: No free man needs a God Summary

Kinbote mentions an article by Professor Hurley about Shade after his death. Kinbote criticizes the article but uses it as his source for information about Shade's parents, who died when Shade was young. Both were amateur ornithologists, and Shade's father was an executive for a surgical supplies firm. Kinbote mentions that Shade's mother's maiden name comes from Luke, as do a slew of other names, and that many names come from professions, linking Hurley's name to "hurley-house," a word for a shabby building.

Kinbote says that the Shade's death and the murderer are misrepresented in the press and by the police and chastises Hurley for not mentioning Kinbote's friendship with Shade. Kinbote notes that both Shade and King Charles could not remember their fathers.

King Charles's father is King Alfin. Known as Alfin the Vague, King Alfin is an abstracted, unworldly person. One day, he is driving an emperor and his interpreter in a car. The car breaks down, and the king stops to fix it. When he drives off again, he forgets the emperor by the side of the road. King Alfin, an avid amateur pilot, is killed in a plane crash. When he's eight, King Charles finds pictures of his father's flight taken the day of the crash.

King Charles remembers his mother, Queen Blenda. Her hobby is riding. At seventeen, King Charles goes to the university and also is in the army. He enjoys English poetry and dancing. During this period, Queen Blenda dies. King Charles comes back from a party with a friend, Otar, and two of Otar's girlfriends to find the queen is dead. Kinbote mourns the fact that he cannot access the detailed drawing of the castle that he gave to Shade, which he begs Sybil Shade to send to his publisher.

Kinbote attributes a line in Shade's draft to a poem Kinbote quoted to Shade. Then he returns to King Charles, who is fond of the girl Fleur, but only as a friend. Otar praises Fleur's womanly walk. After Queen Blenda's death, Fleur's mother contrives through fake séances and a bribed psychologist for Charles to become attached to Fleur. She moves into his room, but Charles is only attracted to boys and cannot consummate the relationship. While she's living with Charles, he cannot sleep. Finally, a contingent of representatives of various groups comes to him to object to the relationship, since Fleur is a commoner, and Charles kicks her out. With relief, Charles goes back to his boys. Thirteen years later, Charles has similar problems with his wife, Disa, Duchess of Payn.

Kinbote identifies the Pope mentioned in Shade's poem as Pius X, says that Aunt Maud was shocking in her views, and gives an alternate stanza about Maud's room. In Maud's room is a scrapbook of odd clippings, including an advertisement for Hanes Fig Leaf Briefs, men's underwear with fig leafs on the front. Kinbote also prints a poem of Shade's about the fleeting nature of a mountain view. Then, Kinbote disagrees with Shade's rejection of God in the poem.

Commentary, Line 71: parents through Line 101: No free man needs a God Analysis

When Kinbote is faced with Hurley's article, which conflicts with his own views of reality, Kinbote strikes back in a passive-aggressive manner. Those who disagree with Kinbote are clearly inferior. This is a defense mechanism that Kinbote uses to maintain his viewpoint. The police and the media are conspiring to keep the truth a secret, from his perspective. He can't or won't admit that his "truth" is not the real truth.

The story of King Charles continues, and it's filled with details of a father who died at an early age and a distant mother who died in Charles's mid-teens. Although Kinbote tells King Charles's story in third person, it's clear that Kinbote believes that he is King Charles. How else could he know such details as the eight-year-old child finding pictures of the plane crash that killed his father? Still, it seems improbably to the reader that the story is a true story. Is it partially true? Is it based on Kinbote's real childhood, which we know nothing about? Is it partially based on Shade's life?

One thing that is clearly based on Kinbote's life is the king's homosexuality. King Charles cannot perform sexually with a woman, and the hoards of beautiful boys that surround him are probably a wish-fulfillment fantasy. Throughout the novel, Kinbote's homosexuality has been hinted at, and it's fully revealed in the history of King Charles. In Kinbote's actual life, being gay probably led to him being an outcast and contributed to his desire to create an escapist alternative reality.

Again, when Kinbote talks about Shade's poem, he seems to insinuate himself into the poem's creation. He portrays himself as the muse who brought Shade an inspirational poem. Kinbote craves fame, which is why he gives himself the identity of a king. He latches on to Shade's fame to fulfill his own desire.

Commentary, Line 109: iridule through Line 130: I never bounced a ball or swung a bat

Commentary, Line 109: iridule through Line 130: I never bounced a ball or swung a bat Summary

Kinbote comments that "iridule," a shimmering small cloud, is probably Shade's original word, and he finds out from the owner of the motel where he's staying that a "peacock-herl," a word written in the poem's margin, is part of an artificial fishing fly. Kinbote also mentions that "Sutton" is a combination of two doctor's names. In the poem, Shade equates five minutes to forty ounces, based on an hour glass in the Middle Ages having 480 ounces of sand. Kinbote can't do the calculations to figure out Shade's equation.

When Shade mentions being unathletic, Kinbote comments on which sports he performed poorly or well in. He reprints on of Shade's drafts mentioning a secret corridor, which Kinbote again relates to King Charles.

The country of Zembla is taken over by extremists, and King Charles is held captive in the castle. Rebel guards are stationed throughout the castle, but one of them is a spy for King Charles named Odon. Because the extremists think the king may be able to send signals outside the castle from his tower room, they move him to the disused dressing room of his grandfather, Thurgus the Third.

While staying in Thurgus's old room, Charles remembers finding a secret passageway there when he was a youth and exploring it with his young lover Oleg. Odon is unsure about the safety and practicality of using the passage, but Charles sees a chance to escape when the man guarding his room goes out to talk to another extremist. Charles clears the passageway entry, changes into the first clothes he finds in the dark, and absently picks up a copy of Timon of Athens. He escapes through the passageway, chagrined to find he's dressed in bright red.

The secret passageway leads out to a dressing room at the city's theater, and Charles realizes that Thurgus the Third must have used the passage to meet with his lover, the actress Iris Acht. Odon is at the theater, and he rushes the fugitive king away in his car.

Commentary, Line 109: iridule through Line 130: I never bounced a ball or swung a bat Analysis

Kinbote's commentary degrades even further. As a reference, he uses the fisherman who runs the motel where Kinbote is staying. His mind is confused. He cannot do the simple math that if 480 ounces of sand is one hour—or sixty minutes—then one minute

is 8 ounces and five minutes is 40 ounces. His mental confusion underscores his unreliability.

Then, Kinbote returns to his narration about King Charles. As the comments near the end of the first canto of the poem, Kinbote is bringing to a close the first chapter of King Charles's adventures. Having described Charles's boyhood and character, now Kinbote details Charles's escape from the castle, leaving the reader wondering how Charles will escape Zembla. This story is superimposed on the poem's story of John Shade. The first canto describes Shade's boyhood and the comments describe Charles's boyhood. At this point in the canto, Shade is on the verge of describing his first brushes with death, his blackouts as a boy. These brushes with death correlate to freedom from the "cage" of the natural world, and also correspond with Charles's escape to freedom from the castle. Perhaps also Shade's brushes with death correspond to Charles Kinbote's escape from the real world to a world of fantasy, the world of King Charles.

Commentary, Lines 131-132: I was the shadow of the waxwing slain by feigned remoteness in the windowpane. through Line 162: With his pure tongue, etc.

Commentary, Lines 131-132: I was the shadow of the waxwing slain by feigned remoteness in the windowpane. through Line 162: With his pure tongue, etc. Summary

The first two lines of the poem nearly repeat here, and Kinbote comments on their beauty and the variation from the first lines. The lines lead him to think of Shade's death, which leads him back to the story of Gradus, the killer, coming ever nearer.

Kinbote stumbles trying to define "lemniscate," which his dictionary defines with obscure mathematical words and suspects Shade of picking the word for sound instead of meaning. Kinbote mentions seeing the clockwork toy from Shade's poem, and when the poet mentions a mountain, that's enough to bring Kinbote back to Charles's story.

King Charles and Odon escape from the theater, but Charles has been spotted. The extremists are searching for the king, and they've set up roadblocks. King Charles must cross the Bera Range of mountains and get to a sea cave on the coast to escape the country. Odon drives off the road into the mountain range at the first possible place. The two men part ways, and Odon plans to lead the pursuers off the king's track.

The king makes his way through the mountains in the dark and finally comes across a farm where he's put up for the night. In the morning, the farmer's daughter Garh leads the king to the easiest route through the pass. She makes sexual advances toward him, but he rejects her and continues through the mountains, where he glimpses one of the impersonators disguised as him. When he exits the mountains, he's stopped by a policeman who chides him for impersonating the king and makes him take off the red sweater and cap. At the seaside, the king gets a message to go to Rippleson Caves, where he is met by Odon, in disguise, and led onto a ship.

Kinbote speculates the Shade's blackouts might have been epileptic fits that somehow naturally healed, calling his own boyhood happy and healthy. However, Kinbote's mention of "derailment" leads him by association to a non-sequitur, describing the look of sweaty railway workers at the side of the line.

Commentary, Lines 131-132: I was the shadow of the waxwing slain by feigned remoteness in the windowpane. through Line 162: With his pure tongue, etc. Analysis

Instead of commenting on the meaning of the "waxwing" lines of the poem, which correlate Shade's blackouts with death, Kinbote comments on their beauty and the coincidence of the poet's death, which leads him back to his favorite topic: himself and his fantasies. Kinbote's attention cannot move away from the drama of King Charles for long. When he does try to return to the poem, he run up against vocabulary he doesn't understand and more or less accuses the writer of not playing fair. Again, this speaks to Kinbote's mental confusion.

The word "lemniscate" actually means a figure eight, but the meaning is so obscured behind the words, the mode of communication, that it becomes lost. This degeneration of meaning shows how difficult true communication is. Kinbote's mind is so different from Shade's mind that he cannot really comprehend the meaning of the poem.

The impersonators of the king are another instance of the mirror/reflection motif. When the king first sees an impostor in the forest, he mistakes him for a reflection in the lake. The copies are so numerous that a policeman can't tell the original when he sees him.

Kinbote's description of his happy and healthy boyhood is ironic, since it is immediately followed by an example of his disjointed and malfunctioning mind. Kinbote takes his own metaphor of the mental pathways being railroad tracks and makes it into a reality by beginning to talk of literal railway tracks. The metaphor becoming reality is akin to the creation of fantasy. Kinbote's fictional King Charles has also, in Kinbote's mind, become solidly real.

Commentary, Line 167: There was a time, etc. through Line 171: A great conspiracy

Commentary, Line 167: There was a time, etc. through Line 171: A great conspiracy Summary

Kinbote notes that Shade started the second canto on his birthday, July 5. Almost immediately, Kinbote again picks up the tale of King Charles, keying off the word "conspiracy."

The extremists, convinced the King Charles would have departed by plane, believe he is still in the country until a year later they learn Odon is making a film in France. Gradus is selected to find and kill the king by a secret organization called the Shadows at the exact moment John Shade begins his poem.

Gradus has a history of failure. When he helps three kids waylay a fourth boy, the boy beats up his attackers. He never succeeds in his profession as a glass maker. Gradus sees things only in the simplest terms, lumping together everything he doesn't understand as injustice and deceit. A clever impersonator imitating the king in radio broadcasts is captured and sentenced to death, but the marksmen miss, sending the man to the hospital. Gradus blunders to the hospital and shoots at the man, also missing. The prisoner escapes.

Commentary, Line 167: There was a time, etc. through Line 171: A great conspiracy Analysis

Kinbote describes not only the personal knowledge of King Charles, but he also describes in detail the motivations and feelings of the extremists who want to hunt down the king. Kinbote believes that he knows things he cannot know. He fills in others' motivations out of his own experiences and imagination. In this way, by filling in information about the outside would from his own mind, he pushes himself even further from other human beings and reality.

Kinbote paints Gradus as a bungler who can only see things in the most simple form, but Gradus actually has a lot in common with Kinbote. When Kinbote cannot understand a word Shade uses, he accuses the word of being meaningless, much as Kinbote describes Gradus condemning anything he doesn't understand. Gradus believes in a very structured, simplistic idea of right and wrong, very similar to Kinbote's reliance on his religion.

Commentary, Line 171: books and people through Line 230: a domestic ghost

Commentary, Line 171: books and people through Line 230: a domestic ghost Summary

Kinbote relates some witty comments made by Shade that he has written in his notebook. Shade values neither praise nor criticism from reviewers and comments that Russian intellectuals have no sense of humor. He loves the visceral aspects of good writing and argues that Marxism is a more evil idea than Freudianism. He cannot forgive his students reading stupidly, evoking generic symbolism, or praising writing as "simple" or "sincere."

On July 5, Shade has a get-together at his house. Kinbote sees him writing at three in the morning and later notes that Shade and his wife are making love for the four thousandth time. Across the world, Gradus is boarding a plane to Copenhagen.

The day of July 5, Kinbote drives a young man to a party and then gets separated from him and brought to a second party. He finally makes his way home and realizes that he's forgotten to give Shade his birthday present, a gaudy dressing gown. Kinbote learns that Shade is having a birthday party, and he calls the Shades, thinking they've been trying to reach him to invite him. Sybil tells him that John will call back, but John never calls. Kinbote spends the evening spying on the party next door.

The following day, Kinbote gives Sybil the birthday present for John. When Kinbote drops hints about not being invited to the party, Sybil says it would have bored him. Kinbote reaches into his pocket and gives her a book by Proust where he's underlined practically the exact same explanation given from one character to another.

Kinbote notes the reappearance of the waxwing in Shade's poem on line 181, and when the poem mentions "gradual decay," Kinbote relates the word "gradual" to Gradus's name. Gradus is on his way to Paris.

Kinbote learns about Shade's daughter Hazel from Shade's ex-secretary, Jane Provost, whom Shade calls Jane Dean in his poem. Kinbote relates that when Hazel Shade was sixteen, the house was disturbed by a poltergeist either caused by Hazel psychically or through trickery. The Shades stopped the poltergeist by saying that they were considering moving out of the house because of it. Kinbote comments that both the natural (psychiatric) and supernatural explanations are equally mysterious.

Commentary, Line 171: books and people through Line 230: a domestic ghost Analysis

Kinbote plays second fiddle to Shade in their conversations, acting more as a yes-man than as a contributor to their talks. The night of Shade's birthday party, Kinbote's perception of himself as Shade's great friend is challenged when Kinbote is not invited to Shade's birthday party. Kinbote translates this through his own view of the world. Instead of realizing that he is not the valued companion of the famous poet, Kinbote presumes that Sybil is his enemy, actively separating the two friends.

Kinbote shows his self-absorption and his habit of seeing his own views in the world around him when he chooses a silk dressing gown with a dragon on it as his gift to Shade. He chooses a gift based on his own tastes, not based on the tastes of his friend, and then Kinbote is offended when Shade never wears it.

When Kinbote discusses Hazel, he is getting his information from an unreliable source. Kinbote never knew Hazel, and John Shade never discussed his daughter. Hazel Shade is portrayed thought the poem as an unhappy, depressed young woman, but Jane Provost portrays her as psychotic, willing to fake psychic episodes in order to get attention. The reader is forced to try to decipher this description of Hazel as translated through both Jane's perception and Kinbote's perception. Jane, not wanting to feel responsible for Hazel's death, may be trying to picture her as more disturbed than she really was.

Commentary, Line 231: How ludicrous, etc. through Line 286, A jet's pink trail above the sunset fire

Commentary, Line 231: How ludicrous, etc. through Line 286, A jet's pink trail above the sunset fire Summary

Kinbote relates a variation of four lines from the poem, and in a list of writers with Swift and Baudelaire, Shade has left a blank spot. Kinbote says that to keep the poem's rhythm the missing word must be two syllables and implies that Shade may have intended to use Kinbote's name.

Kinbote clarifies a reference to a cicada cocoon and then recalls his walks with John Shade. During the walks, John Shade points out interesting plants or animals, avoiding discussion of his work with Kinbote. He will not reveal anything about the poem he's working on. Kinbote believes Shade is writing about King Charles and tries to draw out details from the writer.

Kinbote wonders who an Englishman mentioned briefly in Shade's poem could be based on and interprets the passages about Sybil to be merely a transition. He accuses Sybil of calling him a parasite and then uses Shade's marriage to Sybil as his own transition to talking about King Charles.

Charles marries Disa, Duchess of Payn, in 1949 in order to generate an heir. He first sees her at a masquerade dressed as a boy. He is unwilling to get married, but he is harassed by those around him into a wedding.

Kinbote relates a drafted line where Shade relates his name to the French word "ombre." Kinbote asserts that he pointed out to Shade the beauty of airplanes flying through the sunset and uses this transition to talk again about Gradus.

Gradus visits Oswin Bretwit, a Zemblan diplomat, to find out where King Charles is. As cover, he brings some family papers for Bretwit. Bretwit agrees to meet Gradus, thinking the papers are a valuable family stamp collection. They turn out to be copies of already published, worthless letters between Bretwit's grand-uncle and a cousin. Gradus pretends to have papers to deliver to the king. At first, Bretwit thinks Gradus is a royalist, but Gradus does not know the correct identification symbol. Bretwit then assumes Gradus is a reporter and kicks him out.

Commentary, Line 231: How ludicrous, etc. through Line 286, A jet's pink trail above the sunset fire Analysis

When Kinbote insinuates his own name into Shade's drafted lines, he incorrectly counts that two syllables are missing from the iambic pentameter line. A more likely interpretation is that Shade's own name is missing in the spot, which calls for a single syllable, but it could just as easily be Poe or Frost or Blake.

Kinbote's dislike of Sybil is indicative of a distaste for all women, part of his psychological fracture. King Charles's reluctance to marry, distance from his mother, and rejection of Garh all speak to his complete rejection of women, both in the bedroom and out of it. Kinbote seems jealous of Sybil and unwilling to attribute any true loving feeling to John Shade.

Shade relates his name to the French "ombre," connoting shadows and darkness. Shade himself is hidden in a kind of darkness, obscurely viewed through the words of his poem and the fractured impressions of Kinbote. The shadows that Shade's name evokes also correlate to the afterlife, the shadowy world that Shade passes into. As Kinbote notes, the word "shade" is also a synonym for a ghost.

Commentary, Line 287: humming as you pack through Line 347, old barn

Commentary, Line 287: humming as you pack through Line 347, old barn Summary

Kinbote is on his way to a doctor's appointment when he runs into the Shades and learns that they're planning a vacation. The Shades evade Kinbote's requests for details, but Kinbote's doctor reveals that the Shades have rented a ranch at Cedarn. Kinbote hurries to rent a cabin for himself in the area.

Returning to commentary, Kinbote names Shade's daughter with discussing why she remains unnamed in the poem and admits that he can't understand a line about white flowe rs in the woods in May. Kinbote comments on Shade's use of the term "wood duck" instead of swan and relates Hazel's infinite wait for a love to his own anxious time waiting for John Shade to join him on walks.

Kinbote elaborates on the barn Shade mentions briefly in his poem. According to Kinbote's information, the barn used to belong to a local farmer. After the farmer's wife left, the farmer would come back and sleep in the barn in the summer. He died there one night. One night, a student was frightened in the barn by strange noises and lights, and according to local lore, the place is haunted. Jane Provost gave Kinbote the rest of his information.

Hazel Shade determines to investigate the haunted barn. She goes with Jane Provost, and they are driven out by a lightning storm. Shortly thereafter, Hazel goes to the barn by herself, and she hears noises and sees a light that she tries to communicate with. Hazel's experiments produce only nonsense. Finally, she gets frightened and runs out.

The next time, Hazel asks her parents to come. Kinbote produces a short play portraying the scene. The family sits in darkness in the barn. The daughter shushes them into silence and they wait. The parents make humorous comments and the daughter objects. Finally, the daughter bursts out in a temper. They wait in silence again and finally leave when nothing happens.

Kinbote relates the light in the barn to a poem by Shade that speculates that perhaps the dead live in our electricity, sparkling away as our lights.

Commentary, Line 287: humming as you pack through Line 347, old barn Analysis

Kinbote has become a stalker, more than a neighbor or a friend, even spying out where the Shades plan their vacation and renting a cabin there. This is the same location

where Kinbote has mentioned hiding from potential assassins, and even if the name is disguised, it strikes the reader as odd that he would give away his location. This fact cements the idea that the story of King Charles is more fantasy than reality.

The story about Hazel and the barn is again filtered through two narrators of questionable accuracy. When it comes time to relate a scene that Kinbote cannot know anything about, what happened between Shade, Sybil, and Hazel when they went to the barn together, he assumes omniscience in creating a scene from a play, including dialogue for all the characters.

The communication between Hazel and the light highlights the hazards of any communication by exaggerating the distance between the speaker and the listener. Hazel makes up the rules of communication, and she interprets the light's movements. She dutifully gathers a notebook of random syllables, and the reader is tempted to try to interpret them or put meaning into them. Do they have any inherent meaning, though, or are they simply nonsense syllables? Has any real communication happened or just a semblance, a dim reflection, of communication?

Commentary, Lines 347-348: She twisted words though Line 408, a male hand

Commentary, Lines 347-348: She twisted words though Line 408, a male hand Summary

Kinbote asserts that he, not Hazel, played word games by reversing the order of letters in words. Then, he comments on the use of "again" to rhyme with "explain." He tells the reader that he thinks he knows, but will not say, what poem Shade refers to in line 376. Kinbote then comments on an alternate phrasing of a line about the head of the English department, noting that the head of his own department was Professor Nattochdag and that the current English department chair (not necessarily the one from the time mentioned in the poem) circulated a memo objecting to Kinbote's editing "Pale Fire." Commenting on line 384, Kinbote specifies the book by Pope to which Shade refers.

Kinbote notes that Shade transformed the name "Provost" to "Dean" when talking of Jane Provost and her cousin Peter. Jane believes that Peter actually did have an appointment which he'd forgotten about the night of his date with Hazel.

The poem begins to alternate between the Shades at home watching TV and Hazel on her way back from her failed date. Kinbote criticizes it as too drawn out. Then, he returns to the story of Gradus.

Gradus drives to Lex, where Odon is staying with a collector of ombrioles photographs named Joseph S. Lavender. Gradus pretends to be an art dealer. He drives to Lavender's estate, but Lavender and Odon aren't there. Lavender's nephew Gordon shows Gradus the garden. Gradus notices some graffiti: The King was here. The boy tells Gradus that the visitor probably went to the Riviera.

Lavender calls his visitor on the phone and asks rudely if he's a reporter. Gradus hangs up on him and leaves, believing he already has the information he needs.

Commentary, Lines 347-348: She twisted words though Line 408, a male hand Analysis

Kinbote continues insinuating himself in Shade's poem, claiming to have characteristics attributed to Hazel and picking out a random reference as an excuse to vent his anger at the head of the English department. At the same time, Shade's identity creeps in to Kimbote's writings. The photographs called "ombrioles" are by the description a kind of backlit artwork, and the name recalls the French translation of Shade's name, "ombre." This coincidence of wordplay reaffirms that Kinbote's story comes from his imagination.

The approach of death for Hazel is juxtaposed with the approach of Gradus, who means death for John Shade. Kinbote gives the story of Gradus with intricate detail, including the man asking the cost of a crystal giraffe while he's waiting to meet his targets. Even though Kinbote claims to have interviewed Gradus, it's unlikely that he would know such details, and the reader is reminded of the play scene that Kinbote made up of Shade and his family. Much or all of this is a reflection of Kinbote's imagination instead of a reflection of reality.

Commentary, Line 413: a nymph came pirouetting through Lines 433-434: To the . . . sea Which we had visited in thirty-three

Commentary, Line 413: a nymph came pirouetting through Lines 433-434: To the . . . sea Which we had visited in thirty-three Summary

Kinbote gives variant drafts for a few lines of Shade's poem and then expands gushingly on a reference to Robert Frost. Commenting on a reference to Nice, Kinbote again rejoins the story of King Charles.

After the failure of Disa's marriage to King Charles, she returns to her estate on the Riviera in 1953. During the revolution, she begs Charles to join her. After his escape, the king visits her at her estate. Disa resembles a young Sybil Shade in her beauty, as described by Shade in his poem. Their marriage was tumultuous, because Charles could not perform sexually with her. She finally discovered that he was gay, and he continued to lapse into affairs with young boys. She would erupt in hysterical scenes until finally she left for good. Charles experienced love and guilt over her only in his dreams. When he visits her on the Riviera, she is still deeply in love with the king, although he rejects her. She wants him to stay, but he says he's leaving for America to teach.

Kinbote comments on telling the details of Disa and King Charles to Shade and begging him to write about them. Shade asks how Kinbote can know such details, and Kinbote says he will later reveal a secret about it. Shade says that he can guess the secret.

Commentary, Line 413: a nymph came pirouetting through Lines 433-434: To the . . . sea Which we had visited in thirty-three Analysis

Kinbote details King Charles's relationship with his wife, Disa. Disa looks like Sybil, as described in "Pale Fire," and she is adoringly devoted to Kinbote, despite his rejection of her. She is a fantasy woman paralleling in Kinbote's existence Sybil's loving relationship with her husband. Kinbote cannot possess a woman and does not want a woman, but he wants to be the object of affection and devotion.

Commentary, Line 469: his gun through Line 493: She took her poor young life

Commentary, Line 469: his gun through Line 493: She took her poor young life Summary

Gradus returns to Geneva and phones headquarters. With both sides talking in code, the message is horribly mangled. Gradus believes he is supposed to wait in Geneva for a shipment of canned salmon. Headquarters believes Gradus has discovered that a letter in Disa's bureau will tell them the location of the king.

Kinbote reports a conversation with Shade about prejudice and the use of words to describe different races and cultures. The word "colored" is replacing "Negro" as the accepted appropriate term, and Shade discusses that "colored" is inexact in meaning.

Kinbote notes that "Father Time" in the poem harkens back to an earlier mention of "Mother Time" and that "Exe" stands for "Exton." As the poem addresses Hazel's suicide, Kinbote writes that the faithful religious belief in the afterlife builds in a person the desire to leave the trials of mortal existence for the pleasures beyond the veil. Like a child whose parents are taking him on a journey, a person is unaware of what is coming after death and all the necessary preparations that are being made by his or her protectors. He discusses effective ways and means of suicide and the longing to be with God.

Commentary, Line 469: his gun through Line 493: She took her poor young life Analysis

The miscommunication between Gradus and headquarters is another example of how communication depends on both the speaker and listener (or author and reader), and how signals between the two can become misinterpreted. Both come away from the phone call with unintended information. The discussion of prejudice and politically correct terms is also a comment on communication. Words become offensive or acceptable through their use, and they have no inherent value of their own.

Kinbote reveals himself to be suicidal in this section. The escape of suicide, however, is not unlike Kinbote's escape into an imaginary fantasy world where he is a king. The paradise beyond death is a wish fulfillment for Kinbote, much as the fantasy of being King Charles is a wish fulfillment.

Commentary, Line 501: L'if through Line 596: Points at the puddle in his basement room

Commentary, Line 501: L'if through Line 596: Points at the puddle in his basement room Summary

Kinbote comments that "L'if" is the French word for a yew tree, that "the grand potato" is a pun term for death stemming from a quote by Rabelais, that he knows the real name of I.P.H., and that he disagrees with some of the poet's views on religion. Kinbote maintains that the Christian God drives destiny and that sins will be punished. He blames Sybil Shade for drawing her husband away from religion.

Kinbote relates a conversation with Shade about religion. Shade says pride, lust, and sloth are necessary for poetry, and Kinbote brings up original sin, which Shade says he doesn't understand. Kinbote says that sin is disobeying divine will, and Shade claims not to know or accept divine will. Shade knows only two sins: murder and causing pain. Kinbote insists someone must have designed good and evil, but Shade says life is a mystery, as is death. Kinbote rejects the idea of randomness extending into the afterlife.

Kinbote takes an opportunity to correct an earlier note. He thought one of Kinbote's drafts referred to King Charles, but now he says it was just wishful thinking. Then, Kinbote implies that Shade might have had an affair with another woman. He relates his experiences dining at the Shades' house, where his vegetarian needs were not honored, and he explains how he set up a dinner with the Shades and John Shade's reputed lover. However, their timing was off and the guests only met briefly.

Kinbote finds in a draft of four lines of the poem the words "Tanagra dust" which eerily contain the name of the killer, Gradus. Kinbote marvels at this coincidence. During the time these lines are written, Gradus is doing nothing but waiting in Geneva. The next day, he telegraphs to headquarters and leaves for Nice.

Commentary, Line 501: L'if through Line 596: Points at the puddle in his basement room Analysis

Kinbote is deeply religious because he craves order in the universe. His life is unhappy because of circumstances that feel beyond his control. He feels he has no control over his life. In the afterlife, he insists there must be ordered and absolute rules. Kinbote's wishful thinking about Shade's poem can be related to his wishful thinking about religion. He believes in an ordered afterlife because he wants there to be an ordered afterlife.

When Kinbote identifies Gradus's name in "Tanagra dust," it is reminiscent of Shade's identification of the misprint of fountain in the magazine. Likely, Gradus is not the killer's name at all, but only Kinbote's illusionary name for him. The name may even be inspired by the words "Tanagra dust" in the poem.

Commentary, Lines 597-608: the thoughts we should roll-call, etc. through Line 680: Lolita

Commentary, Lines 597-608: the thoughts we should roll-call, etc. through Line 680: Lolita Summary

Kinbote relates Shade's poem to King Charles, to a couplet by Edsel Ford, and to the cabin where Kinbote now resides. He notes that what he thought was an amusement park outside his abode was actually rowdy campers. He comments on the phrase "two tongues" with a list of European languages and relates the "'tuber's eye" to the earlier description of death as a potato. Kinbote mentions that Starover Blue, the astronomer, is the only person whose real name is mentioned in the poem, and Kinbote calls it tasteless, though admitting the name is aesthetically pleasing. He comments that the name has no relationship to astronomy and gives its derivation.

Shade considered "madman's fate" as an alternative to "fate of beasts," and Kinbote uses this opportunity to talk about the Zemblan religious theories about life after death. Even the most twisted mind, he says, reverts to some pure state when the soul leaves the body. Kinbote relates a tale of a college porter exposing himself to a student, and then he tells a story heard at a college party.

Kinbote has no one to talk to at the party, and he spies John Shade and Mrs. Hurley across the room. He walks up to them and hears Shade saying that Mrs. Hurley is using the wrong word and that there's nothing wrong with shedding a dismal past to substitute pleasing imagination. Kinbote makes his presence known, and Mrs. Hurley says they are talking about a man who thought he was God and began redirecting the trains at a local train station. Mrs. Hurley says he's insane, but Shade prefers the term poet.

Kinbote relates on of Shade's lines to a poem by Goethe, a poem King Charles recited to himself during his escape. Then, Kinbote disparages his friend for naming a book of essays with a quotation of one of Browning's poems. In one line of his poem, Shade mentions his wife translating poems into French, and Kinbote gives an extended negative critique of Sybil Shade's translations. Then, Kinbote wonders why Shade would choose the name "Lolita" for a hurricane.

Commentary, Lines 597-608: the thoughts we should roll-call, etc. through Line 680: Lolita Analysis

Naming and the derivation of names is another motif running throughout Nabokov's novel. Kinbote details Starover Blue's name's history. The word "starover" comes from

Russian and only coincidentally sounds like "star over" in English, and the word "blue" is a translation of a Russian last name. Kinbote has written a history of the origins of names and comments on their meanings and relationships to other names throughout the novel. Like the motif of translation, the derivation of names shows how language changes and generates new meaning over time and distance.

When Kinbote walks up to Shade and Mrs. Hurley at the party, he is most likely walking into a conversation about himself and his fantasy life as "King Charles." He never realizes, though, that Mrs. Hurley is calling him insane and that John Shade is calling him a poet. Shade's friendship with Kinbote seems based in tolerance of Kinbote's madness and appreciation of his imagination.

Kinbote's comments are both self-reflexive of Nabokov's work and revealing about Kinbote himself. "Pale Fire" is the same kind of title stolen from another poet's work that Kinbote criticizes, so the criticism can be extended to Nabokov. Still, Nabokov's "pale fire" changes meaning in the context of the book. Shade is the sun, the talented poet. Kinbote is the moon, feeding off of Shade's life and work to illuminate himself. This is yet another instance of words changing meanings in different contexts, a theme that is continued as Kinbote discusses Sybil's translations and how they change the effect of the poetry. However, Kinbote's criticism of Sybil is tainted by his obvious dislike and jealousy of her. How can his opinion of her work be trusted when he is biased toward her? Finally, the mention of "Lolita" is a reference to Nabokov's book Lolita, reminding the reader that the ultimate author is neither Shade nor Kinbote, but Nabokov.

Commentary, Line 681: gloomy Russians spied through Line 691: the attack

Commentary, Line 681: gloomy Russians spied through Line 691: the attack Summary

Kinbote comments on the gloominess of Russians, attributing it to the enforced nationalism inspired by the soviet government. Then, he mentions the two Russians sent to find the Zemblan crown jewels. The jewels, Kinbote assures the reader, are hidden, but not in the palace where the Russians search for them. After the king departs through the secret passage, the Russians continue searching, practically tearing down the castle. Kinbote describes them, admiringly, including their prowess at soccer and the candies they gave to the children. King Charles, he adds, has some Russian blood.

Kinbote does not know anything about the portrait of Sybil by Lang mentioned in the poem and chides Sybil again for not answering his questions. Then, he comments that when Shade had his heart attack in 1958, King Charles was parachuting into the U.S.

Charles lands in his parachute near Baltimore, and he is met by a Sylvia O'Donnell's Rolls Royce. She is Odon's mother and has agreed to help the king. She has just returned from the Andes and is on her way to Africa. They talk briefly about Odon, and she tells him about the post she has arranged for him at Wordsmith University. She has rented the house next door to the Shades for him, and she mentions Shade's heart attack. Charles writes the Shades a letter but gets no response. Kinbote comments that nothing was truly wrong with Shade's heart.

Commentary, Line 681: gloomy Russians spied through Line 691: the attack Analysis

For the first time, as King Charles lands with his parachute, Kinbote lapses into the first person "I" when describing Charles's adventure. King Charles and Charles Kinbote have merged into one character, as the king lands on U.S. soil. Fantasy is beginning to merge with reality, as the fantastical King Charles approaches the real Kinbote's life as a college teacher in New Wye. However, the scene with Sylvia O'Donnell is still a fantasy scene, complete with a limousine, a vast mansion, and infinite luxury.

Commentary, Line 697: Conclusive destination through Line 830: Sybil, it is

Commentary, Line 697: Conclusive destination through Line 830: Sybil, it is Summary

Gradus lands in France. The two soviets who had been searching the castle for the crown jewels are now at the Riviera to break into Disa's estate, but Gradus does not recognize them when he passes them on the street. He learns from a taxi driver that the estate is currently empty. At his hotel, Gradus receives a communication from headquarters, telling him to do nothing.

Kinbote comments on Shade's wordplay. The words "half a shade" are used in the poem to mean half a bit, half a specter, and also half himself. He returns to Gradus's story. Gradus is sitting in the hotel lobby reading when he notes in the paper a break-in at Disa's estate. While he's wondering what it means, he is contacted by a higher-up who congratulates him on telling them exactly where to find the letter containing the king's location and tells him to get ready to travel.

Kinbote pauses to note that he did not bother to look up a specific magazine article mentions in Shade's poem and then prints a letter from himself to someone in France. He refuses to give his home address, but he gives the university address. He tells the correspondent to communicate through their lawyers and mentions that Shade is his neighbor.

On July 19, as Shade composes lines 797 through 809, Kinbote goes to two local churches, each partly similar to his Zemblan religion. On his way home, Kinbote hears Shade's disembodied voice telling him to come over that night. Kinbote calls Shade and finds that at the moment of the auditory illusion, the poet was playing golf. Kinbote insists on getting together that night, and Shade agrees to go for a walk with him. During the walk, the poet mentions writing about mountains, which Kinbote immediately associates with King Charles's escape.

Kinbote mentions that the "mountain" and "fountain" confusion in Shade's poem will be difficult for translators and relates a story where Russian korona (crown), vorona (crow), and korova (cow) are mixed up. Kinbote then relates how the owner of his motel offered him the Letters of Franklin Lane, a book Kinbote enjoyed. Kinbote notes a passage that he finds similar to part of Shade's poem.

Shade enjoyed word games, and Kinbote relates his success at word golf. Kinbote mourns that "Balkan king" was not "Zemblan king" in the poem. Then, he praises the rhyme of "possibilities" and "Sybil, it is."

Commentary, Line 697: Conclusive destination through Line 830: Sybil, it is Analysis

As the third canto of Shade's poem concludes, Kinbote's story also reaches an important turning point. Kinbote has revealed to the reader King Charles's identity, and Gradus now knows the location of the king. The miscommunication between Gradus and headquarters is what coincidentally leads the Shadows to finding the king's address. This coincidence is similar to the miscommunication of "fountain" and "mountain" that occurs in the poem. Failure of communication results in a success in both instances. For Gradus, he accidentally and unknowingly communicates the location of the letter. For Shade, a misprint leaves him with a sense of purposeful accidents in the universe.

Gradus is about to depart on his assassination attempt. Even though Kinbote has dropped into the first person "I" while telling of King Charles's arrival, he does not tell the reader that the reprinted letter is his letter to Disa. Instead, he leaves merely the implication that this is the letter that leads Gradus to New Wye.

After Kinbote's auditory experience hearing Shade's voice, he feels a dire need to see his friend that night. However, the meeting is anticlimactic, and the premonition seems to lead to nothing.

Commentary, Line 835-838: Now I shall spy, etc. though Line 922: held up by Our Cream

Commentary, Line 835-838: Now I shall spy, etc. though Line 922: held up by Our Cream Summary

Kinbote praises Shade's wordplay in the opening of Canto Four and then notes that the rest of the canto does not stand up to it. He says Shade has left out a third method of composing poetry through the subconscious and then reminds the reader of Gradus on his way to the U.S.

At Shade's line mentioning that his biographer might be "too staid or know too little," Kinbote takes offense, assuring the reader that he's seen Shade shaving in the bathtub. At the word "king," Kinbote mentions that people on campus would occasionally mention Kinbote's uncanny likeness to King Charles. He relates one occurrence.

A visiting professor comments on Kinbote's uncanny likeness to King Charles. Kinbote tries to put him off, saying all bearded Zemblans look alike and that "Zembla" really means land of resemblers. The man insists, and Shade objects that Kinbote looks nothing like King Charles. The other professors begin to discuss the political situation in Zembla, and they disagree whether the king is dead or escaped, and if so, how. Shade talks of people he supposedly resembles, including one of the cafeteria ladies. The visiting professor wishes for a photo of the king, and Emerald goes to find one.

The conversation turns to names, and Kinbote explains that "Kinbote" means a king's killer. Kinbote has written a book about surnames. Emerald returns with an encyclopedia photo of the king, but he is a young man in uniform. Emerald calls the king a "pansy," and Kinbote retorts with an insult.

Kinbote returns to Shade's poem, providing an alternate draft for lines 895-899. Where Shade comments that his hair standing up makes it easier to shave, Kinbote counters that Alfred Housman says it makes shaving more difficult. Then, Kinbote corrects Shade's reference to shaving cream, saying it is more foam than cream, and gives two variant stanzas.

Commentary, Line 835-838: Now I shall spy, etc. though Line 922: held up by Our Cream Analysis

Kinbote is both full of abject praise and slighting to John Shade. This may indicate jealousy of the famous author seeping through. Kinbote also continues to insert himself

into Shade's poem, indentifying with Shade's biographer and insisting on knowing the details of Shade's bath.

The conversation about Kinbote's resemblance to King Charles is difficult to interpret. Does he, in fact, resemble Charles? Is Shade unwilling to admit it for fear of encouraging Kinbote's eccentricity? Certainly, he does not resemble the young King Charles in the photograph, which emphasizes how things change over time. As Shade notes in his poem, time touches all things, changing them, so that an old photo of the king cannot show any resemblance.

Commentary, Line 929: Freud though Line 949: and all the time

Commentary, Line 929: Freud though Line 949: and all the time Summary

Kinbote reflects on the absurdity of psychoanalysis, states that he has not noticed the loud trucks mentioned by Shade, and is distressed at finding Zembla mentioned only once, in a side note. Kinbote points out Shade's couplet that compares a man's life to notes on a poem.

As Shade begins his last batch of note cards, Gradus arrives in New York. It's raining when he arrives, and he spends the night at a hotel. The next day, he must wait for a plane to New Wye, and he eats some of the food he's kept with him from his trip. He's unimpressed with New York, and he spends his time reading newspapers. He does not think about the consequences of his upcoming actions. Gradus enjoys his role in the extremists' revolution, taking pleasure in his important task, but he also takes some pleasure in the idea of killing.

Gradus flies to New Wye in a crowded plane, since there's a conference at the college. His stomach begins to bother him. Gradus arrives at the campus and finds the hotel full, but the more urgent issue is his indigestion. He finds the restroom, but his indigestion continues. Gradus finds the main hall closed and goes to the library to try to find Kinbote. He barely misses the king and must then rush to the restroom to relieve himself again. Finally, he locates Kinbote in the directory, and Gerald Emerald offers to give him a lift. He drops the killer off at Kinbote's street, as Gradus's stomach continues to grumble in turmoil.

Commentary, Line 929: Freud though Line 949: and all the time Analysis

The two lines in Shade's poem that mention the idea of a man's life as notes on an unfinished, obscure poem is the height of self-reflexivity, summarizing the idea of Nabokov's book. This seems almost like Nabokov's voice coming through instead of Shade's.

Kinbote gives a detailed picture of Gradus's psyche in this section and even attributes Gradus's upset stomach to a particular sandwich and some French fries. As a narrator, Kinbote assumes an omniscience which he cannot have, creating a fictional reality from his own fantasies.

When Emerald is in the car with Gradus, Kinbote goes so far as to ask who can say whether the two spoke? Then, after admitting that it's unknowable, he answers his own

question: they did not speak. Kinbote takes as fact everything that he surmises, which is how he builds his elaborate fantasy. Kinbote allows his biases and preconceptions to guide his fantasy; he chooses Emerald to drive Gradus to his address because he has a grudge against Emerald, who he perceives as insulting King Charles.

Commentary, Line 957: Night Rote though Line 1000: [=Line 1: I was the shadow of the waxwing slain]

Commentary, Line 957: Night Rote though Line 1000: [=Line 1: I was the shadow of the waxwing slain] Summary

A poem from Shade's Night Rote was Kinbote's first introduction to Shade, Kinbote comments. He interprets Shade's poem to state that the title "Pale Fire" comes from Shakespeare, but he can't identify where the quote is from. The only Shakespeare Kinbote has is a Zemblan edition of Timon of Athens. Kinbote is certain "pale fire" is not in its text.

Kinbote explains the translator Conmal taught himself English and then translated Shakespeare's works into Zemblan. He also translated Milton and other English pets, dying while working on Kipling. Kinbote describes Conmal as large, self-isolating, and passionless.

In Shade's poem, he mentions the sound of horseshoes, and Kinbote confirms that a neighbor could be heard playing horseshoes. He does not know which one. The horseshoes are jangling on July 21, when Sybil is away and Kinbote goes to find his friend. Kinbote finds Shade resting, with his nearly completed poem gathered together. Kinbote invites Shade to his house for a drink, and Shade accepts, bringing his poem along. Kinbote is certain the poem extols Zembla.

A Red Admirable butterfly, the type mentioned in the poem, flies by Kinbote and Shade, landing on Shade's arm and then flitting away. Kinbote comments that Shade could indeed identify the "some neighbor's gardener" of his poem as Kinbote's beloved employee, whom Kinbote met on the campus. Kinbote enjoys watching the handsome, strong, young gardener. Both the gardener and Kinbote are on the scene when Shade is killed.

Kinbote and Shade walk up toward Shade's house, and Shade notes a man waiting on the porch. Kinbote is annoyed, remarking casually that he'll kill the interloper. He hurries up to the stranger and feels a sudden pang of recognition. Two bullets shoot past Kinbote, and Kinbote objects to the reports that the gunman was shooting at Shade instead of Kinbote. John Shade is shot through the heart, and the gardener hits the gunman on the head with a spade. Kinbote hides the index cards containing the poem in his house and then calls the police. The gunman calls himself Jack Grey, an escapee from the Institute for the Criminal Insane.

Later that night, Kinbote reads the poem and is traumatized to realize it is not about Zembla. On re-reading it, he believes he sees hidden among the lines echoes of the Zemblan story, which lead to Kinbote's commentary. Kinbote realizes that Sybil Shade will conveniently not remember all the variants Kinbote is presenting and that the people who saw Gradus at the college looking for Kinbote will not remember. Certainly Gerald Emerald will deny giving Gradus a ride.

Kinbote relates his gardener's version of events, that Kinbote threw himself between Shade and the gunman. Kinbote denies the truth of that report but admits it allowed him to get permission from Sybil to publish the poem.

Kinbote interviews the gunman in jail, telling the man that he can help him at trial if he admits to lying about his identity and motives. Jack Grey has told the police he mistook Shade for the man who sent him to the criminal asylum. Later, the gunman kills himself in jail. Kinbote wonders what he will do with himself now. He swears he will not kill himself and plans to disappear and start over. Somewhere, however, he believes the Shadows are still pursuing him.

Commentary, Line 957: Night Rote though Line 1000: [=Line 1: I was the shadow of the waxwing slain] Analysis

Kinbote protests that it would be a wild coincidence if his own Shakespearean book contained the title phrase "pale fire," but in fact, it does. The phrase has been lost in the translation to Zemblan. "Pale fire" describes the moon's light, a pale reflection of the sun's fire.

The full range of Kinbote's unreliability is revealed in the end of the novel. Sybil will deny some of Kinbote's variations, most likely because they were never written by Shade. The students at the university and Gerald Emerald will deny seeing Gradus, because Gradus was never at the university. Gradus is, in fact, not the man's real name. Jack Grey is an escapee from an insane asylum, who made his way to the house of the judge that Kinbote had rented. One of the people Shade mentions he resembles is that judge, and the shooting is a huge mistake.

At Shade's death, the gardener reports that Shade threw himself in front of the gunman, and this is likely to be true, although Kinbote denies it. Kinbote is a suicidal man, and he desires to be the center of attention. Thrusting himself into the role of protagonist, Kinbote tries to make himself the target. However, Kinbote is fated to be a bystander, a mere reflector of pale fire.

Characters

Charles Kinbote/King Charles Xavier the Beloved of Zembla

Charles Kinbote is a socially awkward professor of the Zemblan language at Wordsmith University in New Wye. He has rented the house next door to a poet he has long admired, John Shade. Kinbote is a disturbed man who lives in a fantasy world, constantly making himself more important than he really is. Kinbote believes, or wants to believe, that he is the most important person in John Shade's life and a dear friend.

Kinbote also believes himself to be the exiled king of Zembla, King Charles Xavier the Beloved, and he believes that he's convinced the great poet to tell his story. Kinbote even tries to steal Shade's thunder at his death, throwing himself in front of the bullet not to save his friend but instead to become the center of the event and to make the shooting fit into his fantasy existence. After Shade's death, Kinbote succeeds in having the last word and finally telling his story by manipulating Shade's widow into giving him the rights to edit and publish Shade's final poem.

Kinbote is gay, something that has likely made him an outcast, and he is characterized as a woman-hater. Kinbote does exhibit jealousy and spite toward women, particularly Shade's wife Sybil. Kinbote resents taking a secondary role in his friend's life to Shade's wife. In his fantasy life as King Charles, his gay orientation is not a drawback. Instead, there are many beautiful young boys ready and willing to give themselves to the king's pleasure. In addition, the king's wife Disa remains ever devoted to the king despite his rejection of her in favor of young boys.

John Shade

John Shade is a renowned poet who teaches at Wordsmith University in New Wye. Shade is an elderly, pensive man who is deeply in love with his wife of forty years, Sybil. He is an agnostic, having rejected organized religion at a young age, but he is also drawn to the idea of life after death. Shade feels a deep and urgent need to understand what happens after man dies, and this need is built up by experiences that Shade has while he is unconscious.

Shade is the author of the autobiographical poem "Pale Fire," written in the last month before his death in July 1959. The poem's title, taken from Shakespeare, refers to the moon's pale reflection of the sun's fire. Shade probably uses the title to refer to the pale reflections of the afterlife visible in everyday life. Shade is a lover of nature, but he also sees the natural world as a cage separating man from whatever lies across the veil.

Shade is wounded by the loss of his unattractive daughter, Hazel, who he believes killed herself after being rejected on sight by a blind date. Shade wants to believe that Hazel

lives on in some unknowable afterlife. He appreciates mystery and coincidence, and he is happy to live in a world that can't be completely understood.

Tolerantly, Shade befriends his outcast neighbor Charles Kinbote, a delusional man who believes himself to be the exiled king of Zembla. Shade does not disturb Kinbote's fantasies, believing them to have artistic beauty and merit. Kinbote never knows that Shade's friendship probably comes more from pity than genuine kinship.

Sybil Shade

Sybil Shade is John Shade's wife. In his poem, he speaks of her with deep love and affection, and she is the only person with whom he shares his writing while he is working on it. Kinbote is hostile toward Sybil, whom he sees as driving a wedge between himself and Shade. He blames Sybil for every event that separates him and Shade, for removing references to Zembla from Shade's poem, and for leading Shade away from religion. However, in Kinbote's fantasy, the devoted but rejected Queen of Zembla bears a marked resemblance to Sybil Shade.

Hazel Shade

Hazel Shade is John Shade's daughter. She takes after her father both in appearance and in intellect. Hazel has an unhappy life because she is ugly and intelligent, characteristics not easily tolerated in a woman. Her depression ultimately leads her to take her own life after she is rejected by a blind date. Hazel Shade is only revealed through Shade's poem and through Kinbote's possibly unreliable information from Jane Provost.

Jakob Gradus (a.k.a. Jack Degree, Jacques de Grey, James de

Gradus is a killer from an extremist group called the Shadows who wants to find and kill King Charles. Kinbote narrates a detailed description of Gradus's actions and thoughts as he searches for the king and finally finds him, accidentally shooting Shade instead of his mark, Kinbote. However, Kinbote's story is entirely fantasy. According to the police and the media, the killer is actually an escaped lunatic named Jack Grey who wants to kill the judge whose house Kinbote is renting. Grey mistakes Shade for the judge because of a chance resemblance. Kinbote visits the killer in jail and promises to help him, getting the man to agree to Kinbote's fantasies. The man later kills himself.

Gerald Emerald

Gerald Emerald is a pseudonym Kinbote chooses for a young professor who calls Kinbote "the Great Beaver." In his recollection of events, Kinbote gives Emerald a role in bringing the assassin to Shade and Kinbote.

Dr. Nattochdag

Nattochdag is the head of Kinbote's department at the university.

Aunt Maud

John Shade was raised by his progressive Aunt Maud after his parents' deaths.

Jim Coates

Coates is the author of an article about life after death.

Conmal

Conmal is a Zemblan linguist who translates Shakespeare into Zemblan.

Hugh Warren Goldsworth

Goldsworth is the owner of the house that Charles Kinbote rents. He is a judge and an expert on Roman law, and John Shade bears a passing resemblance to him. Jack Grey, the gunman who shoots Shade, goes to Goldsworth's house for revenge because the judge sentenced him to an asylum for the criminally insane. Mistaking Shade for Goldsworth, Jack Grey shoots the poet.

Professor Hurley

Hurley writes an article about Shade after his death.

Mrs. Hurley

Kinbote walks in on a conversation between Shade and Mrs. Hurley in which Mrs. Hurley is most probably arguing that Kinbote is insane.

King Alfin the Vague

King Alfin is the father of King Charles the Beloved. He died in a plane crash when King Charles was little.

Queen Blenda

Queen Blenda is King Charles's mother.

Otar

Otar is one of King Charles's friends from his youth.

Fleur

Fleur is a young friend of King Charles, whose mother contrives for her to become Charles's mistress. However, Charles is unable to consummate the relationship.

Disa, Duchess of Payn

King Charles marries Disa, who becomes queen of Zembla. However, Charles cannot consummate the marriage, and eventually she leaves for an estate on the Riviera.

Odon

Odon is a spy for the king disguised as one of the rebel guards in the castle, and he is also an acclaimed actor. Odon helps the king escape from Zembla.

Nodo

Nodo is Odon's villainous half-brother.

Thurgus the Third

Thurgus the Third is King Charles the Beloved's grandfather, who had an affair with an actress of the time.

Iris Acht

Iris was a famous actress and the lover of Thurgus the Third. Charles finds a secret passageway from Thurgus's dressing room to Iris's dressing room at the theater.

Oleg

Oleg is a childhood friend and lover of King Charles.

Garh

Garh is a farmer's daughter who leads the king to the right path through the mountains. Garh makes sexual advances to the king, but he rejects her.

Jane Provost/Jane Dean

Jane is Shade's secretary. She sets Hazel Shade up on a date with her cousin, Peter, who makes an excuse and leaves after he sees Hazel. Shade calls his secretary Jane Dean in his poem, but Kinbote identifies her as Jane Provost.

Peter Provost/Peter Dean

Peter is Jane's cousin, who has a blind date with Hazel. After meeting Hazel, Peter makes an excuse and leaves. On her way home after the perceived rejection, Hazel assumedly kills herself.

Oswin Bretwit

Oswin is a Zemblan consul who Gradus visits to try to find the location of King Charles.

Joseph S. Lavender

Lavender is a collector of explicit French photographs. Odon is staying with him in Lex.

Gordon

Gordon is Lavender's nephew. He leads Gradus to believe the king has gone to the Riviera, where his wife has an estate.

Starover Blue

Professor Starover Blue is an astronomer mentioned in Shade's poem. He is the only character called by his true name, a name that only coincidentally reflects his profession.

Dr. Sutton

The local doctor named in Shade's poem is called Dr. Sutton. Kinbote mentions that the name combines the names of two different local doctors, one beginning with "Sut-" and the other ending in "-ton."

Sylvia O'Donnell

Sylvia O'Donnell is Odon's mother, who arranges for King Charles's teaching position at the college in New Wye.

Objects/Places

Pale Fire

"Pale Fire" is an autobiographical poem by John Shade, written in the last month of his life.

Zembla

Zembla is the country that Charles Kinbote comes from, a north-eastern European country.

Shadeans

Shadeans are literary critics of John Shade's poetry.

New Wye

New Wye is the college town where John Shade and Charles Kinbote live and work.

Onhava

Onhava is the capital of Zembla.

Wordsmith University

Wordsmith is the university where John Shade and Charles Kinbote both teach.

The Shadows

The Shadows is a group of Extremist rebels which plans the assassination of the exiled King Charles.

Secret Passageway

King Charles finds a secret passageway leading from Thurgus the Third's old bedroom to a dressing room at the theater. The passageway connected Thurgus to his lover, actress Iris Acht.

Bera Range

King Charles must cross the Bera Mountains to escape Zembla.

Rippleson Caves

The king rendezvous with Odon at Rippleson Caves before leaving the country.

Cedarn

Kinbote flees to hide in Cedarn while he finishes his commentary on "Pale Fire." He has rented a cabin in Cedarn because the Shades plan their vacation there.

Crown Jewels

Kinbote hints that he knows the hiding place of the Zemblan crown jewels.

Villa Disa

Queen Disa has a villa in the south of France, on the Riviera.

Social Concerns/Characters

Pale Fire is set in the world of academia (Wordsmith College, New Wye, Appalachia) and on one level is a satire of that environment. In form, too (a poem by a fictitious author with introduction, commentary and index by a fictitious editor), it parodies the excesses of literary scholarship. Ostensibly, there are three major players (with a highly entertaining series of minor characters): John Shade, author of the poem "Pale Fire"; Charles Kinbote, Shade's neighbor and the author of the commentary, introduction, and index to the poem; and Jack Grey, an escaped madman who kills Shade. On another level, it appears that Kinbote is mad, that he is actually a harmless pederast who believes that he is Charles the Beloved, exiled king of Zembla (a fictitious Eastern European country). In Kinbote's mind, Jack Grey is actually Jakob Gradus, a hired killer sent from Zembla to assassinate him and who kills Shade by mistake. As if this were not confusing enough, some critics have suggested even more complex arrangements of identities, sometimes coming to the conclusion that either Shade or Kinbote does not really exist.

Techniques

There are three parallel lines of plot in Pale Fire, which follow the three major characters: Shade, Kinbote/ Charles the Beloved, and Jack Grey/ Jakob Gradus. The three plot lines intersect in Shade's murder (which occurs immediately after he has finished the poem); however, the way in which the intersection is to be interpreted depends entirely on which interpretation of the novel's "reality" one relies on.

The chief reason for the "unreadability" of Pale Fire is that the reader discovers very early on that Kinbote's commentary, at least on the surface, has essentially nothing to do with Shade's poem. This discrepancy creates the impression that Kinbote is an unreliable narrator, an impression which is sustained throughout the novel as Kinbote inadvertently lets slip a suppressed awareness of other characters' opinions of him. Thus, the reader is denied any assurance that he can believe the narrator, or even that he can distinguish reality from Kinbote's fantasy. To try to follow all the clues which are buried in the novel and thus to discover the "objective truth" of Kinbote's story is ultimately to miss the point of the novel, for in Kinbote's mind, sane or not, his fantasies are "reality," and it is Kinbote who controls the telling of the story.

The construction of the commentary allows Kinbote to lead the reader on a merry chase through his story. The reader is referred in one footnote to another footnote, which in turn refers him to a third, and so on (at one point the reader is referred to a note which does not exist). This device draws the reader into the novel's fictive world, making him relinquish his assumptions about what he can know to be true, and thus to understand the creative element in the process of reminiscence.

In addition, the "manufacturer's instructions" (Mary McCarthy's phrase) for putting the novel together create a literal pattern of events. Significant episodes in Kinbote's story are repeated as the reader finds himself returning to certain footnotes again and again. Perhaps this device constitutes an escape from what Nabokov called "the prison of time," as it removes the events of the novel from their normal chronological order.

The most important image of Pale Fire is reflection. Shade's poem begins: "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain/ By the false azure in the windowpane;/ I was the smudge of ashen fluff-and I/ Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky." Both Shade and Kinbote strive to see their reflections in literature: Shade in his poem, Kinbote in the poem and in his commentary. The novel abounds in doubles, real and imagined: Shade and Kinbote, Kinbote and Charles the Beloved, Jack Grey and Jakob Gradus, and a variety of minor characters, residents of New Wye who are "duplicated" in Kinbote's Zembla.

The name of his homeland, Kinbote asserts, is not derived from the Russian zemlya ("land") but is actually a corruption of Semblerland — that is, the land of resemblers, of reflections. Thus, Zembla may be only a reflection of the "real" world of New Wye, "a transliteration," in Mary McCarthy's words, "of a pederast's persecution complex, complicated by the 'normal' conspiracy — mania of a faculty common room." On

another level, Kinbote's Zembla may be a reflection of Nabokov's Russia, and ultimately of all lost homelands, real and imagined.

In the opening lines of the poem, the reflection and the reflected seem to merge with one another, and in the novel it is difficult, if not impossible, to tell truth from illusion. If indeed it is possible to determine Kinbote's "true" identity from clues buried in the text (as some critics insist it is), such an enterprise requires a tremendous amount of detective work, using evidence provided largely by an unreliable witness (that is, Kinbote/King Charles). Kinbote may be mad — he may not even be Kinbote. Ultimately, however, it may be that Kinbote's selfcreation is as valid in its way as Shade's, and by extension that Nabokov's created realities are as valid as the commonly perceived, everyday ones.

Themes

The Reader and the Author

Nabokov's novel is structured as a literary commentary on a poem, and because of this the central dynamic of the story is between an author, John Shade, and a reader, Charles Kinbote. Kinbote, as the reader and critic, has the final say about the meaning of John Shade's work. He serves as the interpreter because he is the audience who experiences John Shade's poetry.

As Kinbote begins talking about Shade's poem, the reader realizes that Kinbote is a poor interpreter of Shade's work. Kinbote is unable to imagine any perspective other than his own, and he inserts his own personality, point of view, and ideas into Shade's work at every possible moment. Kinbote's self-absorbed reading of Shade's poetry is an exaggeration, but it serves to remind the reader that every reader inserts his or her own experiences and knowledge into something that he or she reads. The interpretation of any written work is dependent on the personal reality of the reader.

The reader of Nabokov's book is faced with an unreliable narrator in Charles Kinbote, and so the reader must actively read into the novel in order to understand it. The reader cannot take Kinbote's information at face value. This opens up the novel to misinterpretations and "reading into" the work in a similar way as to how Kinbote reads into Shade's poem. The reader is to Nabokov as Charles Kinbote is to John Shade. This adds a self-reflexive aspect to the novel, and the reader must think about his or her own method of processing and interpreting Nabokov's work.

Communication

Throughout Navokov's novel, miscommunications are rife. Hazel attempts to communicate with a spirit from another world, but all she receives is an indecipherable series of syllables. Gradus attempts to phone his headquarters, but because they are speaking in different codes, each side misunderstands the other. Shade attempts to communicate ideas through his poem, but Kinbote seems unable to understand. The photograph of Iris Acht over the secret passageway in King Charles's castle signifies where the passage leads, but King Charles does not understand until he's already passed through the tunnel.

Communication is made difficult because the characters all interpret the things around them through different modes. Hazel and the spirit are too different from each other to communicate. Gradus and headquarters speak in different codes; they know this intellectually but still fail to interpret the information correctly, each remaining focused on his own code. Shade and Kinbote live in disparate mental worlds. Thurgus the Third displays the photo of Iris as a private message, not meant for interpretation by a grandson.

Whenever communication occurs, there are two participants. The communicator uses one mode of communication, and the listener uses a slightly different mode. Communications, therefore, degrade as they are passed on. The motifs of translation and reflection both involve the reproduction of an idea, and when an idea is reproduced, it is changed or decayed. Over time, or distance, or repetition, communication becomes less and less reliable, and sometimes it utterly fails.

Identity

The question of Charles Kinbote's identity is central to his story. Kinbote believes that he is King Charles the Beloved of Zembla. This is an identity that Kinbote has built up in his own head. The people around Kinbote believe that Kinbote is insane. He is a mundane, socially awkward, woman-hating professor who has attached himself to the kindly and famous John Shade.

What is the truth of Kinbote's identity? He has built up an elaborate fantasy, full of intricate detail. In some ways, the fantasy contains more of Kinbote's identity than what other people see. The story of King Charles reveals Kinbote's desires. He wants to be the center of attention. He longs for a romantic life. He wants to be loved by woman, admired by the populace, and fulfilled by many beautiful men. He feels afraid and persecuted. The elements that make up King Charles's story reveal the details of Kinbote's personal reality and inner identity.

Identity is something that exists inside the isolated reality of a person's mind. John Shade's identity is hidden between the lines of Kinbote's writing, because Kinbote only sees Shade's reality from the outside. Kinbote believes that Shade's agnosticism is because of Sybil, not that it is an inherent element of Shade's personality. This is an important element of Shade's identity, though, as seen through his poem. The poem, Shade's own words, reveals more clearly Shade's identity.

The fluidity of identity is exaggerated when the reader tries to understand Hazel Shade. Both her father's perspective and Kinbote's perspective (through Jane Provost) are removed from the girl's innermost reality. Where does her identity lie? All the reader sees is what the outside world can view, a depressed, unattractive young woman. Everyone, though, has multiple identities: an inner identity that exists in the human mind and one or more external identities, the ways that others perceive them.

Significant Topics

The lack of stable or unambiguous identities in Pale Fire indicates the most important theme of the work: the nature of identity and its creation through reminiscence and through literature. John Shade's poem "Pale Fire" is a poet's attempt to define himself, to find order in his life, to come to terms with the suicide of his teen-age daughter and with intimations of his own death. Kinbote's commentary is also an attempt at self-creation, for he interprets Shade's poem as dealing with the revolution in Zembla which forced him to become an exile. In doing so, of course, he blithely ignores the poem's

actual content, taking words and phrases out of context to use them as springboards for his own (possibly invented) reminiscences, and even falsifying variants for lines in the poem to support his interpretation.

This theme of creativity can be extended to include not only the fictional authors and interpreters within the novel but also the real author of the novel, Vladimir Nabokov. By denying the reader a clear distinction between reality and illusion, Pale Fire argues that the created, "illusory" worlds of literature are as valid as any other — perhaps more so, for they are immortalized in art.

Style

Point of View

The first-person narrator of the commentary is Charles Kinbote, and he proves himself to be unreliable. The narrative reveals that Kinbote lives a complex fantasy existence where he believes himself to be the exiled king of Zembla. Because so much of Kinbote's narrative is a self-invented fiction, all of Kinbote's narration is called into question. The reality of the commentary is not an objective reality, but the reality that exists inside Charles Kinbote's head. As the narrative unfolds, Kinbote uses a third-person semi-omniscient narrative style to tell the stories of King Charles, giving the king's personal thoughts as well as private actions, leading the reader to believe that Kinbote actually is King Charles.

Further into the commentary, Kinbote uses a similar third-person semi-omniscient style to tell the story of Gradus's search for King Charles. When Kinbote gives the details of Gradus's thoughts and actions, the reader must question the "truth" of Kinbote's narrative. Even after a lengthy interview with the killer, it is unlikely if not impossible that Kinbote would know the details he reveals as the narrator of Gradus's story.

The poem "Pale Fire" has yet another narrator, John Shade. Shade's first person narrative voice is pensive and intellectual. He does not pretend to know the truths of other people but instead deeply examines the personal truths of his own life. Aside from Shade's own words in his poem, the only information the reader has about the poet comes from Kinbote. Because Kinbote is unreliable, the reader is left to ferret out knowledge about Shade from Shade's poetry.

Setting

The two main settings in Nabokov's novel are New Wye, an Appalacian college town in the United States, and Zembla, a fictional north-eastern European country. New Wye is the native setting of John Shade, a recognized literary and intellectual figure who fits easily into this small town dominated by its university.

Shade, the son of two amateur ornithologists, is enraptured by nature. He enjoys long walks and vastly prefers commenting on the flora and fauna to discussing his poetry. In this way, Shade is rooted in the natural world, and he evokes its imagery throughout his poem, notably in the image of the waxwing flying into a reflection in a window.

The setting of Zembla is a fantasy setting, and it is the native setting of Charles Kinbote, who does not fit into the American college town. He is clumsy and out of place in every social setting. However, in his fantasies, Kinbote is the romanticized king, surrounded by devoted women and beautiful, young, willing page boys. The palace is a gothic romance setting, including a secret passageway leading from the palace to the city's main theater and a lofty tower overlooking the capital. The aura of gothic romance is

completed by a gallery of paintings fitted with secret compartments and mysteriously hidden crown jewels.

As Charles makes his escape from Zembla, he passes through country mountains to the sea, and from there he escapes to his wife's estate on the Riviera. When he enters the United States, he makes his entry via parachute, and he is met by a limousine. From beginning to end, the settings of Charles's journey are romanticized and exotic, the settings of a fantasy.

Language and Meaning

Nabokov's book is filled with wordplay and clever use of language. Kinbote has written a book on the derivation of names, and the names all have hidden meanings. "Zembla" seems related to "semblance," and the country is filled with images of glass, mirrors, and reflections. "Kinbote" is supposedly the Zemblan word for the assassin of a king, and "Shade" refers to a ghost and a shadow.

One of the subjects of Nabokov's book is language itself, and translation and mutations of words are a motif throughout. Kinbote has a Zemblan translation of Shakespeare's Timon of Athens with him, and he re-translates a section from Zemblan back to English. It happens to be the section containing the title words "pale fire," but neither the Zemblan translation nor Kinbote's English re-translation contains a hint of those words, although the general sense of the passage is maintained. Through copying, the language is transmuted, and it loses some of its meaning.

In poetry, each individual word is chosen for meaning, rhythm, and sound. However, the reader will interpret the chosen words according to his or her knowledge and experience. This dynamic is demonstrated in Nabokov's book. In one notable example, Shade uses the word "lemniscate" to describe the tracks left by bicycle tires in the sand, meaning a figure eight shape. Kinbote does not know the word and can't understand the definition in his dictionary. He is left with the impression that the word is meaningless.

Throughout the commentary, Kinbote shows his tendency to interpret all of the poet's words in light of only his own mental perspective. He picks up on single words out of their original context to relate to the narrative of King Charles and Gradus. In the poem "gun" is mentioned as a passing scene on TV. In the commentary, it becomes a reference to Gradus's gun, the weapon that will kill Shade. This duplicity of meaning shows the transient nature of the symbolism of words.

Structure

The novel is structured as a book about a poem. It begins with a (fictional) forward by the commentator, Charles Kinbote. This forward sets up the central problems of the novel and introduces Kinbote as a controversial and unreliable commentator. It hints at the story of King Charles and the circumstances of Shade's death.

The second section is the poem "Pale Fire," in four cantos. "Pale Fire" is 999 lines long, just one line short of an even thousand. The first canto is 166 lines. The second canto runs from line 167 to line 500, ending exactly halfway through the poem. The third and fourth cantos are the reverse of the first two, their mirror image, creating an exact symmetry, except for the one missing line at the end. Kinbote believes that the last, unwritten, 1000th line is the same as the first, and he presents this idea as a fact. However, the poem itself gives only slight indication that it might have this circular element: the odd number of lines and the unrhymed final line ending in "lane." Perhaps its lopsided structure, with one missing line, is merely part of Shade's view of life as asymmetrical and unexpected.

The longest section of the novel is Kinbote's comments on the poem. Kinbote goes through the poem, picking out lines and giving commentary on Shade's life and Kinbote's interpretation of and reaction to the poem. The notes on lines of the poem vary from a single line to over ten pages. The most important element of the commentary is the tale that Kinbote longs to tell. He gives the fantastical story of King Charles, the exiled king of Zembla, interspersed with his notes. This story is Kinbote's fictional history of himself, and so the reader is presented with two biographies, one of John Shade and the other of Charles Kinbote. Kinbote's "autobiography" is disjointed because of its structure, interspersed into the notes to an unfinished poem, and this reflects the disjointed state of Kinbote's mind.

Quotes

"Frank has acknowledged the safe return of the galleys I had been sent here and has asked me to mention in my Preface—and this I willingly do—that I alone am responsible for any mistakes in my commentary. Insert before a professional." —Forward, page 18

"Let me state that without my notes Shade's text simply has no human reality at all since the human reality of such a poem as his (being too skittish and reticent for an autobiographical work), with the omission of many pithy lines carelessly rejected by him, has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings, attachments and so forth, a reality that only my notes can provide. To this statement my dear poet would probably not have subscribed, but, for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word." —Forward, pages 28-29

"I am the shadow of the waxwing slain / By the false azure in the windowpane; / I was the smudge of ashen fluff—and I / Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky." —"Pale Fire," Canto One, lines 1-4, page 33

"Mars glowed. Shahs married. Gloomy Russians spied. / Lang made your portrait. And one night I died." —"Pale Fire," Canto Three, lines 681-682, page 58

"But, Doctor, I was dead! / He smiled. 'Not quite: just half a shade,' he said." —"Pale Fire," Canto Three, lines 727-728, page 60

"Man's life as commentary to abstruse / Unfinished poem. Note for further use." —"Pale Fire," Canto Four, lines 939-940, page 67

"Nevertheless the urge to find out what he was doing with all the live, glamorous, palpitating, shimmering material I had lavished upon him, the itching desire to see him at work (even if the fruit of his work was denied me), proved to be utterly agonizing and uncontrollable and led me to indulge in an orgy of spying which no considerations of pride could stop." —Commentary, Line 47-48: the frame house between Goldsworth and Wordsmith, page 87

"I am unable to check either this statement or the poet's calculations in regard to five minutes, i.e., three hundred seconds, since I do not see how 480 can be divided by 300 or vice versa, but perhaps I am only tired." —Commentary, Lines 120-121: five minutes were equal to forty ounces, etc., page 117

"'A unicursal bicircular quartic' says my weary old dictionary. I cannot understand what this has to do with bicycling and suspect that Shade's phrase has no real meaning." —Commentary, Line 137: lemniscate, page 136

"Book reviewers being mentioned, he said: 'I have never acknowledged printed praise though sometimes I longed to embrace the glowing image of this or that paragon of discernment; and I have never bothered to lean out of my window and empty my

skoramis on some poor hack's pate. I regard both the demolishment and the rave with like detachment.'" —Commentary, Line 172: books and people, page 154

"I, too, was wont to draw my poet's attention to the idyllic beauty of airplanes in the evening sky. Who could have guessed that on the very day (July 7) Shade penned this lambent line (the last one on his twenty-third card) Gradus, alias Degré, had flown from Copenhagen to Paris, thus completing the second lap of his sinister journey!" —Commentary, Line 286: A jet's pink trail above the sunset fire, page 174

"She [Jane Provost] told me—and I have no reason to disbelieve her words—that Peter Provost (whom I desired very much to meet, but he was, alas, selling automobiles in Detroit) might have exaggerated a wee bit, but certainly did not fib, when explaining that he had to keep a promise made to one of his dearest fraternity friends, a glorious young athlete whose 'garland' will not, one hopes, be 'briefer than a girl's.' Such obligations are not to be treated lightly or disdainfully." —Commentary, Lines 385-386: Jane Dean, Pete Dean, page 196

"I must ask the reader to ignore those two lines (which, I am afraid, do not even scan properly). I could strike them out before publication but that would mean reworking the entire note, or at least a considerable part of it, and I have no time for such stupidities." —Commentary, Line 550: debris, page 228

"'That is the wrong word,' he said. 'One should not apply it to a person who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention. That's merely turning a new leaf with the left hand.'" —Commentary, Line 629: The fate of beasts, page 238

"A visiting German lecturer from Oxford kept exclaiming, aloud and under his breath, that the resemblance was 'absolutely unheard of,' and when I negligently observed that all bearded Zemblans resembled one another—and that, in fact, the name Zembla is a corruption not of the Russian zemlya, but of Semblerland, a land of reflections, of 'resemblers'—my tormentor said: 'Ah yes, but King Charles wore no beard, and yet it is his very face!'" —Commentary, Line 894: a king, page 265

"Did they talk in the car, these two characters, the man in green and the man in brown? Who can say? They did not." —Commentary, Line 949: and all the time, page 283

Topics for Discussion

Compare John Shade to Charles Kinbote. How are the two characters similar or different?

Compare Charles Kinbote to Gradus. How is Kinbote like his fictitious murderer?

Compare Charles Kinbote to King Charles. How is Kinbote similar to and different from his alter-ego?

Why does Nabokov choose to give only Charles Kinbote's untrustworthy account of himself?

Why does Nabokov choose to structure his novel untraditionally, as if it is commentary on a poem?

What is the significance of the names Nabokov chooses for his characters and places? Include the names "New Wye," "Kinbote," "Shade," "Zembla," and "Gradus."

How are reflection, translation, and the derivation of names similar to each other? Why are these three elements recurring motifs in the novel?

What is the meaning of "pale fire" as the title of Shade's poem, and how does it differ from the meaning of "pale fire" as the title of Nabokov's book?

In what ways does Kinbote leech off of Shade to make himself important?

Why is Kinbote's commentary so much longer than Shade's poem?

Based on the information in the novel, is it possible that Zembla itself is a figment of Kinbote's imagination?

Literary Precedents

Pale Fire is extraordinarily difficult to classify and even harder to compare to other works of literature. It is perhaps Nabokov's most original novel in terms of form and structure, though in its underlying concern with creation and the literary process it is part of a tradition which goes back to Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy (1759-1767). It has also been compared to the works of Jorge Luis Borges in its self-conscious artifice and its play with reality and illusion, and to the novels of John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and Donald Barthelme in its experimentation with novelistic form and structure. However, its closest relative is perhaps Nabokov's own translation of Eugene Onegin, completed before but published after Pale fire, in which his commentary and index to Pushkin's poem (which occupies more than half of the edition's four volumes) is itself a highly creative work.

Related Titles

Like Pale Fire, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (1941) has as its central theme the search for identity and the interpenetration of life and art. Satirical treatment of the academic community can also be found in Pnin; interestingly enough, the title character of that novel reappears in Pale Fire as Professor Pnin, the head of Wordsmith's "bloated Russian department," whose sole distinguishing feature seems to be his unpronounceable name.

The unreliable narrator appears in several of Nabokov's novels, most notably Despair (1937) and Ada (1969); although neither of those characters is as sympathetic as Kinbote; Despair is also an ironic treatment of the theme of the double.

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Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994