

# Parodical Study of Literary Criticism in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*

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**Abstract:** In *Pale Fire*, Nabokov employ parody to constructs a world where truth intertwines with falsehood, leaving a labyrinth for his readers to read between and beyond lines and to make their own decision on the authenticity of the lines. Being the most distinct characteristic, parody in *Pale Fire* is much more than merely an experimental innovation on form itself: it brings uncertainty for the content of the story by breaking away from old traditions of writing techniques, as well as unveils the writer's reflection of both literature and life, which together displays the writer's deep humanistic concern.

**Keywords:** Parody, Literary Criticism, Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*

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## 1. Nabokov and *Pale Fire*

Vladimir Nabokov is one of the world's greatest writer, stylist and postmodern figure in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He is special for his bilingualism, as he is a Russian-born American writer with works written some in Russian and some in English. Besides, he is a pioneer of postmodernism, creating unordinary narrative patterns and numberless word games. His fame was first raised by his *Lolita*, while his later master piece *Pale Fire* raised many critics with readers finding it failed to measure up their expectations owing to its obscurity. Nabokov's literary actions can be displayed in two ways. He is first a prolific writer who has accomplished eight English novels as well as many other Russian novels, poems, plays, short stories, translations, reviews and other works, among which we can name some famed ones: Russian novels *Laughter in the Dark* (1932), *Despair* (1936), *Invitation to a Beheading* (1938); English novels *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), *Lolita* (1955), *Pnin* (1957), *Pale Fire* (1962); Translations *The Song of Igor's Campaign* (1960), *Eugene Onegin* (1964); autobiography like *Speak Memory* (1960). It is worth to mention that when he translated Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* into English, he replenished it with detailed commentaries and annotations, which can be seen as some inspiration of literary form for *Pale Fire*. Besides a

writer, he is a literary professor. While teaching Russian literature and other European countries' literature, he kept explaining classical literary works of Europe by his original sight. Nabokov is a writer with international reputations. In the international academic circles, the research of Nabokov began earlier and went into a healthy way; while in China, the research of Nabokov was falling behind. Many scholars know nothing about him whose works and literature views are indispensable in postmodernism studies.

Nabokov's peculiar style gives rise to controversy in criticism. Donald E. Morton argues that Nabokov stresses too much on subjectivity, which makes his characters "sound like solipsists, like individuals completely wrapped up in their own mental worlds. It is as if they have no sense of the objective existence of an outer reality" [1]. Jonathan Raban deems that his English is a shaky blend of grammarian's pedantry slang and the language of the novel is a hyperactive mongrel of English, French and Russian. Many Russian critics deem that Nabokov pays no interest in the social, political, moral or philosophical themes and ignores the writer's obligation to address existing, real problem. At the opposite extreme are contemporary critics in the United States and Europe who see Nabokov's

insistent artificiality as a defense of the artist's free creativity in the face of a hostile, indifferent, chaotic or valueless world. Charles Rolo extols him as, "the most original writer" since Joyce [2].

*Pale Fire* is surely Nabokov's most intricately-designed and oddly-structured work laden with his usual themes of "life and death, sanity and madness, hope and despair, life and loneliness, privacy and sharing, kindness and selfishness, creativity and parasitism" [3] as well as his skillful postmodernist techniques. Structurally wrapped by four layers – foreword, poem, comments, and index, the novel itself is an opening text with different interpretations. As the foreword displays, the poem is written by Shade, a poet, before his death, while the next part – the poem *Pale Fire* presages the narrator's death "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain/ By the false azure in the windowpane;" Then the narrator begins to recollect his entire life and ruminate on his life experiences: an orphan childhood with his aunt, a happy love life and marriage, his daughter's suicide, as well as a moribund experience due to a heart attack, etc. However, the following accompanying materials (comments and index) are strongly personal, imbued with Kinbote the editor's own interpretation loosely connected with the poem itself. He even puts in foreword that without his illuminating commentary, the poem would be incomprehensible. In commentary, large amounts of details are given in terms of prince's growing up, palace revolution, royal gossips and anecdotes, as Kinbote fancies himself as a king of Zembla and describes his Zembla to Shade, and firmly believes that the poem Shade writes has everything related to his story. By bits and patches, the history of Zembla is unveiled before the readers. At the same time when Shade is producing the poem, the regicide departs from Zembla to Kinbote's residence to kill him. On the morning Shade has finished the 999<sup>th</sup> line of the poem, Gradus the regicide mistakenly shoots Shade to death. Shade's wife Sybil then permits Kinbote to edit the poem and publish it with his own foreword, commentary, and index.

Since its publication, *Pale Fire* has won both critics and compliments for its postmodern features, narrative strategy and cultural reflection. Mary McCarthy acclaims *Pale Fire* as "a creation of perfect beauty, symmetry, strangeness, originality and moral truth, a Jack-in-the-box, a Feberge gem, a clockwork toy, a chess problem, an infernal machine, a trap to catch reviewers, a cat-and-mouse game, a do it yourself novel ... one of the very great works of art of this century." [4] On the other side of the debate, critics emerge for the restriction and irrelevance of *Pale Fire*, among which Dwight Macdonald declares "It isn't fun, as a matter of fact, it is precisely its pervasive archness and whimsicality that puts one off...unlike some major writers who successfully tackle large themes, Nabokov is a minor writer whose ambitions are more restricted." Nabokov is a monist. [5:124] So form and content of his novel can never be divided from each other in his mind. *Pale Fire* is a best example to prove this view. This novel is not only an opening text, but also an experimental text by applying parody of literary criticism parody, one

post-modernism technique, which composes the main form and content of *Pale Fire*, he expresses with parody his thoughts on novel and even literary works, making his *Pale Fire* "text in text". On a large scale, Nabokov parodies literary criticism in this novel. There are also parody of biography style, of detective fiction style, and of drama style, which all combine and serve to add uncertainty and readers' participation in the novel. With the guidance of the theory of parody, the thesis studies the uses of parody especially parody of literature criticism in *Pale Fire* and discusses the purpose of employing this strategy.

## 2. Literary Strategy and Narrative Significance of Parody

As Encyclopedia Britannica defines, parody means a comic imitation of other literary works in both style and manner. Parody has broken away from merely burlesque and has become one of the important postmodern writing techniques in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is easy to detect that parody is a demanding skill for a writer as he must read wider and think further. Among the few writers who can truly master this writing technique, Nabokov uses it skillfully and heavily. Impelled by his own literature thoughts and made possible by his great knowledge in literature, he parodies former literary works in pursuit of anti-tradition and artistic innovation in writing to break the shackles of old tradition. To certain degrees, when a writer parodies, he inevitably displays his attitude toward the target text or its author, sometimes in a ridicule tone sometimes a critical one. With the passage of time, the purpose of the parody has experienced the change from satirizing alone to exploring deeply the questions on art, philosophy, life, etc. As Linda Hutcheon puts "Instead, I would want to argue that postmodernist parody is a value-problematizing, denaturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations." [6] For Nabokov, parody, serves as a kind of "the springboard for leaping into the highest region of serious emotion" [7]. With the guidance of the theory of parody, the thesis has studied the uses of parody especially parody of literature criticism in *Pale Fire* and discussed the purpose of this strategy.

According to Wikipedia, literary criticism is the study, evaluation and interpretation of literature. Literary criticism has appeared since the very day literature appeared. The first literary criticism can trace back to 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, when Aristotle wrote *Poetics*, an analysis of literary forms with many specific criticisms of contemporary works. Later, literary criticism develops into classic and medieval form when it was applied to religious texts. Until 20<sup>th</sup> century, the criticism took on a new look, emphasizing on close reading of the original text and evaluating it upon authorial intention and reader response. More often than not, literary criticism comes out as a book composed of four parts: a foreword, the target text, the commentary and an index. However, the value of literary criticism has been questioned by some prominent

artists. Vladimir Nabokov argued that good readers didn't read books, and particularly literary masterpieces, "for the academic purpose of indulging in generalizations". [8] Therefore, this following focuses on the parody of literary criticism in *Pale Fire* and the underlying motivation of this strategy of novel.

### 3. Parody of Conventional Foreword in *Pale Fire*

Since the publication of *Lolita*, Nabokov has always been a writer of great controversy, with both applauses and boos in literary criticism circle. Nabokov parodies literary criticism in *Pale Fire* to free novel creation from former structure and to furnish the future possibility of novel. Written by the author or somebody else, foreword in a conventional literary work appears before the text. Foreword aims to provide background information of the text, such as a brief life and writing experience of the author, an epitome of the text or some useful guide for further reading. Under situations when foreword is not produced by the author, which is often the case, the relationship between the author and the foreword writer is also covered. In terms of *Pale Fire*, whose general idea has been deliberately broken down and re-constructed by the writer, and whose structure is tightly related to its content, to read the foreword is a demanding task if a reader urges to strip off the seemingly-true camouflage and to reach the truth.

As for similarity, the foreword of *Pale Fire* resembles elements of conventional ones. Starting with "*Pale Fire*, a poem in heroic couplets, of nine hundred ninety-nine lines, divided into four cantos, was composed by John Francis Shade (born July 5, 1898, died July 21, 1959) during the last twenty das of his life at his residence in New Wye, Appalachia, U.S.A." [5:13] The foreword includes the author's brief life review, the style and structure of the poem, "a complete calendar of his work" [5:13], defend against critics on the poem and even author's little personal habits of writing. As for differences, the foreword of *Pale Fire* bears a seemingly objective tone with apparent seriousness, totally deferent from a conventional one.

Firstly, the sixteen-page-space allows Kinbote the editor to skip absently from one topic to another which is loosely connected, and almost every time when anecdote of the author is mentioned, the editor will then slide to his own experience or feeling, which can hardly be called a relevant and objective foreword. For instance, after the editor (Kinbote) and the author's (Shade) first acquaintance, Shade asks Kinbote to "try the pork" [5:21], long paragraph comes as follow: "I am a strict vegetarian, and I like to cook my own meals... Moreover, I had already finished the fruit brought with me in my briefcase, so I would content myself, I said, with a bottle of good college ale. My free and simple demeanor set everybody at ease. The usual questions were fired at me about egg-nogs and milkshakes being or not being acceptable to one of my persuasion." To be a foreword, the diction of

Kinbote is fairly too casual and the stuff too personal- related, that is, too self-centered, not realizing this is a foreword for other's poem not his own fictional work which he can develop at his own will. Although it seems to link with the former part and coming part which are both related to the author, it cannot be described as a competent editor's foreword.

Secondly, for most of the conventional forewords, editors tend to bear modesty towards the work and the author instead of boasting of his own foreword or his help to the author. However, in the foreword of *Pale Fire*, Kinbote the editor continuously states his importance in assisting Shade and even illuminating Shade by his illusion of Zembla. "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." [5:28] As can be seen, the editor overstates his importance in the work, claiming that the text would be incomprehensible without his notes. This not only unveils Kinbote's ambition to be not a conventional editor who stands distractedly away from the text but a participant who provides not adequate information but overflowing point of views. From this, readers can also scent the hint of varnish in the later parts he adds to the poem. Besides, his joking tone towards the deceased author is infrequent in conventional forewords.

Thirdly, different from conventional forewords which give clear accounts to the editor's identity, the foreword in *Pale Fire* provides us with subtle and limited views on the commentator- Kinbote. As suggested by Nabokov or Kinbote, "Although those notes, in conformity with custom, come after the poem, the reader is advised to consult them first and then study the poem with their help, rereading them of course as he goes through its text, and perhaps, after having done with the poem, consulting them a third time so as to complete the picture", [5:28] we arrive at the following notes and find things uncommon between the poet and the commentator. When Kinbote the commentator urges to prove that he knows the production process of the poem, he mentions "the dramatic occasion of hearing my poor friend's own voice proclaim" [5:15] with a hint "see my note to line 991". However, in his note to line 991, we are offered information that on July 21<sup>st</sup>, when Shade's wife leaves home, Kinbote drops by Shade's, and chats with him on the progress of the poet by which Kinbote cites to prove that he knows the end of the poem; as well as information about where Shade is staying with Kinbote's note to line 47-48. According to Kinbote's suggestion, we skip to that note, and what is waiting us is Shade's residence condition and yet another note applicable to line 691. What we observe in note to line 691 is none other than the fact that Kinbote is the "disguised King" [5:246] of Zembla, which is not only a secret he has been keeping even against Shade but also a legend Kinbote has been feeding Shade as an

independent observer, expecting in vain for Shade's talent to give life to the king's story in his poem *Pale Fire*. Different from modest and prudent manner of conventional foreword, Kinbote's defiant, self-centered manner and intricate cross reference arouses readers' curiosity to find out what's between him and the poet as well as what's behind the seeming truth provided by Kinbote. With cross reference, readers are led to endless disordered fragments of the so-called truth, and that is what Nabokov offers for his readers to discover.

#### 4. Parody of Conventional Criticism in *Pale Fire*

As for conventional literary commentators, their purpose sets at objective interpreting and evaluating a piece of literary work in terms of its content, subject, character, structure and style based on certain literary theory or criteria. In the commentary in *Pale Fire*, we do find resemblances to conventional ones in that Kinbote the commentator does provide us with hints of the poet's life and background information of his poem, as well as characteristics and personal preferences reflected by the recorded biographical details. Take note to Lines 1-4 for example, "We can visualize John Shade in his early boyhood, a physically unattractive but otherwise beautifully developed lad, experiencing his first eschatological shock, as with incredulous fingers he picks up from the turf that compact ovoid body and gazes at the wax-red streaks ornamenting those gray-brown wings and at the graceful tail feathers tipped with yellow as bright as fresh paint" [5:73]; we make out some characteristic of Shade as well as Kinbote's indulgence of over-explaining.

Granted that the commentary with some personal preference or wild imagination can be accepted with some romantic mercy, Kinbote's obsession in himself and his Zembla even in commenting on literary work identifies him by no means a conventional commentator. Firstly, evidences of Kinbote's wild imagination can be found in his nearly fictional notes. In note to Line 1-4, to interpret Shade's 4 lines as follows: "*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*" [5:33], Kinbote associates the waxwing slain with Shade's "physically unattractive" [5:73] boyhood, and the waxwing slain seen in Shade's house by Kinbote. Then Kinbote's comment slips to his own knowledge on Aves, before he gets at a kind of bird similar to waxwing slain in Zembla and a first mention of "glorious misfortune" [5:74] of the Zembla king. Then come the unnecessary details for literary commentary that when the poem was written the commentator was playing chess with a young Iranian enrolled in their summer school, as well as the fictional detailed plot: the poet deliberately synchronizes his writing with the departure of Gradus the regicide. Doubtlessly, dramatic differences lie between Kinbote's commentary and

conventional ones. While conventional commentary aims to better understanding for readers with adequate and relevant background information, Kinbote's commentary seems only to attract readers' attention on Zembla and its king.

Secondly, as has been stated in foreword ("with the omission of many pithy lines carelessly rejected by him"), [5:28] Kinbote adds the so-called omission into the commentary, with great uncertainty and some unlikelihood. In note to Line 12, Kinbote refers "that crystal land" (Nabokov, 1989: 74) to his "dear country" [5:74] Zembla. To enhance creditability, he presents readers with sentences "in the disjointed, half-obliterated draft" [5:74], which reads, "*Ah, I must not forget to say something/That my friend told me of a certain king*" [5:74] After re-reading Shade's poem (line 12) which describes innocently in a snowy night the narrator's delight to observe the crystal land out of the window, we find that obviously, what Kinbote pointed at is totally irrelevant. If a commentator is allowed to make wild imagination with this kind of "add-in" annotation, then the commentary will be nothing but his own creation instead of interpretation based on the original text. Similar to our deduction, Kinbote begins to reel off a torrent of stories about the king of Zembla.

After reading several opening notes, we can observe distinct gap between the original text by Shade and the commentary by Kinbote. To read further, we can find that Shade's poem echoes his entire life and when he ruminates on his life experience, he gives account of an orphan childhood with his aunt, a happy love life and marriage, his daughter's suicide, as well as a moribund experience due to a heart attack, etc; generally reflecting his life philosophy, his code of life, and his personal preferences. However, Kinbote's commentary is strongly egoistic, imbued with Zembla and the king, as well as palace revolution and anecdotes. He begins with a seeming humble posture and progresses with a desperate eager to advertise for his Zembla and his glorious escape from the kingdom.

#### 5. Parody of Conventional Index of Literary Criticism in *Pale Fire*

The conventional index of literary criticism refers to an alphabetical list at the end part of a book showing where the entry has appeared in the text for readers to retrieve. However, in *Pale Fire*, Kinbote makes the list at his free will with an authorized tone only to appease to his own attempt. We find entries to dismiss Sybil's importance, entries to corroborate the existence of Zembla, entries to magnify his own significance during the production of *Pale Fire* the poem. Firstly, the index is seen as a great opportunity for Kinbote to deaden all voices may come from others, thus to be dominator to take down the world as he sees it. He offers indexes only for the Foreword and Commentary he writes, not the original text written by Shade. To read further, we can only find five persons in New Wye from the index Kinbote has offered, who are Shade, Shade's wife, Shade's daughter, Kinbote, and Botkin, an

“American scholar of Russian descent” [5:306]. Some researchers suggest the possibility of word game in “Botkin”, in that it is the re-construction of “Kinbote”. Moreover, being only a name mentioned three times in notes, Botkin is allowed five lines of index, while Sybil- Shade’s wife, is slighted by Kinbote with one word (“passim”) [5:308] in index as she stands in the way of Kinbote’s imagining relationship with Shade, the way that he believes it is he that inspires Shade with the legend of Zembla.

Secondly, the index to its possible extent exaggerates Kinbote’s role in the life of Shade. As can be seen, when it comes to index for Kinbote, generous amount of index is ready for reader to check, even a page more than Shade’s, saying, “an intimate friend of S, his literary adviser, editor and commentator” “his good-natured request to have S use his stories” “his belief in his having inspired S” “his arranging to have it published without the help of two experts”. [5:308]. We see none of a conventional commentator’s characteristics among which modesty and objectivity should speak loud most; what we can see are egotism, self-flattery, and disdain. In addition to the index of Kinbote himself own, Kinbote indexes Shade’s entries with over half of which are imbued with Kinbote’s appearance: “K’s influence seen in a variant” “the complications of K’s marriage compared to the plainness of S’s” “K’s drawing S’s attention to a pastel smear crossing the sunset sky” [5:312], to name only a few. This approach to claim credit for Kinbote’s influence on Shade is but a wise one, as readers can finally betray Kinbote’s statements as they serves to misinterpret Shade’s lines and to win attention on Zembla, the kingdom. To appease to curiosity, readers have to read beyond lines and skip back to what has at that time comes to their mind as Nabokov is playing this hide-and-seek game with his clever readers.

Reading the index of *Pale Fire* enables us to make out the Kinbote’s egotism and fearlessness: he urges to present his legend of being the king of Zembla; he shamelessly misinterpret Shade’s poem pointing everything to himself and his kingdom. Tracing down the whole book, with index to disclose, we are able to complete the picture in our mind and decide which one to trust or not trust – actively instead of passively -- that’s what Nabokov wants from his readers in the process of reading.

## 6. Conclusion

Sontag holds that, “The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to what it means.” [9]. Published in 1962, when scholars are made to believe that there can never be any new form for a novel, *Pale Fire* seems to subvert this hypothesis. By parodying common elements such as foreword, commentary and index in literature and collaging them in one literary work, Nabokov achieves his purpose to change the seeming fixed forms of novel and show his suspect for traditional criticism. His personal experience might account a lot for the unique form of *Pale Fire*. Firstly, Nabokov teaches literature

in Cornell. The academic atmosphere at that time is rigid for scholars believe in the rightness and wrongness of a literary criticism according to certain methodology. In his *Pale Fire*, Nabokov gives life to character of college teaches, poets and scholars, and excavate great gap between literary criticism and literature itself to show uncertainty and inability for critics and readers to surely communicate with poet and poem. Secondly, Nabokov’s experience of translating Alexander Pushkin’s verse novel *Eugene Onegin* inspires Nabokov to experiment on the uniqueness of novel form, as Nabokov prefers literal translation to free translation, so he attaches 110 pages of preface, 1087 pages of commentary, and 109 pages of index to the translation of *Eugene Onegin*. It is a painstaking procedure as years of researches are made in libraries of Harvard and Cornell, often from 9 A.M. to 2 A.M. By the using parody of criticism, Nabokov proves that the structure of a literary work has no fixed pattern, and all possible approaches to get at some theme or to mould some character can be put into use.

Nabokov is highly acclaimed as one of the finest stylists and greatest novelists in American literature, both for the daring originality of his conceptions and for the meticulous strategies to realize them. Harold Bloom holds that where Nabokov can hardly be overprized is in his achievement as a stylist. John Updike confidently praises him “the most important American writer” since Faulkner.” [10]. Boyd has observed: “Nabokov always envisages that human, mortal memory might be the forerunner of a consciousness, which could endlessly reinvestigate the past, discovering new patterns and new harmonies.” [11] By parodying literary criticism, Nabokov satirizes on the abduction of the original theme of text and the justification of editor’s purposes. Distorting Shade’s autobiographic poem on birth, misery, love, marriage, death and afterdeath, Kinbote gives every hint towards his imaginary kingdom of Zembla regardless of the original text. As we can never separate style from content, we can detect deep humanistic concern through his use of literary parody. Although literary criticism is the study, evaluation and interpretation of literature, sometimes it can be distorted for deliberate reasons such as to cater to the critic’s own purpose or unconscious reasons such as lack of background information, In terms of *Pale Fire*, Kinbote diverts almost every detail in Shade’s poem to his glorious kingdom of Zembla and to his seemingly cryptic identity of the beloved king. By literary parody, in an absurd way, Nabokov displays his contempt for any kind of misinterpretation of literary works, as well as any kind of casual decoding of writer’s intention.

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